

**POLES APART? WOMEN NEGOTIATING  
FEMININITY AND FEMINISM IN THE  
FITNESS POLE DANCING CLASS**

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## **Abstract**

*This thesis explores the current trend for pole dancing as an increasingly popular fitness activity for women, taught in health and fitness clubs across the country. With the use of participant observation in classes and in-depth qualitative interviews with women who take these classes, as well as women who teach them, I explore what these types of class mean to these women, how pole dancing classes fit into contemporary feminist debates around the nature of and the future of feminism, and the pressures and expectations placed upon women to look and act in a feminine and sexualised way. Moving beyond what I see as the quite limiting previous accounts of these classes, which have debated whether or not they are empowering or degrading for women, my research suggests that pole dancing classes are complex, may be neither empowering nor degrading, for these concepts are complicated and problematic, and that the pole dancer cannot be seen as one dimensional.*

*Women describe their participation in pole classes in a discourse of choice and control yet I show that their choice to participate is constructed somewhat by the media and the advertising of these classes which presents them as enabling women to create a particular desirable feminine and sexy self, perpetuated throughout our culture as the 'ideal'. Exploring the ways in which women attempt to manage impressions of themselves and present themselves as 'respectable', I examine how the women in this study wish to dis-identify with both women who work as strippers and women who are feminist, seeing both identities as contradictory to the feminine image that they pursue. I explore the capacity of these classes to offer women feelings of agency, in particular through the fun, fitness and friendships that women gain from classes, but I challenge the idea that participating in pole dancing can offer empowerment, arguing that ultimately we can view these women's participation in terms of both their active engagement and enjoyment of these classes and in terms of the structures and pressures which continue to shape their lives.*

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## Contents

	<b>Page Number</b>
<b>Title Page</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter One: Introducing Fitness Pole Dancing</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Chapter Two: Feminism, Gender and Society: Exploring the Cultural Context for the Mainstreaming of Pole Dancing Classes</b>	<b>22</b>
Introduction	22
What is Feminism?	24
Structure and Agency	33
The Body and the Gaze	45
Girlie Consumption	55
Girlie Feminism	63
Anti-Essentialist Feminism	71
Summary	77
<b>Chapter Three: Researching Pole Dancing: The Research Setting, Methodology and Exploring my Voice as a Feminist Researcher</b>	<b>80</b>
Introduction	80
Developing a Feminist Methodology	81
Research Techniques	90
<i>Participant as Observer</i>	90
<i>Interviewing</i>	99
<i>Analysis and Write Up</i>	114
Research Reflections	116
<i>Feeling Guilty</i>	117
<i>Impression Management</i>	122
<i>Developing my Feminist Voice</i>	125
Summary	129



<b>Chapter Four: ‘I dance around a pole...but I am not a pole dancer...’ Impression Management, Class, Gender and Respectability in the Pole Dancing Class</b>	<b>131</b>
Introduction	131
Respectable Pole Dancing	132
Keeping Pole Dancing Secret	140
The Middle Class Pole Dancer	146
The Enterprising Pole Dancer	152
Pole Dancing for Empowerment	156
I am not a Pole Dancer...	166
I am not a Feminist...	180
Summary	186
<b>Chapter Five: Muscles, Strength and Risk...but still being Sexy, Feminine and Girlie: Discussions of the Pole Dancing Body</b>	<b>188</b>
Introduction	188
Barbie Dolls: The Image of the Pole Dancer	190
Just Do It: The Ethic of the Fitness Pole Dancer	203
Muscles and Strength: A Strong Pole Dancing Body	212
Bruises, Injury and Pain: Taking Risks in Fitness Pole Dancing	221
Summary	237
<b>Chapter Six: Being ‘One of the Girls’: Female Friendship, Empowerment and the Pole Dancing Community</b>	<b>240</b>
Introduction	240
Making Friends in Pole Dancing Classes	242
Talking Pole: Conversations in the Pole Dancing Community	251
‘Girl Power!’ through Pole Dancing	260
Conflict in the Pole Dancing Community	274
Summary	280
<b>Chapter Seven: Conclusion</b>	<b>284</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>297</b>
<b>Appendix One: Interviewee Consent to Participate Letter</b>	<b>325</b>
<b>Appendix Two: Interviewee Details</b>	<b>327</b>

## **Chapter One**

### **Introducing Fitness Pole Dancing**

This thesis explores pole dancing classes as increasingly offered within the health and fitness industry and advertised as a class to improve physical fitness. They are also said to increase confidence, in particular sexual confidence, and its' proponents suggest that pole dancing is an 'empowering' experience for women. This type of dancing, however, is also performed in the striptease industry and the main asset and tool used by the female stripper is the vertical dance pole, which is usually used as part of a dance and strip routine performed on the main stage in a lap dancing club. The typical image of a pole dancer in popular culture appears to remain that of a semi-naked young woman, swinging, gyrating and rubbing her body against the dance pole in order to sexually arouse a (typically male) audience. Pole fitness classes take the activity out of the lap dancing club setting and into a health and fitness arena, removing the performance to an audience and the exchange of this act for money. Yet the women who participate in these classes still appear to be young, partially nude, and are taught the techniques of a typical pole dance, they use the same type of dance pole, and they often (although not always) wear the same high heeled glass slipper style shoes (which are referred to as 'stripper shoes'). Clearly this raises some interesting questions around how this type of practice has come to infiltrate not just the sex industry but also, increasingly, the fitness industry, and the highly sexualised and gendered image that these types of class represent.

This form of pole dancing as we know it today is said to have originated in lap dancing clubs in Canada in the 1980's (Moody, 2005), yet the origins of using a pole as a dance prop are argued to go back many years prior to this. It is suggested that the roots of pole dancing originate from the Indian gymnastic practice of Mallakhamb (literally translated as 'man of power' and meaning 'gymnasts' pole'), a form of yoga or gymnastics practiced usually by men on a wooden pole, said to date back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Moody, 2005), and another theory is that pole dancing is linked to maypole dancing, which in turn has historically been thought by some to have represented a phallic symbol or a Pagan symbol of fertility, celebrating sexuality and life (Moody, 2005; Lloyd, 2007). Pole dancing is also said to be linked with Chinese pole, seen in the Chinese circus where circus performers climb, slide down and perform gymnastic poses and movements on a rubber coated pole. The most popular suggestion as to the origins of pole dancing, however, is that it began in the early 1900s in America when travelling fairs would have a group of women dance on stage in tents to entertain the male crowds (Stencell, 1999; Lloyd, 2007). These women are said to have been called the 'hoochi coochi dancers' and the term 'hoochi coochi' is said to originate from the gyrating hip movements performed by the dancers. The hoochi coochi dancers were alleged to have begun to use the wooden tent poles as a prop whilst dancing, grinding their bodies against the poles and simulating sex in order to attract the crowds (Stencell, 1999). It is argued that this type of dancing gradually began evolving from tents to bars as burlesque dancing and striptease became more popular in the 1950s and poles began to increasingly be used in these settings, with the dance pole remaining a major prop used in lap dancing clubs today.

The UK's first lap dancing club opened in the early 1990s and the numbers of lap dancing clubs have grown since then to the extent that in 2001 lap dancing was described as 'one of the fastest growing areas in Britain's sex industry' (BBC News, 2001) and in 2004 there were an estimated 150 legally operating clubs in the UK (Bindel, 2004). These clubs are also known as 'strip clubs' or 'gentleman's clubs', and they feature different types of exotic dancing including striptease and table dancing as well as pole dancing, and the pole dancing is usually an element that women are required to perform on a main stage in the club, where members of the audience then decide which dancers they wish to buy a lap dance from (Bott, 2006: pp. 27-28). Pole dancing appears to be the main element that is commonly used in the media representation of lap dancing clubs, featured in television programmes and films, and, consequently, the image of scantily dressed women pole dancing has become the image in popular culture that is typically associated with these types of venue.

The dance pole has evolved since the wooden tent poles proposed to have been used in the early 1900s and the standard dance pole today is typically a stainless steel pole, fixed to the ceiling joists, and another type of pole is the spinning pole which, as the name suggests, spins using ball bearings, and is said to create higher speed and momentum. The dancer may hold the pole as she moves around the stage, or she may use it to perform more athletic moves such as climbs, spins, and body inversions. In her ethnography of the strip industry, Catherine Roach provides a description of the pole dancing that she witnessed in lap dancing clubs:

'Pole Work', I learn, is the industry term for a dancer's use in stage routines of the upright metal poles – chrome, brass, stainless steel or

enamel, usually two inches in diameter, and bolted to the floor and ceiling. Pole work is a speciality. Not all dancers do it. While I never visit a club that doesn't have a pole, not all clubs feature true pole work. All dancers will at the very least put a hand up to the pole as they move from one side of the stage to another, using it to steady themselves or to lean out and swing their hair...Only some, however, are true mistresses of the pole. Developing a full repertoire of pole tricks requires months, if not years of practice. (2007: pp. 30-31)

Outside of the lap dancing club context, pole dancing classes which teach women these 'pole tricks' and 'pole work' are said to have first emerged in 1994 when Canadian stripper Fawnia Mondey opened the 'Exotic Dance School', taking pole dancing and teaching this to what she called the 'everyday woman'. In the same year, she also produced the first instructional pole fitness DVD, *Pole Work, Volume 1*, and has since produced several other instructional DVDs and manuals on both pole and lap dancing. Since these first classes developed 16 years ago, pole dancing has evolved into a huge market within the fitness industry and classes teaching people how to pole dance have become hugely popular across the Western world. There are now a huge number of pole dancing schools and companies and many more numbers of classes. Group exercise classes comprise an important and growing part of the health and fitness market and first began to emerge as a significant market sector in the 1980s with the aerobics boom (Mintel Report, 2005: 1). From the 1990s, the fitness industry saw an expansion in the range of group exercise classes available, and new forms of exercise, such as spinning, boxercise, yoga and pilates, were introduced in health and fitness clubs (Markula, 2003). In more recent years, these types of class now seem to be increasingly replaced by new 'sexualised' types of class, which include burlesque, belly dancing, striptease, and fitness pole dance in particular. Pole classes are held often in private health and fitness clubs, where the instructor will hire the studio to teach classes to members, but they are also available in specially

designed, owned studios, and also in bars and nightclubs which have been hired out to the instructor. Often classes are run as a course, so participants will pay in advance for a block of around eight lessons, usually held for one hour a week.

It is difficult to ascertain exact numbers of pole dancing classes in the UK. The Pole Dancing Directory website lists 68 different companies or schools which teach classes in the UK (as of August 2010), however, this figure represents only those schools who have entered their details on the website themselves. A quick search using an internet search engine lists the web addresses of more than 100 different pole dancing companies, schools and individuals in the UK offering classes (August 2010). The Miss Pole Dance UK website states that between 2005 and 2007 the number of dance schools offering pole dancing fitness classes grew by 4200%. There are now also several formally recognised and accredited qualifications specifically to train people to teach pole dancing and some schools offer in-house instructor training based on their own teaching programmes. Pole dancing has expanded beyond classes to include local, national and international competitions, the most popular competition in the UK being the annual Miss Pole Dance UK, for which the winner goes on to compete internationally, representing the UK in Miss Pole Dance World. There are a number of pole dancing 'celebrities', usually women who have competed and won awards in competitions, and who have produced instructional materials such as DVDs, who are known across the pole dancing industry and admired by many. In early 2010, pole dancing 'celebrity' Alesia Vazmitsel, the winner of Miss Pole Dance UK in 2008, entered the reality television competition *Britain's Got Talent*, and reached the semi-finals. In 2008, *Pole2Pole* Magazine was launched in the UK, and claims on its website to be the 'worlds' first publication dedicated to the ever increasingly

popular art of pole dance!' (*Pole2Pole Magazine*, 2010). There is also a wealth of pole dancing information to be found online, and as well as instructional websites there are a multitude of pole dancing 'forums' on which women can communicate with one another and share pole dancing stories and tips, as well as upload their pole dancing photographs and videos. Many women purchase a pole which they put up at home on which to practice. Pole dancing's movement into the mainstream has been led by some of the most popular celebrities like Britney Spears, Carmen Electra, Teri Hatcher, Pamela Anderson and even Oprah, who famously tried pole dancing on one of her chat shows. In the UK, Sadie Frost, Kelly Brook and Sienna Miller are all said to be fans of pole dancing, and, in 2003, the supermodel Kate Moss performed on a pole for the White Stripes music video *I just don't know what to do with myself*. An association with celebrity culture means that pole dancing has much established itself as a familiar, fashionable and stylish trend, and certainly it is marketed at female consumers as such.

At the beginning of her most recent book, *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), Angela McRobbie calls for more academic debate and dialogue around women's participation in what she describes as 'sex entertainment', citing pole dancing as one example of this, and claiming:

It is simply noticeable how little serious scholarly debate there is about what widespread participation in sex entertainment by women means for the now out-of-date feminist perspectives on pornography and the sex industry. (McRobbie, 2009: 3)

If, as suggested here by McRobbie, feminist perspectives are now out of date and no longer applicable to a culture in which an activity like pole dancing is increasingly participated in as a fitness regime and promoted as empowering for

women, then it follows, as she suggests, that new research is needed to recognise the ways in which women's lives are played out, and in order for feminism to have a future it needs to recognise the new ways in which women are consuming and living their lives and what this means to them. This thesis therefore explores the growth and mainstreaming of pole dancing classes, seeking to uncover the stories and experiences of the women who participate in these classes, and explore what the mainstreaming of this type of sexualised dance means for the women who practice it. Using the qualitative methods of participant observations at pole dancing classes and in-depth interviews with women who participate in pole dancing, both pole dancing instructors and women who participate as a hobby, I use feminist theory and feminist methodology to explore the ways in which women are engaging with these types of class. Pole dancing is shown to be a practice in which feminine identities are negotiated, performed and enacted and I explore the interrelationships between gender, sexuality and social class in the context of the pole dancing class, and in particular how pole dancing fits into contemporary feminist discourses around the body, class, gender, sexuality, and the concepts of identity and respectability.

The advocates of pole dancing argue that it is empowering, offering physical fitness and the development of strength and physical power to women, as well as enabling women to develop self confidence and make friends. The Flying Studio advertises their classes on their website by stating:

Pole dancing tones the body and strips fat. It is a great cardiovascular workout and allows you to use your body in sensual ways that make you feel 'all womanly' as a friend of The Flying Studio says. Pole dancing builds strength and lean muscle, improves posture and overall self confidence. (The Flying Studio Website, 2010)



The London Pole Dancing School was founded by Elena Gibson, winner of Miss Pole Dance World 2005, and advertises pole classes as:

Fun, exciting and a tremendous way to exercise and improve your fitness. Pole dance training will improve your posture, coordination and flexibility, build your upper body strength, shape your waistline and tone your thighs. On top of all that it's a great way to build your confidence, make new friends and to have fun, getting fit. (London Pole Dancing School, 2010)

Shelly's Pole Studio, based in Los Angeles, California, describes that:

Pole dancing is a feminine phenomenon that brings women of all shapes, sizes, and walks of life together. Students easily get hooked on it because it's an amazing workout that's really fun. Where else can you go to workout and also explore and express your girl-self, your woman-self, and your inner vixen in a supportive environment? (Shelly's Pole Studio, 2010)

In April 2010, it was announced that the University of Cambridge Students' Union were offering pole dancing classes to female students, which were promoted as a way to ease stress during the examination period. In student newspaper *The Cambridge Tab*, the press officer for Cambridge Students' Union was quoted as saying that pole classes are 'a way of empowering women, as well as being a fantastic way to exercise and have fun together with other women' (Sandelson, 2010). Soul Pole, a Pole Dancing School based in Aberdeen, similarly describes pole dancing classes as empowering for women:

Pole dancing is an instrument of empowering you in your everyday life, because it will help you develop an exotic way to express your body and increase the awareness of your body and how to move. Our lessons cater for women of all physiques and from all walks of life. These classes are for anyone who wants to improve their physical health, muscle tone and strengthen their body. (Soul Pole, 2010)

To date, the only other comprehensive academic study of pole fitness classes to my own is that undertaken by Samantha Holland, described in her book, *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*, which was published in March 2010. Holland's research used similar methods to those adopted by myself via participant observation in pole classes and in-depth interviews with women who take these classes. Holland offers a somewhat positive account of pole classes and since conducting her research, she has purchased a pole for her home and continues to pole dance herself, stating that 'for me, pole classes are a wonderful thing for the women who find the classes transformative, and a beautiful awe-inspiring thing to watch' (2010: 186). Describing herself as a 'sex positive' feminist (2010: 178), Holland describes that her 'sympathies have accrued over time; my position is grounded in my own experiences of the classes and in the positive accounts of the women I met'. Whilst she claims that it is important not to overlook links to the sex industry, Holland challenges the image of pole classes as sexualised, and describes them as different from the pole dancing performed within the sex industry, primarily because classes are all-female and there are differing reasons for the performance in these different settings, with classes being focused on fitness and fun. Her account describes women as able to exhibit agency and liberation through these classes, describing pole dancing as potentially empowering for women who choose it and states 'pole is a positive activity for many women all over the world; pole represents a complex intersection of body, pleasure, fitness and friendships' (2010: 177).

Pole dancing classes have, however, spurred a large amount of media attention and critique and many feminist journalists and academics have cited pole classes as evidence of a cultural shift towards a type of 'raunch culture' (Levy, 2005), a

society which is argued to be increasingly sexualised and in which pornographic and sexualised images are increasingly visible in magazines, advertising, films, television and art (McNair, 2002; McRobbie, 2009; Walter, 2010). This is argued to be a culture in which women are said to be encouraged and expected to be sexual and raunchy at all times and where being sexy is seen as a marker of success for women and pole classes have been criticised for offering women a false sense of empowerment, claiming that the mainstreaming of the sex industry and the sexual objectification of women are now wrongly equated with female empowerment, an equation which simply does not make sense (Levy, 2005; McRobbie, 2009; Walter, 2010). Natasha Walter argues:

Although the word empowerment is so often attached to this culture, it is a strange distortion of what this term once meant to feminists. When we talked about empowerment in the past, it was not a young woman in a thong gyrating around a pole that would spring to mind, but the attempts by women to gain real political and economic equality. (2010: 7)

Pole classes have developed in the context of a society which theorists have most commonly described as 'post feminist' (Coppock et al., 1995; Hollows, 2006), in which we are said to have moved beyond the feminist campaigning of the second wave feminist movement, and in which the media presents feminism as something which is no longer needed and no longer relevant to women today. Debates around the society we live in today suggest that women grow up to associate feminism with radical and angry views, linked to media images of women who are anti-sex, prudish, and unfeminine, and as a consequence women are keen to disassociate with such an image, seeing being feminist as contradictory and binaristic to femininity (Wolf, 1991; Brunsdon, 2000; Hinds and Stacey, 2001). Several feminist researchers cite this as leading to confusion and

ambiguity in women's understandings and sense of self, for the feminist achievements of the second wave are celebrated by women in their increased agency and visibility in work, education and employment, and via a message of 'girl power' which tells women that they are now in control of their lives, yet women are said at the same time to be taught to reject feminism in favour of a performance of femininity (McRobbie, 2009; Walter, 2010). For years we have also become accustomed to a 'self-help' culture in which the body is viewed as a project and in which the numbers of women having cosmetic surgery have increased, self-help and diet books and DVDs proliferate and we are taught via magazines and television how we are expected to present ourselves (Wolf, 1991; Orbach, 1993; Grogan, 1999; Rogers, 1999; McRobbie, 2009), for example, we have learnt how we are supposed to dress from programmes like *What Not To Wear* and how to do our hair and makeup from magazine style programmes like *This Morning*. Feminists have argued that being in control for women seems to be about the right to consume and display oneself to the best effect and that women are taught how to turn themselves into commodified objects to be looked at, desired, and lusted after. Feminist critiques of pole classes (McRobbie, 2009; Walter, 2010) have criticised the advertising of pole dancing as something which will teach women femininity and sexual confidence (for example, as quoted earlier, The Flying Studio advertises its' classes as enabling women to feel 'all womanly', and Shelly's Pole Studio calls pole dancing a 'feminine phenomenon' to enable women to explore their 'girl self', 'woman self' and 'inner vixen'). Against the claims of the increasing sexualisation of culture, pole dancing fitness classes suggest that female sexuality is something which is seen as able to be packaged, sold and also taught, via a weekly one hour class in pole dancing – with advertisements seeming to suggest that by signing up for an eight week course a

woman is likely to emerge as a sexually confident, feminine sexual goddess – and this is argued as contributing to a society in which women are expected to present themselves in this feminine and sexual way and subjected to critique and ridicule if they do not.

Current debates on pole dancing classes thus offer two binary opposite views – its' advocates claim that pole dancing is empowering for women, citing increased confidence, fun and fitness, for example. Yet, on the other hand, critics have refused to accept that pole dancing can be empowering, positioning these classes as an example of the wider raunch culture, focusing on a continued public perception of pole dancing as a sexualised practice and the continuation of the use of the dance pole within the lap dancing industry. My research delves deeper into these debates and finds both approaches in actuality to be limited and problematic. I will demonstrate in this thesis the complexities in women's accounts of their participation in pole dancing, thus arguing that we need to move beyond the previous work and explore the complicated and multifaceted ways in which women experience these types of class. Using the example of pole fitness classes to explore wider debates around feminism, femininity, empowerment, structure and agency, I demonstrate the contradictions and complexities associated with these terms and will argue that these concepts are complex and are played out and negotiated in differing ways in women's lives.

I will show in this thesis that, like Holland (2010), I too found that women developed feelings of achievement, fun, fitness and friendship via attending pole classes, and women defended their participation in these classes by asking questions such as 'how could people criticise pole dancing, when it has all of

these benefits for women?' (Kate). I will show that the women in this research did exhibit some feelings of control, agency and power through working at and developing the body physically and through making friends and developing a sense of being part of a collective group of pole dancers, as well as through feelings that they had made an active choice to take part in these types of class. The women I met throughout the course of this research are clearly not passive victims, adopting classes purely because of a structural pressure to do so, and their stories show that they are to be seen as much more than objectified bodies to be looked at by men. They have not been forced to take pole dancing classes, and describe themselves as having made a choice to attend, as well as, often, to become engaged in additional pole related activities (for example, socialising with friends that they have met at classes, communicating with other pole dancers on the internet, practicing pole dancing at home, and watching or even entering competitions). I will demonstrate the ways in which women adhere to a framework based upon notions of 'respectability' (Skeggs, 1997), and 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959, 1963), whereby through their narratives women attempt to present themselves as middle class and present their pole dancing as 'respectable'. Women's narratives present themselves as having the agency and freedom to make a decision as to whether or not to take pole classes, contrasting themselves with female strippers, who were assumed to be subordinated and disempowered. I found that participants provided certain justifications for being the 'type of person' who goes to fitness pole dancing classes, stating that they were not the 'type of person' who would do it as a career, but it is acceptable as a fitness option, and empowering if it is something that has been chosen. However, whilst women used a discourse of feminism in their discussions of empowerment, liberation and choice, I will demonstrate how women rejected a feminist identity,

displayed confused and ambiguous understandings of the concept of feminism and saw feminism as being at odds with a feminine identity and, consequently, not a respectable or appropriate identity with which to identify.

I will show that whilst the women in this research describe themselves as making a choice, this does not necessarily equate to empowerment and they may not be described as entirely free of structural constraint. Women's stories are complicated for they persist in working at and controlling the body in line with what is regarded as an idealised image of female perfection, adhering to cultural expectations of sexiness and femininity and they see success in attracting men and therefore being subject to a male gaze. Their choice of pole classes may be seen to reflect the media and cultural messages presented to women, for classes are packaged as a fitness practice for women which will allow them to lose weight and tone the body without developing the bulk or overly muscled bodies which are associated with masculinity, and consequently is advertised as appropriate in the strive for female bodily perfection and the creation of the most attractive body to men. Media attention on pole dancing, indeed, has focused primarily upon the appearance of women who take pole classes, and whilst Alesia Vazmitsel claimed to have entered the *Britain's Got Talent* competition in order to promote pole dancing as what she described as a fitness and art form, the media instead focused primarily upon Alesia's appearance and the positive reaction of the two male judges on the panel, as opposed to this as a fitness or artistic practice. For example, an article on the Unreality TV website, in its' preview of the TV show, stated that 'tall, blonde, athletic beauty Alesia opens Simon Cowell and Piers Morgan's eyes on tonight's Britain's Got Talent, as she wraps her lithe body around a pole' (McGarry, 2010). In this thesis I suggest that we can therefore view

these women's identity in terms of both the structures which shape their lives and the active engagement of these women, and thus I offer a much more complicated description than that provided in previous accounts of pole dancing classes.

The structure of this thesis is as follows. In the next chapter, chapter two, I outline and explore the social and cultural context in which these types of class have grown, drawing on feminist literature to examine the current thinking about women's position in society today, and at the end of the chapter I present my research questions and areas of interest. In chapter three, I describe the research setting, methodology and outline some of the methodological concerns and issues faced during the research, including those around developing my feminist voice and dealing with my own ambiguous understanding of feminism. In the following three chapters I present the analytical findings of this research. In chapter four, I describe the ways in which the middle class women in this research use the techniques of 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959, 1963) in order to present themselves and their participation in pole dancing as 'respectable', showing some similarities with Beverley Skeggs' (1997) work on 'respectability', and demonstrating that these women have a deep concern with presenting themselves as respectable middle class women, which infiltrates their discussions and which involves dis-identification with both women who work in the striptease industry, and women who are feminist, seeing both of these identities as going against femininity. In chapter five, I show the ways in which women talk about pole dancing as a fitness practice and demonstrate the cultural contradictions and complications in their narratives. For, on the one hand, they describe feelings of empowerment from attending classes in the form of increased strength, muscle



and the taking of risks, demonstrating to some extent a masculinised approach to the body, yet, on the other hand, they persist in taking steps to control the body and maintain a feminine ideal, placing limits on acceptable amounts of body muscle and describe working the body to appeal to a (male) gaze. Chapter six explores pole fitness classes as a type of female 'homosocial' (Lipman-Blumen, 1976) community in which women are able to develop an identity as part of a collective, and I explore and challenge suggestions that this offers women a form of 'girl power' and a collective empowerment. Finally, chapter seven pulls the threads together to present the overall conclusions of the thesis and I offer some reflections as to what these types of class mean for feminist debate.

It should be noted that these types of class are referred to by a number of different names by different people and the most common names include 'pole fitness', 'pole dancing', 'fitness pole dancing', 'cardio pole dancing', or simply 'pole'. When I refer to these classes throughout this thesis I will refer to them by a combination of these different names, and my use of these different names reflects that the women who take these classes also refer to them in differing ways and with changing language. In order to make it clear when I am referring to the pole dancing that takes place in a lap dancing club setting, when I talk about this 'type' of pole dancing I shall describe it as such, as pole dancing performed by strippers, or as pole dancing performed in a lap dancing club or a strip club, so as to make it clear which 'type' of pole dancing my discussions refer to.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Feminism, Gender and Society: Exploring the Cultural Context for the Mainstreaming of Pole Dancing Classes**

#### **Introduction**

As the previous chapter described, pole dancing is an increasingly popular activity amongst young women in contemporary Britain, with a growing number of classes, competitions, and an internet community of pole dancers. This raises some interesting questions about women's cultural interests and relationships, and I feel it is necessary to examine the cultural context in which pole dancing classes have emerged and become so prevalent. Drawing on a body of feminist literature as well as examples from contemporary and popular culture, including television, films and popular music, this chapter seeks to provide an overview of the different theoretical frameworks for exploring the current thinking about and the cultural experiences of women in contemporary Britain today. I examine feminist questions, in particular, around women's ability to exercise choice and agency in the context of a society where popular accounts describe women as able to finally achieve their potential in work and education, for example, yet conflicting with this, images of women as objects of desire proliferate, and I draw on the ways in which the concepts of structure and agency may act in conjunction with one another.

In the present day there are a number of conflicting debates around the nature of feminism, including definitions of feminism and whether or not we live in an era where equality has been achieved, where feminism is no longer needed and where past feminist theory is no longer relevant for a new generation of women. I examine in this chapter the notion that there has been a 'backlash' (Faludi, 1991) against feminism, in which the media presents negative stereotypes of feminists in contrast to images of supposedly strong and liberated women, and where feminism and femininity are presented as binaristic and incompatible (Brunsdon, 2000; Hinds and Stacey, 2001). I explore the message of power feminism (Wolf, 1994) which tells women that they are responsible for their own individual successes and a mantra of choice and entitlement which positions women as having the agency and freedom to make their own decisions, criticising second wave feminists for having made victims out of women. A number of conflicting debates, however, question women's ability to exercise freedom of choice and agency and argue that women are socialised, particularly by the media, to make the 'right' choices, which are around producing and moulding the body in line with an idealised body type and an idealised image of heterosexual femininity (McRobbie, 2009; Walter, 2010). I examine arguments which suggest that women are presented with a number of confusing messages where, on the one hand, they are encouraged to acknowledge and be thankful for the achievements of second wave feminists, but, on the other hand, are taught to reject feminism (McRobbie, 2007, 2009), and which argue that a false image of empowerment is presented to women via a performance of femininity and participation in sex entertainment (Whelehan, 2000; Levy, 2005; McRobbie, 2009). Finally, I outline postmodernist and poststructuralist feminist debates which place focus upon diversity of experience, calling for research that takes into account the complexity

of women's experiences and the importance of other structural factors in determining identity and a more complex understanding of femininity and womanhood (Butler, 1990; Fraser and Nicholson, 1990; Haslanger, 2000).

## **What is Feminism?**

In order to explore these contemporary feminist debates and questions, I will begin in this section by offering some basic definitions and explanations of 'feminism'. It is common to speak broadly of three waves of feminism; the first wave which spans from the nineteenth to early twentieth century; the second wave which spans from the 1960s through to the 1980s; and the third wave which is said to have started in the 1990s, and is continuing through the present day. It should be noted, however, that the history of feminism may be much more complex than this, for these waves are argued to be interlinked and not necessarily three such distinct and separate periods of history (Roof, 1997), and the wave metaphor tends to pit feminists against one another based purely upon age. Offen (1988) suggests that the term feminism began to be used in the 1890s but that the meaning has varied greatly over time and continues to have a multitude of different meanings to different people. Feminism is argued to be a difficult term to define and there clearly are, within feminism, many different theories and many differing approaches (Delmar, 1986; Beasley, 1999).

Chris Beasley's book *What is Feminism?* (1999) suggests that, in most general terms, the term feminism is regarded as a critique of what is described as a mainstream focus on men within traditional social and political thought, an

assumption of male superiority and centrality, and the related invisibility of women. She argues that the term feminism is regarded by feminists as different in its content and different in kind from traditional thought, offering a challenge to masculine bias and challenging women's subordinate status as second rate or 'other'. Feminism thus developed in recognition that there was no language or means through which women could express the issues that were important to them, and from this perspective feminism enabled women to identify themselves as an oppressed group who, united, could gain the power to contest preconceptions about femininity and female potential (Whelehan, 2000). The development of a politicised language of feminism would thus allow women to pursue equal representation in the world of work, to argue that housework is work, to demand more control over their reproductive health and to reject the objectification of women and the perpetration of an impossible feminine ideal. Beasley quotes a number of different definitions of feminism which she suggests demonstrate a common general consensus, whereby definitions of feminism show it to be a view that women are discriminated against because of their sex and that feminist thought has some orientation to group concerns, for example, 'I adopt a general definition of feminism as a perspective that seeks to eliminate the subordination, oppression, inequalities and injustices women suffer because of their sex' (Porter, 1991: 5, cited in Beasley, 1999: 27), and 'many would agree that at the very least a feminist is someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex' (Delmar, 1986: 9, cited in Beasley, 1999: 27). Beasley goes on to show, however, that despite this common general view of what feminism means or refers to, within this, feminists themselves do not agree on the nature of this discrimination or whether different women suffer from different levels or types of discrimination. Beasley suggests also that a feature of

feminism is the focus on women and womanhood at the centre of analysis, however, within this there is little consensus about what womanhood actually means (Delmar, 1986; Beasley, 1999).

A focus of feminism on the subject of women, a grouping defined by differentiation on the grounds of sex, leads Beasley (1999) to use the concept of sexual difference to highlight some of the debates within feminism, arguing that sexual difference is approached in at least five main ways by feminists; firstly, some feminists (often referred to as liberal feminists) argue that men and women are the same and equal and should be treated as so and these feminists are engaged with reworking mainstream views of women as second rate; secondly, some feminists argue that women are different from men but this does not mean that women are inferior and actually the differences between men and women should be celebrated; a third view argues that these two approaches are too simplistic and the question is not as simple as assessing whether men and women are the same or different, for instead we need to question the organisation and effects of power; fourthly, some feminists argue against a position which identifies women as a homogenous group, arguing that we need to consider other defining characteristics, for women are divided by race and class, for example; and finally, a more radical approach to feminism argues that women are superior to men and this requires an inversion of mainstream views which currently deem men as superior.

Delmar (1986) suggests that in the 1960s and 70s (commonly referred to as the second wave of feminist movement), feminism was concerned with finding a single cause of women's oppression and focused on an attempt to find an

explanation for feminism which would express women's commonality and bind all women together politically. In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in which she examined the change in women's roles in the context of the post war period, where opportunities for women outside of the home were predominantly part time, poorly paid and restricted to servicing work. Friedan challenged the effects of the limitations placed upon women by patriarchal ideologies, gender stereotyping and assumptions around femininity, and her response was to encourage women to combine motherhood, domesticity and a career, arguing that this would enable women to achieve true fulfilment and equality. *The Feminine Mystique* was one of several important written contributions to second wave feminism, which represented women's opposition to the post war reaffirmation of women's roles – demonstrating that women's primary responsibilities as wife, mother and carer were not being accepted passively, or without resistance. Campaigning for equality of opportunity and equality of treatment, including reforms in social policy, education and health care were characteristic of the second wave, and in Britain the Abortion Act 1967, the Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 were significant achievements of the second wave movement which gave the appearance of major gains for women. However, in the 1980s and 90s, the second wave of feminism began to face criticism as an essentialist approach which treated women as one homogenous group and failed to take into account the diversity of women's experiences. Many feminists were critical of the 'oversimplifications and generalisations of this period in feminism' (Bordo, 1990: 134). As I will go on to discuss in the final sections of this chapter, feminism is now increasingly marked by diverse accounts which recognise that womanhood is not a unified subject (Butler, 1990; Fraser and Nicholson, 1990; Beasley, 1999). These debates call for

a shift within feminism from debates around equality to debates around difference  
– recognising that women are divided by race, class and sexuality, for example.

Barrett (1980) describes feminist political struggle as having always been disproportionately engaged in by women who are highly educated, posing a question over how to make feminism relevant to women across a range of different experiences and situations. It is argued that many younger women feel excluded from the women's movement due to a perception that feminists are predominantly white, middle class and middle aged (Aapola et al., 2004). Indeed, in reference to social movement activity, Byrne (1997: 73) found that it is predominantly the middle classes who are involved in collective action. This claim is supported by Skeggs' (1997) research with white working class women in the UK who she found to reject feminism on the basis of it being perceived as too middle class, as 'a prerogative of the privileged, something that benefits those in different economic, social and cultural circumstances' (1997: 153). Skeggs argues that the women in her study viewed their femininity as potentially facilitating upward social mobility and as a means of being seen to be respectable (1997: 157). Feminism, by contrast, could not offer the means of attaining similar cultural and economic approval and instead was associated with being undesirable, pretentious, serious and boring, 'feminism was seen to offer few incentives, especially in comparison to the use that could be made of femininity' (1997: 157). Skeggs' findings highlight a common belief that feminism and femininity are mutually exclusive, and also highlight the importance of socio economic status in young women's identity.



Criticisms of the second wave have also focused on generational differences between younger and older feminists and describe a new generation of young women who cannot identify with the second wave women's movement. In its broadest sense, the third wave refers to a generation of women who, according to self identified third wavers Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, were raised in the wake of the second wave movement of the 1970s (2000: 15). The generational view argues that there is a divide between the context of feminist thought in the 1960s and 70s and that from the 1980s onwards. Feminism, in a general definition, assumes that women are oppressed, exploited and subordinate, however, in recent years the idea of women as victims is no longer taken as given by feminists. Wolf (1994) argues that what she describes as the second wave 'victimhood' approach has lost its relevance to the younger generation for women have increasing amounts of political power, and she also pits feminist struggle as one of youth against age. She implies that a new generation of women are mature enough to deal with sexist innuendos and jokes without a return to the militancy of classic radical feminism. Of course, this view seems to depict older feminists as being bitter, twisted, with no sense of humour, positioning older feminists as the oppressors of younger 'normal' women. In her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, Ariel Levy (2005: 74) talks about a 'generational rebellion' and argues that young American women embrace what she describes as 'raunch culture' so as to distance themselves from second wave feminists because 'nobody wants to turn into their mother'. However, as Griffin (2001: 182) points out, the generational approach to theorising young women's relationship to feminism is problematic because a concentration on age tends to overlook other forms of diversity amongst young women and feminisms.

During the 1990s, we saw the emergence of terms including 'third wave', 'new feminism' (Walter, 1998), 'post feminism', 'power feminism', 'postmodern feminism' and women centred schools of thought which rejected the label of feminism altogether. Some seem to use the terms 'post feminist' and 'third wave' interchangeably (Brooks, 1997; Barrett, 2000). The use of the prefix 'post' seems to be when the writer wants to make it clear that they have a certain antagonism to the term 'feminism', because of the connotations it generates or to describe a progressive nature of third wave thinking, positioning past feminist beliefs as irrelevant to today's society. Post feminism offers a way of thinking through the way in which feminism has changed, and a way of marking a generational movement, understanding that feminism is constantly shifting and evolving. As Hollows (2006: 104) describes, women today 'have grown up in conditions that are both shaped by second-wave feminism, and which are also the product of a time that is historically post-second-wave feminism'. The term post feminism emerged at a time when initiatives in government and industry were announcing the 1990s as the decade of gender equality, on the basis that decades of social policy and legal reform, informed by equal opportunities legislation, had provided the foundations for social change (Coppock et al., 1995). The media was scattered with references to post feminism throughout this period, and post feminism is most often defined as the belief that society has entered an era where feminism is no longer needed. Helen Wilkinson (1994) claims that, via a 'gender quake', many of the aims of feminism have been achieved, including fundamental changes in attitudes towards the female role in society.

To Wilkinson, therefore, the rise in post feminism signifies a world in which feminism has been transcended and overcome, but to other feminists it is clear

that there is still work to do (for example McRobbie, 2009; Banyard, 2010; Walter, 2010). Debates around post feminism provoke fierce debates in contemporary theory and politics, and the remainder of this chapter highlights, explains and examines some of these contemporary debates. Some theorists argue that women are being enslaved by their own liberation, suffering depression and burnout as they attempt to 'have it all' (Walter, 2010: 218). Whilst Friedan (1963) encouraged women to pursue a career as well as being mothers and wives, Quest (1994) argues that women are unhappy with their newly established status – for they are expected to do everything in the home plus all that men do at work, and delaying child rearing in favour of independence and employment is depressing for many women. Black (2006), in her discussion of women's use of beauty salons, claims that the gains made by feminism mean that many young women today have freedom to make choices around occupation and sexuality with less rigid restrictions than their mothers, yet this is also experienced as a heavy responsibility and a fear of failure. Also, it is suggested that 'women have clearly made inroads into some previously male-dominated spheres, but the spheres themselves have not changed their bias towards the male / masculine perspective and needs' (Whelehan, 2000: 16).

Empirical research in the UK demonstrates that young women embody feminist ideals, however, many do not identify with the women's movement (Aapola et al., 2004; Rich, 2005). Stuart questioned:

Why – when it is patently clear that women still feel strongly about 'feminist' issues and in a new decade where most of the social problems that prompted the rise of feminism in the early 1970s still remain with us – do many ordinary women feel that feminism has nothing to do with them? (Stuart, 1990: 28)

Susan Faludi (1991) argues that there has been a media induced 'backlash' against women's pursuit of equality and that the successes of second wave feminism were turned into crimes against women. Images of women's liberation proliferate in contemporary culture, especially images of seemingly strong, confident and successful female celebrities, presented as no longer needing feminism, and presented in contrast to negative media representations and stereotypes of female activists. In her discussion *What is Feminism?* Delmar (1986) suggests that whilst it may be difficult to come to a single definition of feminism, there is great consistency in the images which are associated with feminism and feminists. Hinds and Stacey (2001) argue that feminism and femininity are frequently portrayed in binaristic terms, regarded as mutually exclusive and:

The tension between feminism and femininity is perhaps most clearly articulated in what has now become the mythical, and most persistent, icon of second-wave feminism, the bra burner. (Hinds and Stacey, 2001: 156)

The myth of the throwing of bras into a burning fire decades ago was suggested to have taken place as a protest to the 1969 Miss America Beauty Pageant to symbolise an end to enslavement to an artificial feminine 'ideal'. Whilst it is debated whether or not bra burning for protest actually occurred or is simply a myth, today the parody of 'bra burning feminists' is used to demonstrate why not to be feminist and this image of bra burning is associated with the most radical, angry and right wing feminism. Whelehan (2000) notes that commodities that were once perceived as being at odds with women's liberation, such as bras and high heels, are now repositioned as fashion accessories, signifying of femininity, and as characteristic of female agency. To reject the bra is said to repress

women's sexual feelings and symbolise a lack of care for oneself or ones appearance and of not wanting to be attractive. Similarly, Brunsdon argues that:

In the popular imagery, feminists are still women who don't wear makeup, don't shave their legs and disapprove of watching soap opera, getting married and having doors held open for them. (Brunsdon, 2000: 211)

These images demonstrate popular views of the incompatibility of feminism and femininity and are used as a reason for rejecting feminism. The image of feminists as hating and rejecting men means that the threat of being seen as a lesbian is another reason used by women to reject feminism. Bulbeck (1997) and Griffin (1989) argue that the label 'lesbian' is used to police the boundaries of acceptable (heterosexual) femininity, and Skeggs' (1997) research with working class women showed that for them, feminism was associated with man hating and lesbianism. The women in Skeggs' study took steps to dis-identify with this 'for the women to take up a lesbian identity...would mean to disinvest their gains in respectability' (1997: 122). Wolf (1991) describes how popular culture presents the ugly feminist activist as only being a feminist as she is too undesirable to get a man, depicting the popular views of the correlation of beauty and (hetero) sexuality, where a woman must be beautiful and feminine in order to be seen as sexual.

### **Structure and Agency**

Historically, feminism has focused upon the social structures which limit the opportunities for women in social life. Debates have traditionally focused on the structural constraints throughout society which are said to have served to

subordinate women and privilege men. Simone de Beauvoir describes women as 'mutilated' and 'immanent' (Beauvoir, 1949), cast in the role of 'other' to men, and historically women have been argued to be dependent upon men, excluded from the world of work, confined to domesticity, and socialised to objectify themselves. Adrienne Rich (1980), in her essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, describes that heterosexual relationships are seen as being the 'norm', as 'compulsory', and she criticises heterosexuality as an institution which serves to control and disempower women and limit their sexual choices. She argues that heterosexuality is integral to the way that society is organised, that a person's heterosexuality is generally assumed until proven otherwise, and if a woman self identifies as lesbian, she is rejecting the 'compulsion' towards a heterosexual life. Rich also argues that compulsory heterosexuality presents a constant message that sexual pleasure is the right of men.

The growth and availability of pornographic materials in the 1980s meant that pornography went from being a marginal issue to being central as a source of concern and anxiety in popular culture. Some feminists at this time, including Andrea Dworkin (1981, 1987), Susan Brownmiller (1975) and Catherine MacKinnon (1987), some of the most well known feminist campaigners against pornography, became concerned with pornography as a direct cause of violence against women and as a means of subordinating women, suggesting that pornographic images, as well as the sexualised depictions of women in magazines, films, television and advertisements, portray women as depersonalised sexual objects, and the pervasion of these images into our everyday lives means that this is the way many men learn how to see women. These feminists became highly active, particularly in America, calling for

pornography to be re-cast as a civil rights issue and censored. The Women Against Pornography group, with which Dworkin, Brownmiller and MacKinnon were involved, was extremely active in the US in the 1980s. Dworkin and MacKinnon define pornography as 'the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and / or words' (1988: 36). Dworkin and MacKinnon's (1993) criticisms of *Playboy* magazine and the image of the *Playboy* bunny also suggest that women are dehumanised as commodities to be bought and used. The term 'bunny' and its reference to women is suggested to be used to characterise women as little animals that can be caged and kept, and that want sex all the time. They suggest that *Playboy* and other pornographic materials have an underlying theme that suggests that all women want sex, and want to be sexually accessible to men, and that these images constitute an incitement to violence and rape. These feminists have focused on elements of degradation, torturing and humiliation of women in pornography, an industry they describe as controlled by men, and the portrayal of women as sexual slaves and whores, to be used and abused by men. The word 'pornography' comes from the Greek word 'porne', meaning 'whore', and 'graphos', which means 'depiction' or 'representation' (Paul, 2005). The radical feminist theory on prostitution (for example Barry, 1981; Bell, 1987) refers to prostitutes as victims and prostitution as a form of slavery, reducing women to nothing more than bought objects. Prostitution is seen by these feminists as the purest expression of male domination and patriarchy and pornography is related and compared to prostitution as the purchase of women's bodies for use in photographic and filmed images.

This portrayal of women as abject victims has, however, not been without challenge. One of the earliest feminist arguments against the anti pornography movement was that by Ellen Willis (1984), in *Feminism, Moralism and Pornography*. Willis argued that feminists should not issue a blanket condemnation against all pornography. Rubin (1984) agreed with this and claimed that the dangers of pornography had been greatly exaggerated by feminists who only focused on the most shocking and violent images of pornography, for example, those which included the use of sadomasochism or child pornography, and they ignored those images which depicted heterosexual couples enjoying uninhibited sex with each other. Willis argues that by campaigning to censor pornography and sexual images, the anti pornography movement dissuades women from being sexually free and from exploring their own sexual desires and interests. She suggests that women are led to believe that to enjoy sex is wrong, degrading and abnormal and these arguments serve to make women feel ashamed of their sexual feelings and afraid to be honest about them, thus removing women's agency and right to choose whether or not they watch pornography. Denfield (1996) argues that the anti pornography movement makes victims out of women and '...by blaming sexual material for sexual violence, current feminists invoke the Victorian era belief that sexuality is inherently evil and any display of it must be quashed' (Denfield, 1996: 13). In 1989 Feminists Against Censorship was developed in direct opposition to the Women Against Pornography campaign, in order to fight both censorship and the impression that was generally held in society, that all feminists were radical feminists and agreed that pornography should be restricted. Instead, Willis argues that the presence of sexual material in society gives women agency and permission to explore their



sexuality and removes guilt about the experience and expression of sexual feelings (1984).

Power (2009) suggests that more recent feminist debate has tended to regard pornography more benignly, in closer alignment with these liberal (also described as sex positive) views on pornography, and particularly it is argued that a new generation of women are able to make their own choices about pornography and that, for these younger women, empowerment is about making their own choices and taking charge of their own sexuality. As argued by Walter (2010), this notion of choice and agency which emerged in feminist debate around pornography has become in recent years a post feminist 'mantra', and the idea that women are able to please themselves in all aspects of their lives is everywhere. Other feminists have also argued that women are, in post modernity, increasingly freed from structural constraints, and that they have gained increased rights in work and politics, enabling them to take a more active role in society and allowing for expanded options about how to live. A post feminist emphasis upon agency and freedom of choice is described by some as 'power feminism' and is illustrated by Naomi Wolf in *Fire with Fire* (1994). Like Helen Wilkinson (1994), Wolf also discusses a 'gender quake', arguing that a change in attitudes towards women's position in society has occurred and women now hold political power, meaning that second wave feminism can be rejected as no longer being relevant to younger women due to its' focus on women as victims. Victim feminism, Wolf argues, not only focuses on but actually reinforces women's subjugation at the hands of men, and she argues that women should be energised to use their newfound power, rejecting victimhood and taking control of their own lives. She argues that power feminism affirms women's equality with men, celebrates

women's achievements, and encourages women to assume the power and responsibility they deserve as men's equals.

When I say that the gender quake has potentially changed forever what it means to be female, I mean this: it is no longer necessary for women to ask anyone's permission for social equality. (Wolf, 1994: pp. 51-52)

Wolf goes on to provide practical guidelines for implementing power feminism, encouraging women to join political action groups for example, her goal being to create a feminist movement that women will feel part of and in which women act as agents of change in their own self determined lives. Thus, the agency approach argues that women are not cultural dopes or victims, but are now skilful actors who are capable of accounting for their own action, due to social change which has enabled women to have an ability to carry out human actions that are purposive and intentional and carried out at the choice of the woman concerned and not because of constraints imposed by social structure. The power feminism approach points to a neo-liberal discourse, encouraging women to become more self reflexive and to scrutinise and assess their own lives and opportunities (Duggan, 2003). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2001), in their analysis of individualisation and women, discuss the ways in which choices have been opened up to young women, producing new possibilities for human agency, and they describe 'individuals freed of traditional constraints' (1995: 7). Volman and Ten Dam (1998: 540) claim that 'individuals must be more capable than ever before of deciding how they want to run their lives, regardless of the social constraints of family, social class and sex'.

Samantha Holland (2010: 178), in her research with women who take pole dancing classes, describes herself as leaning towards a 'sex positive' approach and describes pole dancing as allowing women to exhibit liberation and agency via an active choice in which to participate in these classes. There also seems to have been an onslaught of post feminist images of strong and powerful women in the media. In 1996 the Spice Girls came onto the pop music scene with the catchphrase 'girl power!' and their version of girl power mirrors Wolf's (1994) power feminist argument, playing on the idea of a culture full of choices and opportunities available equally to all women and seeing girls as in control of their lives. The Spice Girls described their standpoint on feminism in their declaration 'feminism has become a dirty word. Girl power is just a nineties way of saying it. We can give feminism a kick up the arse. Women can be so powerful when they show solidarity' (Spice Girls, 1997: 48). By this statement, the Spice Girls firmly position themselves as post feminist, showing an antagonism with feminism, and their desire not to be associated with the stuffy and angry feminist views of past. By suggesting feminism needs a 'kick up the arse', the Spice Girls suggest that feminism is no longer relevant to young women, and needs reaffirming as 'girl power'. This comment also promotes a view that feminism never gave serious consideration to the importance of female solidarity. Girl power as appropriated by the Spice Girls seems to recognise the strengths of female friendship and the Spice Girls first single *Wannabe* pivots between heterosexual romance and the importance of same sex friendship and community. Indeed some feminists discuss the value of friendships and communities in providing women with confidence and feelings of agency (Friedman, 1993; Brison, 1997).

This section so far has described two opposing arguments, firstly those that see women as confined by structural constraints, and secondly, those that describe women as having increasing amounts of agency and 'girl power' to construct themselves in a post modern society. A further approach to the 'structure versus agency' debate is that of 'structuration theory', developed by Giddens in works such as *The Constitution of Society* (1984), which argues that structure and agency are inextricably linked and that it is incorrect to separate these entities. Structuration theory argues that approaches which emphasise either structure or agency are less adequate and, instead, we need to develop an approach which incorporates both dimensions. Structure and agency in this argument are seen as complementary, where structure influences human behaviour and humans are capable of changing the social structures that they inhabit. Giddens argues that there is an ongoing relationship between social structure and human agency, as humans are not passive or cultural dopes but they act intentionally and are constantly involved in producing and reproducing society. Giddens defines structure as a set of rules and resources that actors draw upon as they produce and reproduce society in their activities. He describes that these rules can be laws but also are the unwritten social rules that apply to the realm of the informal, including body language, posture and social expectations. He claims that humans are active in producing and constructing themselves where self identity is a reflexive project. Giddens' (1982, 1991) idea of the 'reflexive self' argues that we are continuously working at, monitoring and reflecting upon our identities. 'We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves' (Giddens, 1991: 75). Giddens provides an account of the processes of individualisation and the growth of the self monitoring subject, claiming that the second modernity brings into being people whose lives are no longer wholly determined by roles ascribed to

them by the traditional structures of class, race and sex, but individuals are required to become more reflexive, to reflect on the various rules, constraints and structural factors which impinge upon them, as a necessary method for self realisation, and also to become self reflexive, to monitor and evaluate themselves, to plan their lives and to assess opportunities available to them. Giddens (1991: 3) claims that in 'the settings of what I call 'high' or 'late' modernity – our present-day world, the self, like the broader institutional contexts in which it exists, has to be reflexively made'. The term reflexivity is thus used by Giddens to refer to the ability of an agent to consciously alter his or her place in social structure and Giddens describes how we monitor ourselves, placing expectations upon ourselves and others. Thus, Giddens argues against what he regards as the extreme positions of either structure or agency, instead arguing that although people have the agency in which to make society, they are at the same time constrained by it, and thus agency and structure cannot be analysed separately.

Within feminism, a number of debates have recently suggested that whilst women may now have greater opportunities in the workplace and in education for example, their ability to exercise choice and agency may still not be entirely free. Showing similarities to Giddens' structuration theory, this approach does not present women as entirely passive in the face of social structure, or as completely free agents, but rather argues that women's choices remain influenced to some extent by structure. A number of theorists (for example Adkins, 2002; McRobbie, 2004, 2009) have criticised the concept of individualisation, as assuming that women are now entirely free from constraint, failing to recognise the complexities of women's experiences, and some researchers have demonstrated the importance of other structural factors in determining women's lives. Walkerdine,

Lucey and Melody (2001), for example, highlight the role of class in determining the life chances of young women, and Skeggs (1997) also shows the importance of class in shaping women's identity. In her critique of second wave feminism, Mary Smeeth argues that this period was '...based on the false premise that differences between women were less important than what united them: men as the common enemy' (1990: 31). Thus there was an assumption by many that, following the passing of equal opportunities legislation in the 1960s and 70s, gender divisions between men and women would be dismantled, and the work of the feminist movement would be done, but this did not take into account other structural inequalities endemic throughout society.

Hockey et al (2007), in *Mundane Heterosexualities: From Theory to Practices*, describe the role of heterosexuality in women's gender identity. They explain that there have previously been two polarised feminist arguments towards heterosexuality, where some have tended to describe heterosexuality as denying women's agency (for example, Rich, 1980), and others have argued that women do gain pleasure and are able to express agency through their heterosexual relationships (for example Rubin, 1984; Willis, 1984; Denfield, 1996). Using life course interviews with different generations of women, Hockey et al aim to explore how people 'live' heterosexuality. In chapter three of their book, they give an account of one of their interviewees, Jean, who was one of the eldest participants in their research at age 74 at the time of interview. Jean's story, they argue, demonstrates the complexities of the lived experience of heterosexuality, and the difficulties in using a dichotomous 'structure versus agency' or 'disempowerment versus empowerment' approach to describing heterosexuality. On the one hand, Jean's story appears to confirm traditional stereotypes of how

heterosexuality was lived in the early twentieth century, as a woman growing up during the Second World War, adhering in her marriage to what has historically been regarded as a 'traditional' division of domestic labour and childcare. Yet Jean's account also shows the complexities within her experiences, in having sex before marriage, becoming the main breadwinner when her husband was made redundant, and her enjoyment of heterosexual sex. Hockey et al argue that Jean's narrative shows that power was operating constantly in her relationship with her husband yet it was fluid, changeable and negotiable. They suggest that Jean's stories show the ways in which being heterosexual patterns her everyday life, from the 'extreme' to what they describe as the 'mundane' aspects of life, and their account problematises the term 'heterosexuality', as not simply being about attraction between and / or sexual relations between a man and woman, but as shaping gender identities, relationships, and the organisation of everyday life. They also found that experiences of sexuality differed amongst their respondents in terms of social class and age in particular. Hockey et al therefore propose a more comprehensive theory of sexuality and recognition of the diversity of heterosexualities which women inhabit. Rejecting previous polarised and dichotomous views of heterosexuality, they suggest that a 'recognition of different (heterosexual) experiences allows for a more inclusive feminist politics which may speak to a wider group of women than previously' (2007: 63). These debates thus indicate the complexities of women's experiences and suggest that structure and agency may work through one another, may not be easily separated, and may be constantly shifting and changing.

Some theorists have criticised the rhetoric of power and choice as a means of 'blaming' women, for women appear to be increasingly told that the world is their

oyster and that if they do not achieve what they want, it is not structural inequalities which are to blame, but their own individual failures. In *The Individualised Society*, Bauman (2001) describes how in modernity, everything is undergoing individualisation and is the responsibility of individuals. This message positions women as having the agency and the freedom to make their own decisions, suggesting that they cannot blame gender inequalities, for they now have responsibility for directing their own life choices. Susie Orbach (2010) in a recent article in *The Observer*, describes how women are now encouraged to be ambitious, make life choices, and to believe that the world is their oyster, yet she argues that this is setting women up for failure:

As their expectations clash with experience, they will be encouraged to see their difficulties as personal; the trumping of the feminist revolution by the 'have-it-all woman' has privatised their experience, engendering a sense of individual failure if it doesn't – as it can't – all work out. (Orbach, 2010)

It is also argued that a discourse of power and control for women is held up as a substitute for feminism. McRobbie argues that a celebration of choice and agency for women has in actuality led to a neglect of the structures which continue to create power divisions in our society. Similarly, Sharpe (2001: 179) claims that 'the prevalent rhetoric around 'equality' lulls young women into a false sense that more has been achieved than is the case'. McRobbie's arguments explore the work of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2001) and Giddens (1982, 1984, 1991), yet she suggests that the concept of individualisation has contributed to the undoing of feminism, for the emphasis upon individualism and autonomy renders feminism redundant and indicates that women are no longer impacted by structural constraints and therefore no longer need to become involved with a feminist movement. McRobbie describes 'the adverse consequences of new



individualism' (2004: 11), whereby she claims that neo-liberal ideas tend to constrain women, putting pressure on women and placing them as responsible for their choices. She states that, as supposedly autonomous subjects, women are presented as no longer needing to be involved in collective organisation and are (falsely) encouraged to believe that discourses of empowerment and choice are 'a kind of substitute for feminism' (2009:1).

Later in this chapter I will examine Angela McRobbie's (2009) arguments that women are encouraged, in contemporary society, to distance themselves from feminism by adopting a 'new sexual contract' through the abandonment of feminism in favour of a performance of femininity. In the next section, I now go on to demonstrate feminist arguments that specifically suggest women's 'choices' to be influenced by a widely accepted image of the 'ideal' female body and adherence to a male 'gaze'.

### **The Body and the Gaze**

As discussed above, some feminists have criticised the images of power feminism and girl power presented in popular culture, and it is argued that the language of personal responsibility, empowerment, agency and choice in reality encourages women to make the 'correct' or 'right' choices, and these are argued by some feminists to be predominantly around making oneself attractive to the opposite sex (Whelehan, 2000; McRobbie, 2009; Walter, 2010). Whelehan argues that the message of control, choice and girl power put forward by the power feminist message, is that control '...always seemed to be about the right to consume and

display oneself to the best effect, not about empowerment in the worlds of work, politics or even the home' (Whelehan, 2000: 4). This is demonstrated by Mavis Bayton's (1998) discussion of the difficulties faced by women in the music industry in *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music*, where she examines the reasons why, although female vocalists have always been common, women playing instruments in bands are proportionately rare, citing a gender bias within the music industry. She explores the social factors that keep women from playing instruments and is critical of pop bands like the Spice Girls and their mantra of girl power, claiming that the Spice Girls as a dance and vocal group and as a symbol of female solidarity may inspire women to an extent, but they do not encourage women to take up instruments and break stereotypes about women in the music industry – being a Spice Girl is predominantly about dressing up, dancing and singing, which Bayton describes as timeless female activities. Also, she argues that successful girl band members are required to conform to strict measures of female conventional attractiveness, claiming:

The Spice Girls are a vocal and dance group, who do not play instruments and were chosen for their looks rather than their musical abilities, so that they cannot inspire women to be instrumentalists. (1998: 12)

Bayton argues that, for women in the music industry, choices of image and clothes are seen as just as important as the music, with sexual image taking precedence over sound. Whelehan (2000: 47) questions whether, as role models, it is the message of power and control that the Spice Girls put forward that young women aspire to, proposing that it is more likely to be their looks and media stardom. Natasha Walter (2010: 71), in her discussion of the messages presented to young girls about the 'correct' ways of looking and being, argues that girls are

taught from an early age about the importance of being sexually attractive and girls who are fans of female singers 'learn quickly that in order to be visible, female musicians will need to fit a narrow image of female sexuality'.

In more recent years the Spice Girls have been superseded in the UK music charts by other female singers and girl groups, including most notably Girls Aloud, formed in 2002 on the TV talent show *Popstars: The Rivals*. Girls Aloud have had continued musical success since 2002 and *Guinness World Records* lists them as holding the record for the most consecutive top ten entries in the UK by a female group (Glenday, 2008). Yet the media focus on Girls Aloud is often, it appears, concentrated on their image, appearance, fashion and celebrity boyfriends as opposed to their music. In her previous work, *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf (1991) argued that there is a cultural backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty to keep women in their place. Wolf argued that women are under pressure to conform to an idealised concept of female beauty, where the image of the perfect woman, as deemed by men, is usually blonde, tall and willowy, weighing about 20 per cent less than what her height requires, with no visible flaws on her skin, and her hair and clothes being always immaculate. Girls Aloud member Cheryl Cole is celebrated by the media for her looks and in April 2010 was voted the 'World's Sexiest Woman' by *For Him Magazine (FHM)* as well as 'Woman of the Year' by *Glamour Magazine* two months later in June 2010. In contrast, the media have frequently castigated another Girls Aloud band member, Nicola Roberts, for not fitting the norms of femininity as do the rest of the group, who seem to conform to quite rigid definitions of female beauty; slim, tanned, toned and made up to perfection. Nicola's red hair and pale skin has been criticised for not measuring up. Nicola has, in fact, spoken out in recent months

about the media criticism of her looks and the unfavourable comparisons to her supposedly more glamorous band mates, revealing what she describes as the pressures she feels in the media spotlight to conform to an idealised image of beauty (on the BBC Three Programme *The Truth about Tanning*, February 2010).

In feminist theory the body has emerged as a central issue in relation to ideas of femininity and women's subordination. In the 1970s, feminists began to explore the ways in which women's bodies had been exploited, violated, objectified and controlled, and this focus on women's bodies as a source of oppression has continued. There are many discussions of the media messages presented to young women and the harm that they do, and it is clear that many women spend large amounts of time monitoring themselves and how closely their body measures up to the acceptable 'norm'. Discourses around ideal bodies are so normalised that feminists suggest we live in a world where women are encouraged to compete constantly in terms of physical appearance (Orbach 1993; Grogan, 1999). Both Grogan and Orbach argue that women are taught from an early age to view their bodies as commodities and that their bodies are an arena for constant improvement and re-sculpture. The body is thus said to be seen as a project and magazines are filled with advice to young people about how to create the perfect body (Winship, 1987; Wolf, 1991; Kay, 1999; McRobbie, 2009), which implicitly suggest that the aim of this is to make the correct choices in order to make oneself attractive to the opposite sex. Given the heterosexist nature of this advice, it is argued that women are socialised to grasp the notion that they will perpetually be viewed as objects (Downs et al., 2006) and they must strive to improve and work at their bodies to appear as attractive as possible. This may set up impossible ideals for women, who are expected to be slender but large breasted, and this is argued to be a way of continuing to keep women in a

subordinate position, by ensuring they put their energies into vigilance over their bodies, '...in sexist society women are in fact frequently regarded by others as objects and mere bodies' (Young, 1990: 24). Wolf's (1991) argument is that our culture judges women, and women judge themselves, against the standard set by the beauty myth and creates a view that if women do not look perfect then they only have themselves to blame, for if a woman does not work at her body there must be something wrong with her willpower.

McRobbie (2009) discusses the proliferation of TV makeover programmes such as *What Not to Wear* and *Ten Years Younger*, describing these as a form of 'gender regulation' in which women are taught to self regulate in line with specific gendered and classed identities, and women are shown competing and critiquing each other if they do not make the right fashion or appearance choices. Thus, whilst women are said to have the freedom to make their own decisions, they are socialised to make the right decisions and 'choice is surely, within lifestyle culture, a modality of constraint. The individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices' (McRobbie, 2009: 19). McRobbie describes the right choices, as portrayed in these types of programmes, as bound in class assumptions where style is assumed to be something which comes naturally to middle and upper class women while the working classes, more usually the subjects of these makeover shows, have to work harder to achieve an acceptable femininity. Similarly, Skeggs (1997) showed how working class women were very aware of the judgements made against them by middle class women in relation to their appearance and non-respectability. McRobbie (2009) shows how the media encourages working class women to aspire to success in terms of femininity and

glamour, and criticises women if they do not make attempts to improve themselves.

In her discussion of the erotic fiction series *Black Lace*, a series of erotic fiction novels written by women and aimed at women, Sonnet (1999) suggests that these novels have been typically seen as evidence of the existence of the 'new woman', a woman who is feminine and sexual in a social context where reading erotic novels is a way of displaying a female heterosexual identity and presented as tied to notions of entitlement and agency, suggesting that women are also entitled to read pornographic fiction, the majority of which has traditionally been aimed at men, and consumerist self determination, where women are empowered and can make choices about their consumption of such materials. Sonnet's analysis of these novels, however, questions whether women are really able to use erotic fiction as a way of exploring their own sexuality, suggesting that women's use of pornographic fiction is compromised by the power relations which structure male defined pornography. Sonnet notes that the visual images used for book covers are of women, claiming that erotic literature aimed at heterosexual men would rarely have men on the cover. She also argues that the women used for these images are also very similar in terms of ethnicity, size and age, reflecting the dominant view of female beauty, and she suggests that the images used indicate a language of femininity, where the importance of looking attractive and measuring up to the ideal, via makeup and clothing, and the 'theatrical staging of sexual encounters' (1999: 182) is important. Thus, lingerie and accessories, as well as the positioning of the female body, are used to represent or 'stage' female sexuality. As argued by Attwood (2005), this suggests a formulation of femininity which relies on 'masquerade' rather than experienced sexuality, for example,

looking sexual and presenting oneself as sexual, rather than necessarily being or feeling sexual. Attwood suggests that sexual consumerism and the marketing of sex and sex products to women indicates that women continue to put themselves through self regulation and self scrutiny, turning themselves into commodities which need to look raunchy and sexy. The erotic novels which Sonnet discusses may thus not only present women to be looked at, but also invite women to identify with the woman on the cover, as an object to be looked at. Ariel Levy (2005) argues that women have become 'female chauvinist pigs', and the opening pages of her book give a precise definition of this, as being 'women who make sexual objects of other women and ourselves' (2005: 4). Levy suggests that in recent years women have accepted a form of raunch culture, in which women have internalised the sex positive argument presented to them by images in popular culture and by the negative stereotypes associated with feminism, and women are suggested to now believe that female empowerment is about being sexual and raunchy at all times (Whelehan, 2000; Levy, 2005; Walter, 2010), for example, partaking in casual sex, watching pornography, going to lap dancing clubs and wearing clothes with the *Playboy* bunny logo on the front, as well as going to pole dancing classes. The infiltration of images of porn stars, strippers and glamour models into popular culture may mean that women feel that they are expected to both look and act in the same way as these women. Levy (2005) suggests, however, that the idea that looking like a stripper or a *Playboy* bunny and learning to strip or to pole dance, and that women cannot explore their own sexuality without doing these things, is a very narrow and limited view of sexuality.

The proposition that having the most simplistic, plastic stereotypes of female sexuality constantly reiterated throughout our culture somehow proves that we are sexually liberated and personally empowered has been

offered to us, and we have accepted it. But if we think about it, we know that this just doesn't make sense. (Levy, 2005: 197)

Levy suggests therefore that being in control for women is presented as being about the right to consume and display oneself to the best effect, where women are concerned with turning themselves into objects to be looked at. Similarly, Gill (2007b) offers an analysis of advertising which she claims sells sex as a form of empowerment to women, and the disciplined sexy female body becomes the key sign of a contemporary femininity and sexual display is presented as the source of women's pleasure and power. However, Gill notes that sexualised advertising excludes older women, lesbians, disabled women, overweight women, and many other women who do not meet the narrow standards of sex appeal, suggesting that the real concern is with women's sexual attractiveness to men – far from empowering women it requires them to internalise an oppressive view of female sexuality. Thus, women are:

...invited to become a particular kind of self, and endowed with agency on condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy that is found in pornography. (Gill, 2007b: 258)

In the essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey (1975) first introduced the theory of the 'gaze' and showed the ways in which women are objectified and stereotyped in films, where the audience is put into the perspective of a heterosexual man. Mulvey's theory of the male gaze has much influenced feminist film theory and media studies. In feminist sociology, the theory suggests that the male gaze expresses an unequal power relationship between viewer and viewed, gazer and gazed – and the man imposes his objectifying gaze upon women. Samantha Holland (2010: pp. 2-3) in her study of women who take pole



fitness classes, argues that these classes are 'not subject to the male gaze because pole classes are, for the vast majority, all-female', suggesting that the lack of a male audience indicates these classes are not objectifying in this way for women. However, other sociological research suggests that the concept of the gaze is much more complex than simply one person being physically observed by another (Janet Holland et al., 1998; Gill, 2007b). Whilst women may not be physically observed by men when they participate in pole classes, outside of the class in other arenas of their lives they may be subject to the male gaze and they may take these classes in order to work at and construct the body in line with an idealised body image and to appeal to men. In *The Male in the Head* (Janet Holland et al., 1998) a study of young people's sexuality and heterosexual practices, the researchers suggest that young women feel forced to discipline their bodies into conformity with an internalised view of what men want and desire. They found that young women measured themselves through the gaze of the 'male in the head' and they had developed understandings of sex which privileged masculinity. For example, the women described having unprotected sex with men, for they believed that to insist upon contraception was to assert power, control and agency, concepts which they felt went against femininity, and in contrast, femininity was seen as letting sex 'happen' and keeping men happy. These findings could therefore question whether, as well as being socialised to make the 'right' choices as discussed earlier, women are also socialised to not exert, or to not be seen to exert, 'too much' power and agency – this may question whether there is a glass ceiling on the amount of power and agency women are allowed to exhibit without damaging their feminine identity. They also suggest that men do not need to be physically present for women to have internalised a view of what men want and to act accordingly. Gill (2007b) also

states that we have moved from an external male judging gaze to a self policing narcissistic gaze, where the objectifying male gaze is internalised to form a new disciplinary regime. In earlier media advertising, women were presented as sexual objects, and Gill argues that women now do this to themselves, turning themselves into objects of desire and lust, to be looked at by men, and thus may be seen to be reproducing structure, this demonstrating the ongoing relationship between human agency and social structure as was argued by Giddens (1984). Thus, Holland's assumption that pole dancing classes are not subject to the gaze may be too simplistic and gazes may be much more complex than this. The well known quotation from art critic John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1972) relates to depictions of women in advertisements and oil paintings, however, the arguments above indicate its applicability to contemporary society:

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only the relations of men to women, but the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (Berger, 1972: 47)

The debates highlighted in this section thus centre on arguments around appearance and the body centre and whether or not the dichotomy of structure versus agency is complicated by women being individualised and required to invent themselves, yet being socialised to make the 'right' choices around a body which most closely resembles an idealised image of feminine heterosexuality, and which women believe will make them attractive to men and adhere to the male gaze, thus suggesting that structure and agency are complicated terms which are interlinked. The next section explores women's choices further in the context of a sexualised consumer culture and similarly shows a number of further conflicting

debates around the extent of women's capacity to exercise free choice and agency through their consumption.

### **Girly Consumption**

Studies of consumption have often focused upon the structure agency debate in questioning whether or not people are independent and free consumers who are able to freely choose and use consumer items, i.e. exhibiting agency via their consumption, or whether or not they are influenced by structures, i.e. consumer culture and marketing, which frames and constrains people's choices (Willett, 2008). Thus, are consumers truly free to pursue and develop preferences, experiences and behaviours, and what role does social structure play in shaping consumer freedom?

In an analysis of our contemporary culture, McNair (2002) describes a 'pornographication' of mainstream culture and the emergence of 'striptease culture', in which pornographic representations and sexualised images are increasingly visible. He suggests that sex has come to be as susceptible to analysis as the rest of our lives – newspaper and magazine sex columns are increasingly popular, sex advice books are constantly high on bestseller lists, and we are no longer ashamed to talk about sex and sexuality, revealing intimate details of our feelings and our bodies in the public sphere. The public / private aspects of sex and sexuality have become blurred and sexuality and its performative elements seem to have become 'normalised' (Whelehan, 2000; Levy, 2005). This can be observed through the power of advertising, for the use of

sex and sexuality in advertising is a strategy widely used across the world. Sexuality pervades our everyday lives not just in advertising, but also in television, music, the internet and magazines. Naked breasts proliferate in lads magazines, which are now commonplace on newsagents' shelves and there are dozens to choose from. The internet has made pornography more accessible, affordable and available to us and, as suggested by Paul (2005), there are dozens of examples of how pornography has infiltrated our lives. McNair (2002) focuses in particular on the emergence of popular cultural forms in which people are both literally and metaphorically stripped naked, for example, in celebrity culture, where every aspect of celebrity sex lives and affairs are published for our entertainment, and also reality TV programmes such as *Big Brother*, a programme for which a group of people live together in a house for a period of several months, watched for 24 hours a day by the public, and for which thousands of people apply each year to participate. As Guy Debord ([1967] 1994) suggested, we live in a *Society of the Spectacle*, whereby a commonly noted feature of late capitalism is that more and more forms of entertainment become preoccupied with the commodification of spectacle and experience.

Alongside the pornographication of mainstream media and the emergence of a sexualised striptease culture, women are increasingly targeted as sexual consumers and in the United Kingdom sex emporia like Ann Summers have been hugely successful and women's consumption of sexual commodities seems to be regarded as a huge growth area (Attwood, 2005). Merl Storr's (2003) research, conducted in the 1990s with Ann Summers party organisers and party goers, found that many women considered it appropriate to buy a vibrator because 'it's the nineties' (2003: 32), indicating a sense both that social change has been

achieved and also a feeling of entitlement, in a consumer society which promotes these products to women. In her analysis of the websites of several UK sex businesses including Ann Summers, Attwood (2005) shows how these websites present sex products to women as stylish and feminine, through a claim to aesthetic value in terms of health and beauty. She describes also how Ann Summers shops are situated on the High Streets of many UK cities, next to women's popular fashion stores and health and beauty stores and suggests this indicates to women that sex is domesticated, for it is feminine and familiar (Attwood, 2005). Thus, fashion and beauty instantly become interlinked with femininity and sexuality, which in turn seems to have become normalised and female perfectibility is promoted and endorsed by consumer culture. Griffin (2004) in an analysis of the representation of girls and young women, describes the ways in which girls are influenced by the 'compulsory purchase narrative' explaining that as consumers, girls are presented as having freedom to make choices, yet in actuality consumption is framed by a requirement to better oneself through particular purchases, and industries regulate consumers by presenting particular lifestyle options via marketing campaigns.

The use of female celebrities, presented as empowered and liberated, to endorse feminine and sexual products may contribute to their increasing popularity and acceptance. Striptease culture, described also as raunch culture, is argued by both Levy (2005) and Walter (2010) to have pushed girls into thinking that flaunting their sexuality is a form of empowerment, and Levy describes the growth in pole dancing classes as indicative of this, suggesting that the idea of pole dancing as something empowering is a message that has been fed to women, and is a message that simply does not make sense:

We have to wonder what women are getting out of this now. Why would a straight woman want to see another woman in fewer clothes spin around a pole? Why would she want to be on that pole herself? (Levy, 2005: 34)

Walter, in her book *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (2010), cites a number of television programmes, films and books which celebrate no-strings sex for women and glorify prostitution. Walter argues that young women are unaware of the commercial interests that are pressuring them to conform to an unrealistic ideal of beauty and states that the idea that women are choosing to dress and act in these ways, and choosing careers as glamour models or lap dancers, is not about sexual liberation, but rather is evidence of a reduction in women's freedom. She traces the objectification of women from a young age, going right back to childhood and the ways in which she claims young girls are pressured by the media and consumer culture to make, as also argued by McRobbie (2009), the 'right' choices in terms of heterosexual femininity, by the choice of the colour pink, for example, and encouraged to obsess about their looks from an early age. Walter argues that we are seeing the return of what she terms 'biological determinism', where we are falsely encouraged to believe that inequality is born of biological differences rather than social factors. In a discussion of stereotypes such as that women are naturally more suited to caring and nurturing, and that men are more prone to being good at maths and science, Walter shows the ways in which 'in so much of the work done on sex differences today, instead of the recognition of the true variability of men and women, we are presented simply with stereotypes' (2010: pp. 200-201). Arguing that these stereotypes reduce the choices available to young women by teaching them to make the 'correct' choices for women, Walter calls for increased debate on the social factors impacting upon life choices and the questioning of old fashioned stereotypes.

'Impression management' is a concept coined by Erving Goffman in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) where he defines impression management as the activity of controlling or regulating information in order to influence the impressions formed by an audience. Goffman observes that people's behaviours in social situations are guided by the norms that exist for that situation and people develop a view of how to perform in different situations. People may use impression management in order to shape an audiences' view of a person, including themselves, or of an object such as a consumer product, by presenting self-assessed positive and beneficial information in social interactions, and Goffman describes social interaction as a theatrical performance, where people choose the ways in which they wish to present themselves as a background for social interaction. Many researchers have used the theory of impression management to explore the ways in which advertising is used to sell products or to explore the ways in which people act in situations such as the workplace and in job interviews (Gardner and Martinko, 1988; Grove and Fisk, 1989). Also, Hochschild (1983) uses the concept in his study of 'emotional labour', those types of service work that he argues require the worker to suppress their own emotions in order to present themselves to customers in a particular way. Studies of women in employment (for example, Gray, 2003; Watts, 2008) have shown how women use impression management techniques in the workplace. In popular culture, impression management is a notion frequently seen in television programmes and magazines which describe to women how to dress for work or for a job interview, in order to make a good first impression. In *Barbie Culture*, Mary Rogers (1999) positions the Barbie doll as an example of our obsession with the idealised female body, as a symbol of the ideal. The Barbie doll entered the market in 1959, the same year that Erving Goffman first published *The*

*Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. Rogers suggests that 'a lot of what Barbie tells us about femininity parallels what Goffman wrote about selfhood in an age of appearances and images' (1999: 16). Rogers argues that Barbie represents the ways in which in the post modern world the body is seen as plastic, malleable and able to be changed – and that we are required to work at, control and manage our bodies to present ourselves in the correct way. Barbie is shown as an icon of the view that our bodies can be whatever we like if we devote enough money and attention to them – through tanning parlours, nail salons and cosmetic surgery, for example, the body increasingly serves as the site of individuals' greatest control. Likewise, Mike Featherstone argues that:

The tendency within consumer culture is for ascribed body qualities to become regarded as plastic – with effort and 'body work' individuals are persuaded that they can achieve a certain desired appearance. (Featherstone, 1991: 178)

Rogers claims that women actively try and transform themselves into real life versions of the idealised image that the Barbie doll represents. Walter agrees with this:

Living a dolls' life seems to have become an aspiration for many young women, as they leave childhood behind only to embark on a project of grooming, dieting and shopping that aims to achieve the bleached, waxed, tinted look of a Bratz or Barbie doll. (2010: 2)

In an episode of the US reality TV show *The Hills*, (season 6, episode 1), evidence of the proliferation of *Barbie Culture* can be seen when 23 year old Heidi Montag is shown in a conversation with her mother explaining her reasons for having had cosmetic surgery as 'I do want to look like Barbie'. Michelle Jacobs (2003), in a part autobiographical account entitled *Obsessed with Impression*



*Management*, describes how she grew up worrying constantly over how to present herself and achieve the ideal body image in a society which she describes as based entirely on the way we look, where 'we have to have better hair, eyes, nose, and body in order to survive in this society that we have created for ourselves' (2003: 69) and 'the issues with impression management that we have in society today are perpetuated through the media and how it portrays body image' (2003: 72).

Achieving the ideal body demands 'hard work', for example cosmetic surgery like Heidi Montag above, or visiting the gym and attending fitness classes, which Rogers (1999) suggests is often pursued as an appearance regimen rather than as a health and fitness commitment. The relationship between women and aerobic and fitness practices has received considerable academic attention in recent years (Theberge, 1987; Markula, 1995, 2003). Theberge claims that the women's fitness movement of the 1980s was a sexualising rather than empowering experience for women and the goal of women's fitness classes is not to develop physical strength or fitness but to increase women's sexual attractiveness and appeal. Theberge concludes that aerobic classes '...are developing women's potential in the sexual marketplace, not in athletics' (Theberge, 1987: 195). Likewise, MacNeill (1988: 206) claims that the image of the active female body portrayed via televised fitness programmes '...tends to fabricate pornographic and erotic myths about how activity is to be experienced and what an active woman should look like.' Frew and McGilvray (2005) argue that the fitness industry can be seen as a major site for the production of gendered identities and sexualised body images. Many researchers discuss the widespread stigmatisation in our society of female athletes who move too far

away from dominant images of the ideal body and the boundaries of femininity (Lenskyj, 1984, 1986; Cahn, 1994, 1995, 1996; Griffin, 1998). The overly muscled body has always been regarded as masculine, and discourse around muscles, strength and power has historically been associated with male rather than female sports. It is argued that there continues to exist in our society widespread stigmatisation for athletes who move 'too far' outside the accepted boundaries of masculinity or femininity.

Shari Dworkin (2003), in her study of women's exercise choices in a gym, found that women constructed their workouts with an image of the ideal female body in mind – they chose not to lift weights and instead worked out on cardiovascular machines, for the ideal image of femininity placed emphasis upon acceptable levels of strength and muscle. Dworkin suggests that there is a 'glass ceiling' or upper limit on strength – whilst strength in women to a certain extent was related to feelings of physical power and independence, women live in a 'feared bodily masculinisation' (Dworkin, 2003: 142), a fear that if they became 'too muscular' they would be deemed unattractive or threatening and rejected by men on the heterosexual dating scene, or they would be labelled with a lesbian stigma. Certainly, media images of female sports stars seem to often focus primarily upon looks as opposed to sporting ability. Hargreaves (1994) argues that female sports encourage body presentation which makes the female body much more visible. 'In fact, women's tennis has used an image firm to coach its players to walk and talk and dress in a more sexually appealing fashion' (Stubbs, 1999). If we think about female tennis stars in more recent years, most of the Russian player Anna Kournikova's fame seems to have come from the publicity surrounding her personal life, as well as numerous modelling shoots, as opposed to her tennis

performances. In 2000, Kournikova became the new face for Berlei's shock absorber sports bras, and appeared in the highly successful 'only the ball should bounce' billboard campaign. Photographs of her have appeared in various men's magazines, including in the US the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue* (2004-2005), where she posed in bikinis and swimsuits, and in many popular men's publications in the UK.

### **Girlie Feminism**

Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2000) offer an analysis of the state of contemporary feminism and they make a case for a return to femininity and the enjoyment of feminine products – such as makeup, heels, and thongs, for example. They propose 'girlie feminism' as a way for young women to challenge historical associations of femininity with weakness and subordination, thus offering a challenge to victim feminism, and state that women need not reject consumerism in order to be 'political'. Baumgardner and Richards suggest that girlie feminists should embrace the Spice Girls, bikini waxes and fake tanning as they cultivate their new feminist identities – arguing that women do not need to reject their looks or lose their sense of humour in order to be feminist. Here, Baumgardner and Richards call for a new feminism in which women can adopt feminist values and beliefs without having to reject their looks, femininity or attractiveness. Their approach argues that women can 'have it all' – they can campaign for women's rights yet continue to follow fashion, wear makeup and strive to be attractive to men. Similarly, Valenti (2007: 34) states that one can be both a feminist and 'cool' and that 'feminism says that you have a right to enjoy

yourself' and, as quoted by Whelehan (2000: 10) in her discussion of the Spice Girls, 'Baby Spice' Emma Bunton once stated 'of course I'm a feminist. But I could never burn my Wonderbra. I'm nothing without it!' (Spice Girls, 1997: 15). This message of girl power thus calls for an intermixing of feminist values with the values of femininity and sexual attractiveness and seems to suggest that women are able to exert agency and choice through their consumption.

For Angela McRobbie (2009), however, the reappropriation of 'girlie', as described by Baumgardner and Richards, is questioned as playing into the hands of corporate consumer culture which plays on these young women's rising incomes – as promoting a 'pro-capitalist, femininity focused repertoire' (2009: 158). She is critical of Baumgardner and Richards and claims that their argument belittles the political strategy and degrades an older generation of feminists, presenting them as bitter, twisted, ugly and unfashionable, and trivialises the important achievements made by the second wave movement. Despite their claims of being third wave feminists, McRobbie describes the views of Baumgardner and Richards as being decidedly anti feminist. Taft (2001: 4) states that the message of girl power in the present day reflects a blatant commercialisation and the feminist content once associated with the message has now been erased – girls are encouraged to think in terms of consumption rather than a space for social and political action. Whelehan (2000) also argues that sexualised imagery and its proliferation in popular culture indicates a hostile response to feminism, masquerading as irony. The development of what she terms 'lad culture', whereby pornography is part of our everyday lives, and naked breasts proliferate in tabloid newspapers and lads magazines, places emphasis on male hedonism and female

exhibitionism. This culture is what Whelehan terms 'sexism with an alibi', whereby women are falsely told that being 'up for it' will give them empowerment.

Twelve years ago in *The New Feminism* (1998), Natasha Walter argued that the second wave feminist movement had enabled women to be able to concentrate on achieving political, social and financial equality, and that this would allow less concentration on women's looks and sexuality and less 'policing' of women's private lives. In a similar way to Baumgardner and Richards (2000), Walter argued that women would be able to enjoy sex, makeup and high heels without feeling that they were betraying the struggle for equal rights. In 2010, however, Walter openly states that she believes now that this was wrong, and argues that the rise of a hypersexualised culture which she discusses in detail in *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*, 'is not the equality we once sought; it is a stalled revolution' (2010: 9). Women may have made many steps in the right direction in work, education and politics, yet Walter argues that they are socialised through consumer culture and media enforced gender stereotyping to believe that sexual allure is the real key to women's success, 'It encourages many women to model themselves on a sexy doll rather than seeking other kinds of success.' (2010: 210). Spice Girl Emma Bunton's belief that she is 'nothing' without a push up bra may be indicative of this. Via a discussion of popular and consumer culture and excerpts from interviews with a number of young women, Walter argues that many women have forgotten about equality in the workplace or in politics and now believe that sexual appeal and attention from men is what will give them sexual confidence, which is:

...the only confidence worth having, and that sexual confidence can only be gained if a young woman is ready to conform to the soft-porn image of a tanned, waxed young girl ready to strip and pole dance. (2010: 37)

Both McRobbie (2009) and Walter (2010) describe the conflicting accounts put forward to women today via these media and consumer culture led messages and by feminists such as Baumgardner and Richards. McRobbie describes a 'double entanglement', where women are told that they are the beneficiaries of past feminist victories, to the extent that gender equality now seems to be common sense, and that women are encouraged to take control of their own lives, via a message of power, emphasising that feminism means that women are no longer victims and they have the agency and freedom to direct their own futures. Yet at the same time, women are told that feminism is no longer relevant, feminism is a dirty word, and that to identify with feminist beliefs is to be anti-sex, prudish and consequently unattractive and unfashionable. McRobbie positions post feminism as not just anti feminism, or as a straightforward backlash against feminist ideas, but as a backlash that takes feminism into account. Thus, feminism is seen as a thing of the past, no longer needed at a time when women are encouraged to pursue a career and an education and explore their sexual desires, but at the same time, post feminism promotes stereotypes which cast feminism as associated with hatred to men, bra burning and being unfeminine. In defining post feminism she writes 'broadly I envisage this as a process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s are actively and relentlessly undermined' (McRobbie, 2009: 11). McRobbie (2004) presents the fictional character Bridget Jones as a classic post feminist character. In the novel and the associated film *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the character of Bridget is presented as modern and independent as she lives alone in her own city apartment, makes career choices and has nights out

with her friends. However Bridget is also incessantly obsessed with her looks, her weight and plagued with anxiety about finding a husband.

Likewise, this argument can be attributed to the US series *Sex and the City*, which focuses on the lives of four single professional women living in New York. The *Sex and the City* characters are presented as modern, wealthy career women who are able to fulfil their desires via the consumption of designer clothes, shoes and their New York designer loft apartments. Carrie Bradshaw, the main character, is presented as glamorous, well dressed and independent and liberated. Shopping is presented as giving the women independence and agency. The women's conversations with one another centre around two main topics, fashion and sex, and the two are interlinked, as the women's sexual activity is linked to the development of style and taste and the pursuit of self improvement and self care. As noted by Lees (1997) and Holland et al. (1998), our culture has historically tended to stigmatise women who are deemed as having had 'too much' sexual experience. Skeggs' (1997) research shows how working class women make attempts to escape from the association with working class sexual promiscuity, feeling that they have to work hard to construct a very specific, correct and respectable image of (hetero) sexuality. Yet the *Sex and the City* characters seem to offset numerous sexual encounters by their professionalism – suggesting that by wearing designer clothing and consumption of 'high end' goods, as well as occupying high profile jobs, they are unlikely to be stigmatised in the same way as might the working class women in Skeggs' research and that these women are free to make sexual choices. However, the theme that runs through every series of *Sex and the City* is the pursuit of a permanent relationship. All of their sexual adventures lead them in this pursuit and this

implicitly seems to suggest that through being sexually available and a focus on fashion and appearance, they should be able to find a partner. These storylines present the *Sex and the City* characters as women, like Bridget Jones, who have reaped the benefits of the earlier women's movement but nevertheless yearn for romance and their behaviours and the way they present themselves may be seen to play directly into both male fantasies and the hands of consumer culture. Showing similarity to McRobbie's theory of the double entanglement, Rabine (1994) argues that women have two bodies, one which is seemingly confident and free, and the other which remains trapped by patriarchal power.

The double entanglement, as depicted by McRobbie, can also be attributed to both Walter (2010) and Power's (2009) discussions of women in politics, in which they argue that women who seek power in the world of politics are criticised as reducing their femininity, bound in a society full of stereotypes which associate masculinity with power and assume that 'to be a woman in politics one must become more like a man' (Power, 2009: 9). Walter cites many examples of contemporary female politicians in the US and the UK, including Margaret Thatcher, Hillary Clinton and Jacqui Smith, who have been criticised in the media for their looks and presented as 'inhuman', stating that:

What women who seek power gain in authority, they will lose in femininity, and vice versa. It takes a terrific balancing act, achieved by few women, to maintain both the necessary authority and the necessary femininity to be seen as fully human in politics. (2010: 212)

McRobbie (2009) describes a 'new sexual contract' for young women, a post feminist 'settlement' in which the abandonment of feminism is rewarded with new opportunities for freedom and agency. Requirements for this new deal for women



include; firstly, occupying positions of visibility and agency through participation in education, employment and consumer culture; secondly, abandoning a critique of patriarchy and relinquishing political identities and; thirdly, engaging in a range of practices which are both progressive and also consummately feminine. McRobbie claims that, as women come forward in education and employment, they must work even harder to ensure the stability of the heterosexual matrix and reinforce hierarchies. Women are therefore encouraged to take (the past achievements of) feminism into account, only to reject this in favour of a performance of self centred femininity, and this, McRobbie argues, is effectively producing a generation of confused young women and a range of what she describes as 'post feminist disorders', including eating disorders, depression, self harming and low self esteem. In a discussion of fashion photographs and the models captured in these photographs in *Vogue*, *Elle* and other fashion magazines, McRobbie argues that the pressures and expectations placed upon women to strive for the supposed perfection depicted in these images compromises women's mental health, subjecting women and the female body to constant assessment and judgement, and she states that 'seeking to achieve a feminine identity makes women and girls ill' (2009: 97), claiming that these types of complaint have become so frequent that they are now normalised and seen as part and parcel of being a woman. This echoes the arguments of Naomi Wolf (1991: 11) who suggested that the reproductive rights won by second wave feminists gave Western women control over their bodies, but since then, advertising, fashion and popular culture have resulted in a rise in eating disorders and a growing neurosis around food and weight which have been used to strip women of this sense of control. Kat Banyard raises similar discussion in *The Equality Illusion* (2010), arguing that:

Despite decades of feminist critique of the tyranny of beauty, monitoring and manipulating their appearance remains a daily feature of women's lives. Today it is normal for women to worry about their looks when they get up each morning, to religiously check their appearance in the mirror throughout the day, to not want to leave the house without make-up on, or to feel fat or disgusted at the sight of their thighs. (2010: 17)

Citing a number of different studies on eating disorders and body image, Banyard demonstrates that anorexia and bulimia are primarily women's diseases and are increasingly normalised for women. Banyard views this as being a result of living in a culture in which women are regarded first and foremost as bodies, judged on their appearance and how closely they measure up to the ideal. Similarly, Jacobs (2003: 69) describes that 'we have created a society obsessed with looks and appearance' in her discussion of the pressures that she herself feels to manage and control her body image in order to influence the impressions of others and present herself in a particular way.

McRobbie raises further debate in her claims that this range of 'post feminist disorders' can be collectively described as 'illegible rage', a term she borrows from Judith Butler's (1997) discussions of 'gender melancholia'. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler describes a society in which women are prescribed compulsory heterosexuality and femininity, and any alternative to this is foreclosed as a possibility. Thus, such foreclosures function like losses and, as they are unrecognised in heterosexual culture, they can never be mourned, leading to unresolved grief, a sense of loss and an anger she describes as an 'illegible rage'. Melancholia for Butler marks a withdrawal from the social world and a retreat into the psyche, a loss of self esteem and feeling of worthlessness which results in undirected anger or anger directed against the self. McRobbie builds upon this to describe young women as similarly being bound in a sense of

confusion and mournfulness via the loss of feminism which, to them, is also foreclosed as a possibility. McRobbie argues that this gender melancholia has become normalised and part of being a woman. The fashion photograph, and the models that inhabit them, McRobbie argues, represent post feminist sites of regulation which 'keep young women locked into a hermetic world of feminine ambivalence and distress', preventing any serious critique of patriarchy or heterosexual norms (McRobbie, 2009: 111). According to McRobbie, fascination with fashion photographs, combined with cultural discourses of self reflexivity, self-help, and gender equality, leaves many young girls confused, frustrated, and unable to identify the source of their illegible rage.

### **Anti-Essentialist Feminism**

Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson (1990: 35) encourage feminists to adopt what they describe as a *postmodern feminist theory, which acknowledges 'complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others, attending also to class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation'*. Increasingly, this postmodernist thinking has been applied to feminism, incorporating a poststructuralist stance via the rejection of essentialism and refusing conceptions of women as a homogenous entity, emphasising differences within and between subjects and the diversity of forms of power. This is an approach which has often been referred to as 'anti-essentialist', stemming from a criticism of second wave feminism's alleged focus on white middle class heterosexual women and developing a strand of questioning of the foundational categories of feminist theory, 'woman' and 'man', maintaining that these

categories are shifting and unstable (Fuss, 1989; Beasley, 1999). Characteristic also of this approach, Judith Butler's work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, published in 1990, calls for a new way of looking at sex and gender, arguing that feminism made a mistake by trying to assert that women are a homogenous group with common characteristics and interests. This approach, she argues, reinforces a binary view of gender relations in which we are divided into two biologically determined groups, men and women, and rather than opening up possibilities for a person to form and choose their own individual identity, therefore, feminism has closed the options down. The anti-essentialist feminist debate challenges the privileging of man over woman, but also challenges the idea of a distinguishable female experience, disputing the idea of woman as a category identified by sex determination. Instead, Butler (1990) calls for an approach which sees gender as fluid and variable, showing that female identity is constituted through the complex interplay of a variety of other factors such as race, socio-economic status, cultural background and sexuality, which shifts and changes in different situations and at different times. She suggests that by deconstructing the way we think about gender we might move towards a new equality where people are not restricted by masculine or feminine gender roles. As discussed earlier, common definitions of feminism as quoted by Beasley (1999) showed that feminism is often defined as having a common focus on womanhood, seeing women as the subjects for political representation. Butler, however, argues that we cannot see women as a unified homogenous group since every woman is a unique individual. Indeed, feminists before Butler have also had problems in defining 'woman'. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) describes woman as being seen throughout history as 'other' to man, 'Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to

him' (Beauvoir, 1949: 16). Increasingly, debate argues that biology cannot be used to ground claims about men and women (Nicholson, 1995; Walter, 2010), and that there is a real diversity in the power relations which shape modernity (Harding, 1986; Letherby, 2003). The effect of categorising all women into a unified group separate from men has actually been detrimental to feminist calls for equality, Butler claims, suggesting that if men and women are seen as fundamentally different and separate then true equality is impossible. In this way Butler takes a different stance to other feminists who emphasise the differences between the sexes. Butler argues that the tactics of some radical feminists of naming men as the enemy exacerbates the problem rather than helping to move towards equality. Whelehan (1995: 129) notes that feminists are now increasingly aware of the non-homogeneity of the term women and that differences amongst women are a social fact that should be recognised to avoid replicating unequal power relations. Thus, feminists have become aware that existing work not only excludes many women's voices but also silences the voices of many social groups (Nicholson, 1990: 1). Haslanger (2000) argues that essentialist theories of gender have alienated women of colour from feminism and claims that feminism needs to rethink the centrality of a unified and singular women's identity. Michele Barrett writes of the need to take into account that women in different social classes have different experiences and:

In posing women's oppression simply as the effect of male domination, it refuses to take account of the widely differing structures and experiences of that oppression in different societies, periods of history and social classes. (1980: 4)

The concept of 'performativity' is at the core of Butler's work, and she describes people 'performing gender', arguing that gender is not an expression of what one

is, but of what one does. Chris Weedon (1987: 32) similarly highlights the importance of the subjective in understanding women's lived realities, arguing that subjectivities shift and change as we attribute meanings to differing situations and experiences. She deconstructs the notion that men and women are tied to their biology, arguing that gender is a cultural construct and she calls for poststructuralist feminist thinking which will enable feminism to understand relationships of power and offer a means for understanding identity, moving beyond limiting and essentialist classifications. This, she argues, will give feminism 'a way of conceptualizing the relationship between language, social institutions and individual consciousness which focuses on how power is exercised and on the possibilities of change' (1987: 19).

Empirical researchers have also highlighted the importance of research which seeks to understand women's lived experiences and their subjectivities. Wolf (1991) seemed to assume that all women internalise the beauty myth and act accordingly, however *The Beauty Myth* is criticised for failing to take into account class and other differences in women's relationship to the beauty industry (Black 2006), and other researchers have found a complex set of practices and discourses at work which determine women's participation in beauty regimes and which position women very differently as a result of structural inequalities beyond gender (Craig, 2002; Black, 2004; Skeggs, 2007). Black's (2004) discussion of women's use of beauty salons highlights that women make conscious decisions as to whether or not to visit a beauty salon, bound in a complex set of considerations as to the woman's view of herself, the world around her, and whether or not visiting a salon is deemed 'appropriate' in terms of her social class, ethnic background, sexuality and age, for example. These arguments thus

suggest that women's participation in beauty regimes may be complex, multifaceted, and highly subjective. Sports feminists have suggested that some physically active women may experience their bodies as a source of power and can both destabilise and reinforce traditional notions of gender. Susan Cahn (1994, 1995, 1996) argues that the female athlete causes tension in normative notions of femininity and masculinity by embodying the cultural contradiction between athletic prowess and femininity. Liston (1999) describes how female participation in sport highlights the common sense view of masculinity and femininity being two sides of a coin, but it can also challenge the boundaries of masculinity and femininity as well as reinforce them. Liston thus argues for more than just a simplistic and dualistic understanding of masculinity and femininity and calls for research which looks to understand the complexities and ambiguities of both men's and women's experiences. Kane and Greendorfer's (1994: 41) arguments similarly suggest that female athletes represent a multiplicity of ethnic and racial backgrounds and women actively participate in a variety of sports in numerous different athletic settings. They argue that the female athlete is not to be seen as one dimensional.

Recently, feminists have begun to talk about the complexities of women's experiences of the sex industry and have increasingly argued that these experiences are also diverse, as are the power roles within the sex industry, and both the radical and liberal approaches to the sex industry, as outlined earlier in this chapter with regard to debates around pornography, may be too simplistic. Liepe-Levinson (2002), in her study of strip club workers, suggests that previous feminist writing on female strippers offers a very narrow theory and breaks people down into two gender categories, the 'active male desirer', and the 'passive

female object of desire'. Many of the female strippers that she interviewed in actuality gave examples of aspects of their jobs that they liked, and they claimed that in the strip club they were able to exercise some power and control of the situation, by seducing patrons into submission, or, in the face of harassment, they can refuse to perform for a particular customer, or get him thrown out by the bouncers. She suggests that structure and agency are complicated and it is not as simple as previous theory which has suggested that female strippers are passive in the face of oppression. Liepe-Levinson suggests her findings to show that the personal lives of strippers are so diverse and multifaceted that it is impossible to draw definite conclusions about their job choices, other than their need to make a living. She argues that gender and power roles are not as clear cut as is first imagined and suggests that '...social sexism, social alienation, sexual representation, and sexual fantasy do not operate as a single seamless system of oppression.' (2002: 13). Likewise, in Delacoste and Alexander (1988), each chapter is written by prostitutes or sex trade workers and their stories show a multitude of different experiences of sexuality and the sex industry, as well as different reasons for going into this industry and feelings about their work. This is also demonstrated in the work of O'Connell Davidson (1998a, 1998b), who, like Liepe-Levinson, attempts to move beyond what she describes as the previous limiting and simplistic radical versus liberal views on the sex industry and she claims that her research with female prostitutes and their clients demonstrates the complexity of prostitution as not simply an expression of male violence and oppression, but as part of an extremely complex relationship connecting economics, gender, age, race, class and power. She suggests that common views depicted in the media construct prostitutes as a separate class of people, almost like an 'underclass', who are subjected to civil and human rights abuse,



and often deemed to be drug users. She argues, however, that prostitutes, along with the men who use them, cannot be seen as a homogenous group in terms of their behaviour and sexual interests, and she calls for research which instead locates the diversity of people's individual experiences.

## **Summary**

This chapter has shown the complexities and varying debates in definitions and understandings of feminism today and the diversity in approaches to feminism, the female body and gendered identity, as well as women's consumption of 'sex entertainment', feminine products and participation in beauty regimes. Clearly, as identified by Beasley (1999), there exists a range of varying and complicated approaches to feminist issues today. In this chapter I have shown that there are a multitude of arguments around whether or not women's consumption and actions represent women's newfound liberation and agency in a post feminist society, or in fact a persisting lack of control over their bodies, or whether there is an ongoing relationship between human agency and social structure whereby women act in response to a media pressure to make the 'right' choices in line with specific gendered and classed identities and in turn are producing and reproducing the sexualised raunch culture or striptease culture described in this chapter. McRobbie's (2009) theory of the 'double entanglement' suggests that women are on the one hand told that they have freedom, choice and agency, but on the other remain constrained by patriarchy and media images which pressure them to present themselves as feminine. The actions of women are clearly not as simple as a question of 'structure versus agency' or 'active versus passive', for example,

and I would argue that a more complex and multifaceted understanding is needed, as is also argued by Catherine Roach (2007: 13) in her research with female strippers, where she suggests that “demeaning or empowering’ is, like any dualistic question about a multifaceted area of human experience, impossible to answer and in fact misleading as posed’. The debates raised in the final section of this chapter demonstrate that if we are to truly understand the growth and popularity of an activity like pole dancing amongst women today then there is a need for research which seeks to explore in more depth women’s individual stories and lived experiences, taking into account the different subjective meanings and attitudes people have to their actions, and which takes into account women’s multilayered identities, including their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, suggesting that we need to examine not just gender but other social structures which may impact upon human behaviour. This points to a need to speak to the women who are involved in these activities, and further explore the ways in which women are engaging with these sexualised practices, in order to develop a more complex understanding of the contemporary behaviours and experiences of young women. To this end, my research seeks to uncover the lived experiences of participants in pole dancing classes, giving voice to these women by documenting their narratives and their biographies, and in this thesis I examine further the following overarching research questions:

- To what extent do women exhibit choice and agency through their participation in these types of class? What role does social structure play in shaping their participation?
- Can a fitness pole dancing class possibly offer empowerment to women? What does empowerment mean to the women in this research?

- What does feminism mean to the women in this research and how does this relate to femininity?
- What do pole dancing fitness classes mean for contemporary feminist debate?

The three analytical chapters of this thesis are based around three key themes which emerged from the fieldwork and which provide a context in which to explore and discuss the above research questions, based around:

- The ways in which women fitness pole dancers present themselves, and the ways in which they negotiate their social class and gender identity, drawing on the concepts of impression management (Goffman, 1959, 1963) and respectability (Skeggs, 1997) and exploring the concepts of feminism and femininity in women's identity construction.
- How the women in this research relate to and describe their bodies and their participation in pole dancing as a fitness class and as a beauty regime, drawing on the concepts of the 'ideal' feminine body and the 'male gaze' and the ways in which women who pole dance demonstrate both conformity to this image and some deviation from the norm in discussions of muscles, strength, bruising and risk taking.
- The ways in which pole dancing classes are both advertised and described by women as something that offers a collective empowerment for women to make friends, develop self confidence and display agency in a women only environment, exploring the concepts of friendship and community and the ways in which women describe themselves as a collective, and exploring further and questioning the concept of empowerment in this context.

In the next chapter, I discuss my motivations behind the topic of research and explain the research methods and methodological decisions made during the course of the fieldwork, before moving, in the following three chapters, to outline the findings of this research.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Researching Pole Dancing: The Research Setting, Methodology and Exploring my Voice as a Feminist Researcher**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter describes the research setting and the methodological approach and methodological decisions made during the course of this PhD research. It outlines the original motive for the research, the methods adopted, how I gained access to the research setting and recruited my interviewees, and the processes used throughout to develop rapport and make respondents feel at ease, as well as some of the ethical concerns and decisions made. Drawing on my experiences of conducting the research, this chapter also highlights researcher biography and issues of locating myself in the research and I make a detailed, self reflexive and subjective account of my time both carrying out participant observation and conducting interviews. By documenting my experiences of doing research, this chapter seeks to contribute to discussion about feminist research and reflexivity in the field. I acknowledge the diversity of women's experiences and explore the effects of my own biography during the research and recognise myself as an active agent in the data collection, whereby I feel that my class, race, gender, age and educational background as well as my self-identification as a feminist were instrumental in the data collected and the interpretation of the data. I reflect in the final section upon three particular issues that I faced and confronted which include; firstly, feelings of guilt around the ways in which I was interpreting the

data; secondly, managing respondents' attempts at 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959), in which I felt that interviewees at times attempted to actively present themselves in a particular 'respectable' way; and thirdly, my voice as a feminist, charting my shifting perceptions and thoughts during the course of the research and the ways in which my feminist identity has changed and been challenged throughout this research.

### **Developing a Feminist Methodology**

In this section I explore how the methodology for the research was developed and to do this I will begin by explaining the context of the research and how I came to see this as an interesting topic for PhD research. I first heard about pole dancing classes in 2004, whilst working as a fitness instructor at a city centre gym in my home town of Sheffield. This particular gym was called The Cage, and prided itself on a 'nightclub' atmosphere, with dark wooden panelling, spotlighting and a permanent DJ in the gym. The gym was located on the ground floor of a block of modern city centre apartments in a complex which also included bars, restaurants and boutique style shops, and was marketed at young professionals living and working in the city centre. The fitness class timetable was put together with none of the traditional aerobics or step style classes, which were described by the gym manager as 'boring' and 'old fashioned', and classes were said to have been given a modern twist to appeal to a young modern market. The classes I taught at The Cage included 'fitness yoga', a yoga class that was choreographed to music, and 'on the ball' a body toning style class with the use of Swiss gym balls. Other

classes at The Cage included 'cheerleading' and 'hula hooping', and about six months after the gym opened, they introduced 'cardio pole dancing'.

I have since found out that pole dancing classes had been running in London for a number of years prior to this, but the cardio pole dancing classes at The Cage were the first of this type to start up in Sheffield (six years later there are now many more pole classes to be found in Sheffield, running every night of the week in different locations and at different gyms across the city). The classes ran twice a week at The Cage and instantly the classes were full and there was a waiting list for places. After a few weeks of hearing from the female members of the gym how enjoyable and exciting the classes were I put my name down to attend a class. This was mainly out of curiosity and a desire to understand why so many women wanted to attend a class like this, which seemed to me to carry with it so much controversy, and to explore how these classes could fit into the market that I describe above. The media image of pole dancing, as I described in chapter one, was of half naked women writhing around the pole and this is what I expected from the class. I certainly did not expect to get a good work out physically but I was intrigued to see what so many women were getting out of it. Like many women, I have always had a quite ambivalent and confused relationship to feminism, which I shall discuss later in this chapter. Looking back now, I perhaps entered my first pole dancing class adhering more towards a radical feminist approach, determined that I would not enjoy the class, believing that such a class must surely objectify women, and wondering why women would allow themselves to be objectified in this way, expecting that the sexualised 'raunch culture' (Levy, 2005) in which we live had pressurised women to feel that they had no option than to attend such a class.

What I will always remember from my first pole dancing class is that, having gone into the class with these pre-conceived ideas and almost being determined not to enjoy it, I was surprised when I actually did – I had fun, I had a giggle with a group of other women despite not having ever met them before, and I found it physically demanding upon my body in ways I had never imagined. At the time I was working as a fitness instructor teaching 15 different group fitness classes a week. I was a qualified gym instructor, personal fitness trainer and pool lifeguard and I also worked out in the gym myself several times a week, had tennis lessons, and considered myself physically fit. Yet a one hour pole dancing class left me out of breath and the resulting muscle aches in my arms and upper back lasted over a week. Lifting my body weight, swinging my body around the pole using my arms and climbing the pole were not physical movements my body was used to. This was an acrobatic, gymnastic practice unlike any other fitness class I had ever attended, and I immediately recognised pole dancing as something with the capability (with regular attendance) of considerably changing women's bodies. However, during the class, the instructor, wearing six inch glass slipper style shoes (referred to by my respondents as 'stripper shoes'), hot pants and a pink feather boa around her neck, encouraged us to look in the mirror at ourselves as she taught us a short routine, choreographed to music, which involved physically demanding tricks on the pole (a spin or a climbing move), interspersed with what she referred to as 'linking moves' – wiggling the hips, walking seductively around the pole and at one point running our hands down our bodies over our breasts and down to our inner thighs (typically the type of moves presented in the media image of pole dancing, which I was aware of prior to attending the class). These 'linking moves' were described later by one of my respondents as a way to rest the body in-between the other more physically challenging pole dancing moves.

Yet as a fitness instructor I could think of plenty of other 'linking moves' that could have been used that were less challenging on the body yet which would not be perceived as so overtly sexualised. I emerged from the pole dancing class somewhat confused about my opinion on pole dancing and on my feminist beliefs, having enjoyed some aspects of the class and seeing pole dancing classes as perhaps being more complex than my initial (media influenced and perhaps quite radical) assumptions. Take the sexualised linking moves out and dress the instructor in gym clothing and trainers, and pole dancing could potentially be a gymnastic fitness class, but by keeping these elements in, pole dancing retains some association with the sex industry, remains overloaded with contradictions, and I saw the real potential to explore this more for my PhD research. It was after this experience that I began to write my proposal for this research. My PhD thus began with an initial basic desire to understand why so many women wished to attend pole dancing classes and what these classes meant to them. Initial observations at this particular class and at the gym in general had led me to believe that many of the women attending were of a similar social background to myself as young white female professionals, often recent graduates, who lived and / or worked in the city centre, and the women I spoke to throughout the course of this research were overwhelmingly of a similar social background. This is in contrast to the popular image of female strippers, who have historically been assumed to be working class women (Skipper and McCaghy, 1970; Boles and Garbin, 1974; Carey et al., 1974; Bruckert, 2002). The original research design began around a desire to understand better the experiences and motivations of these women, developing originally in part around a desire for an understanding why, if these women were of such similar social backgrounds to myself, were they choosing to pole dance whilst I was not? And why were seemingly middle class



women choosing to take part in something which has historically been associated with working class women in the sex industry? The women attending this class did not seem to be women without any agency or who had no control over their lives and decisions and, as I shall show throughout this thesis, throughout the research respondents maintained that pole dancing was something that they themselves had made a choice to do, and advertising for classes, as I showed in chapter one, promotes them as being about liberation and empowerment for women. My research interest was developed then based broadly around the concepts of structure and agency and to explore further the notion of this as something potentially empowering. The research would also allow me to develop and explore my own feminist theory and assumptions, having realised quite quickly that the pole dancing class was a much more complex experience than I had originally anticipated.

My personal standpoint with regard to research methods could most accurately be described as adhering to the 'interpretative' method of research, with my aim being to uncover the lived experiences of my respondents by documenting their narratives via in-depth interviewing techniques, and thus attempting to provide what Geertz (1973) terms 'thick description', an expression used to explain how the researcher moves beyond the simple description of a social action (i.e. an increasing number of women are taking pole dancing classes) to an understanding of the meanings and interpretations behind the particular social action (i.e. how these women construct and understand their participation in pole dancing and how they experience and negotiate their self identity). I began the research without a specific scientific question that I wished to test but instead the emphasis of my research was on apprehending the viewpoint of my respondents,

and gaining insights into the world as they see it. As suggested by Giddens (1982), interpretative researchers need to concern themselves with the inner world of their subjects in order to understand the reasons and meanings behind their actions, and O'Connell Davidson argues that '...if we want to comprehend and explain patterns and regularities in the social world, we need to consider the inner world of social actors' (1998b: 211). This has implications for the research techniques adopted. The qualitative methods of talking to people, observing their actions and analysing their language and behaviour are seen as the ways in which it is most possible to see the world through their eyes and thus achieve what Max Weber termed as 'verstehen' (1949) and the benefit of this methodology is the richness of the data collected. The methods of research were also adopted with an adherence to feminist methodology with an emphasis upon engagement as a valued aspect of the research process and the need to listen to women's voices.

Generally, feminist research began from a critique of traditional social research as being characterised by a male bias which defines society and science in terms of male values.

Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men, they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth. (Simone de Beauvoir, cited in Mackinnon, 1982: 41)

Feminist methodology stresses the importance of bringing women's voices and personal experiences into the research process. This is twofold, firstly to challenge these dominant masculine power relations that are said to influence social research and result in women's marginalisation in research practice, and

secondly, to expose the significance of seemingly individual personal stories and narratives. Harding (1987) argues that feminists have a responsibility to make public and validate the diverse voices of women as women's voices have historically been ignored, and that this is accomplished through the interpretation of women's personal narratives. Ann Oakley (1979, 1981) famously argued that feminist research needed to be based around mutual relationships and mutual respect, and feminist research methods thus developed to favour informal relationships with respondents on a qualitative interviewing basis (Oakley, 1979, 1981; Finch, 1984). Oakley defended an informal approach in her study on experiences of the transition into motherhood by claiming that, due to the sensitive and personal nature of the topic, a mutual and reciprocal relationship was appropriate, and traditional disengaged methods of interviewing or questionnaires would have made women feel uncomfortable and thus they would not have revealed any intimate or personal details. She argued that a mutual exchange of information, in which Oakley shared her own experiences of motherhood and answered interviewees' questions, was conducive to establishing rapport.

The goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her personal identity in the relationship. (Oakley 1981: 41)

Recent arguments, however, have criticised assumptions that by virtue of a shared gender between interviewer and interviewee, rapport and an easy interview process is able to be developed. Whilst Oakley's research has been hugely significant in feminist methodology, highlighting the importance of developing rapport with respondents and listening to women's voices, it is not

without critique. Cotterill (1992) argues that to presume 'sisterhood' overcomes other social characteristics such as race, class and age is misleading and simplistic, and whilst we should not do away with the collective category of women, it is important to acknowledge differences which cut across gender and that researchers cannot necessarily have a true understanding of their respondents simply by virtue of a shared gender. Stanley and Wise (1990), in recognising that experiences are not always shared by all women, argue that the category 'women' needs deconstructing. This is a move towards a poststructuralist feminist methodology which recognises that women's realities are complex and that the epistemological and ontological claims of all women are equally valid. As I showed in chapter two, increasingly feminist poststructuralist theory has rejected what is described as essentialist feminist theory, refusing to accept women as a homogenous group and emphasising the differences between women, claiming that there is no unique women's experience (Barrett, 1980; Harding, 1986; Weedon, 1987; Butler, 1990; Fraser and Nicholson, 1990; Letherby, 2003). These feminists have called for research which takes into account the diversity of women's experiences and voices and which seeks to understand the lived experiences and subjectivities of all women. Certainly in this research, I found that experiences of pole dancing differed amongst women. All of my interviews were different, all of my respondents were different, and each class that I observed was different. Diversity of women's experiences can most simply be explained by the fact that not all women pole dance and the research sought to explain broadly why this group of women take pole dancing classes, when others like myself, do not. If women were a homogenous group, then all women would either pole dance, or they would at least be sympathetic towards it, when in

actuality, pole dancing raises much heated debate throughout society, including amongst feminists, and may perhaps always be something which divides opinion.

Cotterill (1992) also suggests that it is impossible to create a completely non-hierarchical relationship between interviewer and interviewee and that the interview is a fluid process in which balances of power and control shift throughout. It is therefore argued necessary for feminist research to acknowledge the subjective experiences of the researcher which will impact upon the research process. These debates have influenced my own research, in which I am compelled to analyse the nature of relationships in my own interviews and the impact of myself and my biography on the research process, as well as my inner thoughts and feelings around the research, which impact upon the way in which I have interpreted my findings. Chris Weedon (1987: 32) defines subjectivity as '...the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself, and her ways of understanding her relation to the world'. Throughout the research process I explore the subjectivities of my respondents as well the subjectivities that I myself bring to the research. Giddens' (1982) definition of reflexivity argues that we all possess different levels of awareness which affect the way we act in the world and we switch between these in different contexts. Thus by being self reflexive I aim to show my own preconceptions, levels of awareness and feelings and the ways in which I have interpreted the lives and experiences of my respondents, 'Central to maintaining reflexivity is the need for researchers to constantly locate and relocate themselves in their work, and to remain in dialogue with research practice, participants and methodologies' (Bott, 2010: 160). As argued by Harding (1987), the task for researchers in self reflection is to take responsibility for our identities, particularly by learning how we

are related in society to others, thus the researcher learns to openly locate herself and her history and values in the text, so that she, like those researched, is open to critical scrutiny by the reader. Via the disclosure of oneself, the researcher will thus appear not as 'an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests' (Harding, 1987: 9). As I will also go on to show in this chapter, being critically self reflexive has allowed me to consider (and re-consider) my own feminist position and the ways in which this has impacted upon the research.

## **Research Techniques**

The findings which make up this thesis were collected via the research methods of participant observation and interviewing, and the subsequent analysis and interpretation of the data collected. This section describes in detail the research decisions made, the processes used and any issues faced during these aspects of the fieldwork.

### *Participant as Observer*

Although the definitions of participant observation vary, the broad purpose is to discover and understand the thoughts and behaviour of a particular social group through the involvement of the researcher (Brewer, 2001). This involves the researcher taking a role in the setting, observing what people do, listening to them talk, and collecting data to help gain an understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). I felt that participating in pole

dancing classes myself was a necessary method of research for this study as it could be questioned how I could even attempt to understand pole dancing classes if I did not try them myself. I participated in 14 pole dancing classes throughout the course of this research, not including the original class described earlier that I had attended prior to submitting my PhD proposal. Each class I attended was subject to having been approved by the class instructor (the 'gatekeeper') prior to the class. Usually I obtained instructors' email addresses via their websites and made contact, introducing myself, explaining the research and asking them if they would allow me to attend the class as a participant. The majority of my participant observations in classes were conducted from January to November 2007, prior to beginning my interviews (which were conducted between October 2007 and October 2008) although on a couple of occasions I also interviewed the instructor on the same day, either before or after attending their class. Most classes that I attended were located in the Yorkshire and Humberside area or the Midlands, although I also spent some time in London where I attended two classes and conducted one interview.

The position I adopted in classes was of 'participant as observer' (May, 1997: 140), where I adopted an overt role and made my research intentions clear to the other women present in classes. The British Sociological Association (2002) argues for informed consent in research and that participants should be free to withdraw from the study at any time. Standing at the front of each class I attended I was introduced by the instructor and I then thanked her for allowing me to attend and explained the research to the women attending the class. I invited any questions or comments about the research and asked women to tell me, or to tell their instructor, if my presence was something that they were not comfortable

with. If anyone was wary about my presence, they did not show it, and if they were, I would not have participated in that class. I was grateful that no-one ever questioned or refused my presence. Having travelled to classes, sometimes driving a couple of hours to get there, and changed into my vest and shorts, standing at the front and explaining my research, I would have been disappointed if I were turned away. Throughout the course of the research I never felt that my presence was a problem for the women in the classes, and I made attempts to talk to them as a fellow participant in the class, conscious not to appear as a researcher asking too many questions. Yet it may be that at times during classes, my status as a researcher had been forgotten. Despite describing myself as a researcher, whilst I was participating in the class and learning moves as time progressed the women may have seen me as just another class participant, including instructors, as they taught me moves, advised me on my hand or foot positioning and encouraged or applauded me when I performed a spin correctly. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) argue that it is common for participants to forget the researcher's mission when they come to know them as a person, yet this is often the aim of researchers in participant observation in order to gain the most true to life experience and the most in-depth data. Had I not participated in the class and simply sat at the side making notes, women may have been uncomfortable with my presence and suspicious of my motives, perhaps feeling that I was judging them, and may have altered their behaviour. I made sure to explain that I was there to participate and learn what pole dancing classes involved, and I was not there to judge their abilities at pole dancing, or to record any details about them personally. Also, had I been an advanced pole dancer and capable of amazing spins and tricks on the pole, beginners to pole dancing may have felt uncomfortable and daunted by my presence. But as someone who was



joining in the classes as a beginner to pole dancing, I found all of the same moves and tricks difficult. Attending a new class for the first time, I shared many of the same concerns, questions and anticipations as other participants in the class, for example as to what the class would involve and whether I would be good at it. Like the other women in classes, I also bashed my leg against the pole, made mistakes, fell off the pole and landed in a heap on the floor, and complained that inverted positions and climbing were 'too hard'. Whilst because of this some women may have forgotten that I was a researcher, I found in general that many women were actually very interested in the research and, throughout, the women asked me questions about my study and what had made me decide to research this particular topic. Getting to know respondents was on occasions difficult as I attended classes alone, whereas many women arrived with a friend or a group of friends and therefore this involved my attempts to become involved in and accepted into the conversations of an already established group which was more difficult than with those (relatively fewer) women who had come alone, who often seemed to welcome someone to talk to. For some moves we were put into small groups or into pairs, which was an easy way of getting to talk to people as we supported one another with moves or put together a short routine as a group.

As I was a beginner to pole dancing, the classes I attended were mostly beginner or intermediate level classes. This obviously creates a flaw in the research as I was mostly limited to observing women who were of a similar ability at pole dancing to myself and meant that I rarely observed those women of an advanced level or who had been pole dancing for a long time. Sometimes, the class I attended was the first class in a course of lessons, where for the women attending it was their first ever experience of pole dancing. In others, women had been

attending for a few weeks. Hannah's class was different as it was a mixed ability class where some women had been pole dancing for over a year and were of an intermediate to advanced level so I did have access to some women of a higher pole dancing ability in this class. I also attended and observed two pole dancing competitions, firstly the Pole Divas National Pole Fitness Competition, held at a nightclub in Manchester in June 2007 and secondly Miss Pole Dance UK 2008, held in October 2008 at a nightclub in London. Both competitions had been preceded by a number of regional heats across the country, and the finalists from these regional heats competed in the final event for the ultimate prize of Pole Diva 2007 and Miss Pole Dance UK 2008 respectively. At competitions, each finalist performed an approximately five minute routine to a panel of judges and an observing audience. The women competing in these events were some of the most advanced pole dancers in the country, many of whom had been pole dancing for many years and who were capable of some awe-inspiring and incredibly acrobatic tricks and moves on the pole. In the pole dancing world, these women are 'celebrities', some of whom have their own websites or 'fan' groups on social networking sites, and whom my interviewees mentioned by name as being people who they admired. The majority of women attending to watch pole dancing competitions seemed to be women who attended pole dancing classes, of all levels of ability, and, indeed, many of my interviewees talked about having been to or planning to go and watch competitions. My role at both of these events was as a spectator, watching and observing the event. Due to the nature of these events, both held in a busy nightclub, it would not have been practical to ask permission to attend for research purposes and thus my observations were carried out covertly. However, the purpose of my attending these events was to gain a broad idea of what a pole dancing competition involved, and whilst I shall

discuss these competitions throughout the thesis, the purpose was not to make detailed observations on individuals attending pole dancing competitions and as these people are anonymous to me I am not in a position to reveal any information about them that could be considered private.

Van Maanen (1978) describes participant observation as a role which involves becoming a 'fan' who desires to know and understand more from people within the setting and to become part of the social scene and participate in it requires that the researcher become accepted. Becoming a 'fan' meant I felt that I needed to show that I was enjoying the classes. This was rarely a problem as I did often genuinely enjoy the classes. I met some fascinating women during classes, I felt a real satisfaction in the achievement of certain physically demanding moves, and, as discussed earlier, I appreciated and enjoyed the fitness aspect of classes. Yet I felt uncomfortable with the sexualised linking moves which we were asked to perform and at times I felt a little awkward knowing that my motivations for attending the classes in the first place differed from other women in the class, and although I may have explained this at the outset, this may have been forgotten as we struggled together to do certain moves, complained how difficult climbing was and compared our bruises and blisters from chaffing against the pole. Thus, for part of the pole dancing classes, I did feel like I was a pole dancing 'fan', as Van Maanen (1978) suggests is necessary, yet there were aspects with which I was less comfortable and which I found contradictory to the claims of this as an empowering fitness class. Prior to Hannah's class, which was based in a lap dancing club during the day when the club was closed to customers, she described pole dancing as 'fitness' and told me that her class involved two elements; firstly, a section where the class is split into ability groups and she

teaches various moves to each group dependent upon ability, who then practice these on the poles situated around the club; and secondly, a section where the class comes back together and women are individually called onto the main stage to perform a routine to music for the rest of the class. This was not an element in which I wanted to participate. As a relative beginner to pole dancing I did not have a repertoire of moves that I could perform, or wanted to perform, on the stage in a lap dancing club for others, even if they were all women. When it came to this section of the class, I was the first woman that Hannah picked to go onto the stage and perform for the other members of the class. This I found extremely embarrassing and I initially stood frozen on the stage, bright red in the face, with an audience of 22 women waiting to see my pole dancing abilities. I eventually managed to perform three spins and rushed off the stage, head down, back to my seat. Not only was I deeply embarrassed but any confidence I had previously felt as a researcher engaging with the women in the class had been lost. The attempts I had made to show a fellow enjoyment of the class and to gain acceptance into the group seemed to have been negated, I felt, by my reluctance and embarrassment at performing on stage – this was in contrast to some of the other women who had been pole dancing a while who had a routine prepared and had bought their own music to perform to. Of course, these are purely my feelings about the situation and I do not know for certain what other women thought of my ‘performance’, or whether they even noticed my embarrassment. I also noticed that there were others who looked equally reluctant to perform on the stage but were also persuaded to do so, and I wondered how, when the fitness pole dancing industry makes very grand claims about empowerment and confidence building for women, forcing them to perform on stage when they clearly do not want to do this, can possibly build women’s confidence? I also wondered why, if

pole dancing presents itself as a fitness class and as something far removed from the strip industry, it is necessary to teach women to perform on a stage to an audience? Of course, the claims that pole dancing is removed from the strip industry were in this case questionable by the very fact that the classes were taught in a lap dancing club. In hindsight perhaps I shouldn't have agreed to go onto the stage (although at the time I didn't feel that I had much choice) or perhaps I could have made more of an effort whilst I was up there. However, I do know that this was not an experience I wanted to repeat and luckily no other classes that I attended involved this performative element, so I did not have to do this again. This experience, however, demonstrates the difficulties of becoming a 'fan', as described by Van Maanen (1978), and of becoming totally integrated and accepted into the group, for even if the other women present in this class did not notice my embarrassment or reluctance to perform on stage, this experience knocked my self confidence as a researcher for the rest of this observation session and made me feel somewhat an outsider.

One of the questions most commonly asked about participant observation is whether or not the people being observed would have acted any differently, had the researcher not been there. I have no way of knowing whether or not this is the case – perhaps if I had attended classes covertly and not been open about my research I may have been able to answer this with greater certainty, however, I did not feel that this was ethical and I wished to be honest with my respondents. I do not, however, have any reason to believe that respondents were modifying their behaviour significantly in my presence, particularly as I participated in moves and routines just like everyone else in the classes and I did not sit writing notes, instead making notes from memory when I arrived home after classes. Whilst this

meant that I may have missed things out, having forgotten things in the drive home, and making it impossible to use any direct quotes from my observations, sitting with a notepad would not have been conducive to making people feel comfortable in my presence. Also, the bulk of the data collected for this thesis was that from my interviews, which followed the participant observation. I used my participant observation in classes and competitions to develop my own understanding of what pole dancing was all about and to inform my interview questions. Although I talked with others in classes and asked questions about their participation and motivations, this was structured like a mutual exchange of information as I shared my ideas and experiences and talked about what I found difficult with various moves, just as they did with me. Conduction of observations prior to beginning my interviews meant that I could formulate some of the questions that I wished to explore further in my interviews as I developed an understanding of the structure of a 'typical' pole dancing class, the format of competitions and the names of different pole dancing moves and of pole dancing 'celebrities'. It also enabled me in interviews to be able to share with respondents my own experiences of classes, what pole dancing was like for me, how it felt, what I had found difficult, what I had found easy and what I had expected classes to be like. As I will go on to discuss later in chapter five, bruises were a topic which all interviewees discussed, sharing with me their stories of bruises, referring to bruises as something which were part of the pole dancing experience and some respondents actually showed me their bruises during interviews. In pole dancing classes I found that women would discuss and share their bruises and getting involved in these conversations was a way of talking to people and developing relationships with them. In interviews I was also able to share my own experiences and stories of bruises and also similarly stories of attempting certain

moves and falling off the pole, for example, which helped to develop rapport and, in light of Ann Oakley's arguments (1981), enabled an exchange of information, allowing me to ask questions of my respondents and them to ask questions relating to my own experiences of pole dancing. I turn now to my experiences of conducting interviews in more detail.

### *Interviewing*

For this research I carried out 24 interviews with women who participated in pole dancing, including 10 pole dancing instructors. Communications with respondents prior to interview was vital, I feel, to the success of the interviews. I sent respondents via email a letter explaining the research (a copy of this can be found in appendix one) and I offered to answer any questions. With some respondents, we had a lengthy phone conversation about the research prior to interview, and with others we had email communication back and forth over a period of time before arranging to meet. This provided respondents with a clear understanding of the research and what an interview would involve and gave them an opportunity to raise questions. With all instructors, the initial communication was made via email. This was straightforward as I obtained their email addresses from their websites on which they advertised their classes and I sent them an email explaining the research. Although many also listed a contact telephone number on their website, I felt that contacting them via email allowed me to explain more clearly in writing what the research was about and would also allow respondents an opportunity to take their time to consider if they wished to participate in the research, giving them an opportunity to simply ignore the email if they wished. Those emails to which I did not get a reply I did not chase up, except for one to a

male pole dancing instructor who did not reply, which I followed up with a telephone call, leaving a message on his answer phone, again to which I had no reply. As a male instructor, I was keen to interview him and gain his views, but I took from his lack of response to two methods of communication that he did not wish to participate and I did not contact him again.

Some respondents were recruited at classes during participant observation where the instructor, usually who I had already interviewed or would be interviewing in the future, introduced me and whilst I explained my research to the class I also asked anyone who might be able to do an interview to talk to me during the class. This put the requirement onto women to approach me and agree to participate, meaning that I was relying upon women to volunteer, but it also meant that women did not feel pressurised to do an interview. I found that many women during classes were interested in the research and asked me questions about it, and on average one or two women during each class offered to participate in an interview and I asked for their contact details and contacted them a few days later to give them some more information and to organise an interview time. Not all subsequently agreed to do an interview, and some did not respond when I contacted them, but many did. Some respondents were also recruited by the method of snowball sampling, where respondents had a friend who also pole danced and I asked them to pass on my details and ask if they would be willing to be interviewed.

When I interviewed Hannah she told me of her friend Maria who she was sure would participate in an interview. I asked Hannah to speak to Maria on my behalf, and a couple of days later Hannah contacted me herself to say that Maria was



happy to do an interview and had requested I get in touch with her by searching for her name on the social networking website Facebook. I did this, finding Maria's profile and sending her a message, however, I felt a little uncomfortable as I searched for her profile and found I had access to what I deemed personal information including Maria's photographs of herself, her family and her friends. When I arrived to interview Maria, I already knew a lot about her, including that she lived with her boyfriend, owned her own horse, she was a second year student studying Veterinary Science, and she had been on holiday to Portugal the previous summer. It felt intrusive knowing this information prior to meeting Maria, however, I also felt that as she had requested I contact her via Facebook she must have expected me to look at her profile. Upon meeting Maria, I realised that she had looked at my Facebook profile also. We met in a pub and she recognised me straight away which indicated that she had looked at my photographs, as I had done hers, and she told me that she knew I had a cat as she had seen his photograph on my profile and we had a conversation about cats. After the interview I asked Maria if there was a reason that she had requested I contact her via Facebook and commented that I had not contacted any of my other respondents in this way. She told me that she had found it useful to see who I was and find out some more about me. Trawling through my holiday snaps and pictures of my new kitten seemed to have enabled her to see me as a person and not as an intimidating or authoritative researcher and had made her feel more comfortable in agreeing to an interview. After this, I decided to see if I could recruit other respondents via Facebook also. I used the search engine on the site to make a search for the profiles of women who lived in Sheffield who had listed pole dancing as a hobby. There were hundreds of results and I picked the first two women on the list, women who both had a picture of themselves pole dancing as

their profile picture. I sent a message to both explaining how I had found their profile, what the research was about and inviting them to respond if they might be able to help with an interview or to ignore my message if they did not want to take part and I would not contact them again. Both responded and were willing to be interviewed. With both, we had some communication back and forth via Facebook before arranging the interview. Again, like Maria, they had looked at my profile in advance of the interview as I had done theirs, and I again asked them for their perceptions as to this as a method of recruiting respondents, and both told me that they had liked an opportunity to find out a bit more about me before agreeing to the interview.

Indeed, the internet was hugely significant in this research. I will discuss in chapter six the use of the internet in the development and maintenance of friendships between pole dancers, often via online forums and in groups on websites like Facebook where women share photographs, videos and talk about their pole dancing experiences. Whilst not all of my respondents used the internet regularly to talk about pole dancing, there is a huge amount of pole dancing related communication to be found online and most described themselves as having used the internet at least occasionally for information, as well as having initially found their classes via the internet and purchased poles online. As well as recruiting Maria, Anna and Mel via Facebook, I had numerous internet based communications with other women via forums and email and I recruited Theresa via her responding to my post on an internet forum on which I had explained my research and invited people to contact me with their views. My PhD would still have been possible without the use of the internet but it may have taken a very different shape and may have been much more difficult for me to find and recruit

my respondents. Of course, it should also be noted that, without the internet, this may not have been the topic of my PhD research at all, for the internet seems to have played a huge role in the expansion and the mainstreaming of pole dancing and without it, these classes may not have ever become so popular.

Janet Finch argues that in the setting of respondents' own homes, the researcher is more like a 'friendly guest' than an 'official inquisitor' (1984: 74). Many of my interviews took place in respondents' own homes. I never asked or suggested their homes as the interview venue, instead, asking my respondents to choose a venue themselves, and to choose a venue in which they would feel most comfortable, always suggesting it be somewhere convenient and local to them to save them any travel time or cost. Many suggested then that I came to their home, others arranged to meet me in a local coffee shop, I met two respondents in pubs, and some instructors I met at their studio or the venue where they taught their classes. Hannah's interview took place in the changing room of the lap dancing club before her weekly class, and she got changed and applied her makeup as she spoke to me. This was one of the most challenging interviews I conducted as Hannah was slightly distracted at times as she got ready and at one point during the interview she went to the toilet but told me to carry on with the interview through the cubicle door. For other interviews the discussion took place over a coffee. In their homes respondents usually offered me a drink and I gratefully accepted, and if meeting in a public venue I offered to buy my respondents a drink and a cake and enjoying a cake together was often an icebreaker, for example, with Mel in her interview joking that she really shouldn't have a cake but then suggesting we share one. Meeting at respondents' own homes seemed to mean that women were a little more relaxed, as Finch (1984)

suggests, as the interview took place in surroundings in which they were comfortable, under their terms, and they could decide where we sat and in which room, giving them more control over the interview, whereas meeting in a public place sometimes took a little more effort on my part to help respondents to feel comfortable. I also found it more difficult to conduct an interview in a public place. In respondents homes they generally arranged the interview for a time when their partners or housemates would not be at home to disturb us, or if they were home, they were asked to refrain from entering the room so that we had some privacy. In a public venue I was aware of other people sitting at nearby tables and felt a little conspicuous with my digital recorder, making attempts to cover it slightly so the fact we were doing an interview was not obvious to others. These interviews also tended to be a little shorter, as when we had finished our drinks it felt a bit awkward to be sitting in a café without purchasing another and generally when I offered to buy another drink my respondents declined, which I felt may have been a signal that they did not wish for the interview to go on much longer. The other obvious problem with interviewing in public places was background noise with one interview in particular having a few ellipses in the text where I could not make out what was said. Meeting strangers in a public place was also a bit more nerve-racking for me and I would imagine also for my respondents. I always obtained respondents' mobile telephone numbers and arrived early at the agreed venue so that I could choose a suitable table in the quietest part of the venue as possible – usually looking for a quiet corner at the back of the venue. I then sent my respondent a text message to tell them where I was sitting and what I was wearing so that they could recognise me when they arrived. Several respondents still looked a little nervous as they approached me and on a couple of occasions I

joked that it was a bit like being on a 'blind date', trying to establish rapport and help respondents to relax by showing that the situation was alien for me also.

The interviews lasted on average an hour and 15 minutes, with the longest interview lasting just over two hours, and they took on a semi-structured to unstructured format. I had a few broad areas that I wished to cover in each interview and a few questions that I asked each respondent but the majority of each interview involved my developing questions as the interview went on. I began each interview with 'icebreaker' style questions where I asked respondents to explain how they had got into pole dancing in the first place and what had motivated them to initially try a class. From their response to these questions I asked further questions about women's first experiences of pole dancing and often the interview was guided by respondents' answers to these initial questions and each interview then followed its own path dependent upon what respondents had told me initially about getting into pole dancing. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) argue that listening is one of the most important acts during an interview and they advise researchers to 'think and act on your feet' (1992: 76) due to the unpredictability of the interview exchange. I certainly found this with my interviews. Every respondent was different, every respondent had different stories to tell, and thus although some general themes were followed, every interview was different. This took flexibility as a researcher in listening and responding flexibly to respondents, asking further questions and probing particular topics dependent upon respondents' answers. With each interview, and with the analytical work and thinking both during and after interviews, I formulated new ideas and I modified questions asked during future interviews to check these out. After one respondent talked in depth about the stripper shoes worn for pole

dancing, I asked others in future interviews their opinions on footwear and acquired some interesting data on the debates around whether wearing heeled shoes can 'be' a fitness class, and by those who do wear heels, that these types of shoe make women feel sexy. Also, after many of my respondents discussed pole dancing as involving an element of risk, talking about bruises and muscle aches and pains, I asked further respondents whether they too had developed bruises and how they felt about this. I also made attempts to involve respondents in the development of arguments and asked respondents questions like 'I've noticed lots of women have said (X, Y, Z...), why do you think this is?' For example, in my interview with Anna I asked her:

I've interviewed a few other women who horse ride as well as pole dance, seems to be a theme, I really don't know why. I don't know why it seems to be a trend that lots of horse riders pole dance as well. Any ideas?

This makes for a more interactive approach and indeed Anna, in this situation, went on to describe her view that pole dancing is becoming a typical activity for middle class young women in similar way to horse riding. Oakley (1981) argues that the richness of the material in her research on motherhood was due to the non-hierarchical nature of the relationships between herself and the women she spoke with and the investment of her personal identity in the relationship. In interviews I too aimed to create a situation where women could ask questions of me and we could exchange stories and information, and I attempted to break down power relations somewhat by the involvement of the respondent in the research. I also did this in my interviews with Maria, Anna and Mel, as discussed earlier, by asking their opinions on the use of Facebook as a research method. I would argue that eliminating power may be impossible but attempts can definitely

be made to establish rapport and break down barriers between interviewer and interviewee. There is perhaps no harm in asking respondents their opinions on the research methods and if I had not learnt from Maria that she thought recruiting respondents via Facebook was a good method of research, I would not have used Facebook to recruit and, subsequently, carry out interesting interviews with Anna or Mel. Also, as I shall now go on to discuss, an understanding of the complexities of the research relationship will also reveal how narratives are often influenced by the relationship between the respondent and the researcher.

Like Ann Oakley (1981), Janet Finch (1984: 74) describes women interviewing other women as 'conducive to the easy flow of information' and she talks about the readiness with which women talked to her. I too found the interviewing process to be relatively easy in getting women to talk to me. Women were generally happy to take part in interviews and I found they opened up easily and shared their stories and experiences often with very little prompting by myself. However, I feel that our similar biographies beyond simply a shared womanhood were also conducive to this. Had I been a woman much older than my respondents, this may have impacted upon our conversations. Indeed, several respondents talked about an 'understanding' of pole dancing as being generational, arguing that this is a product of our time, the culture in which we live and that women in their teens, 20s and 30s have grown up in a society in which participating in something like pole dancing is seen as relatively common and deemed more acceptable, yet for older women it remains something associated with the sex industry which they cannot comprehend as a fitness practice. The fact that I was in my late 20s at the time, of a similar age to the majority of my respondents (who were mostly aged in their 20s and 30s, with the exception of

three respondents aged 19 at the time of interview and one aged 44), may have implied that I too had grown up in such a society and by virtue of this I was expected to understand. I also shared a similar ethnic background to my respondents as the women that I interviewed were overwhelmingly white British like myself (23 out of 24 identified as white British and one identified as mixed white and Asian). As a PhD student I could relate with fellow students (I interviewed ten current students, including seven undergraduates, one Masters student and two PhD students. A further eight interviewees had at least an undergraduate degree), and we shared stories of educational experiences and plans for the future beyond academia, in interviews. The two PhD students, Helen and Sophie, in particular were interested to hear more about my research methods and the background to my research, just as I too asked questions about their respective PhD studies. Similarly, my own interest in fitness and my job as a fitness instructor meant I was seen to have a common interest – indeed, the instructors that I interviewed were interested to hear that I taught aerobics and other fitness classes and they rendered this as us having something in common. My respondents' perceptions of my class and social background I also feel may have impacted on respondents feeling able to open up to me. In my interview with Kate, she spoke of a 'type' of woman she did not want to attend her classes, who she described as a working class 'drinking culture type of person' and she positioned her classes as suitable for professional or middle class women like herself, describing pricing and advertising her classes deliberately to attract this 'type' of woman (more on Kate's story and discussions on 'respectability' can be found in chapter four). Kate's interview was one of the longest interviews I conducted and which yielded some rich and interesting data. This is likely to be in part due to her perception of me as being of a similar social background to



herself. Admitting she discriminated against working class women in her classes and her detailed descriptions around this would have been unlikely had she perceived me as actually being working class or as being what she described as a 'drinking culture type of person'. I would thus argue that it was not simply my womanhood that yielded the interview data that I did and enabled rapport during interviews, but also my other similar biography to my respondents, and their perceptions of my biography. Of course, this does not mean to say that I shared all aspects of my biography with my respondents and it would be naïve to assume that I did. Feminist research previously argued that a researcher's womanhood secures a privilege of being 'one of the girls' – and for me as not just a woman, but also white, middle class, educated and in my late 20s, my biography on paper does indeed seem to mirror that of the vast majority of my respondents. Yet whilst these aspects of my background may have enabled women's voices to emerge, there were other differences between us, the most obvious being that I was not a fellow pole dancer, and this may have limited the emergence of some aspects of women's voices. Whilst my having participated in some classes prior to conducting the interviews helped me to be able to discuss and share my experiences of classes, I did not participate regularly, I did not have a pole at home, I had no desire to progress beyond the basic pole dancing skills that I had learnt and I had no plans to continue attending classes once the fieldwork was over. Whilst I did not criticise pole dancing to my respondents, and I often discussed with them the positive aspects that I had noticed when attending classes, at the same time I did not pretend to be a pole dancer and was honest about the fact that I had attended classes purely for the purposes of the research. Whether my not being a pole dancer impacted upon my research and / or limited respondents' voices I will never know. Alternatively of course, it could be that, had

I been a pole dancer, my respondents may have cut short some of the explanations and narratives in which they described what classes involved and their experiences of particular moves and so on, as they may have assumed I would already understand or be aware of this information and not have deemed it necessary to share it.

During the course of this research, on a number of occasions my respondents actually thanked me at the end of the interview, telling me that they had enjoyed our conversation and that being able to talk about their feelings and experiences of pole dancing had been useful to them and had helped them to make some sense of their experiences. Kate, Karen and Helen emailed me after our interview to reiterate this. Finch (1984: 74) states that women welcome an opportunity to talk to a 'sympathetic listener' and similarly Cassell (1988: 95) calls for the researcher to become an 'intelligent, sympathetic and non-judgemental listener'. Cotterill (1992), however, argues that women do not need a sympathetic listener because they already have friends in whom they can confide. However, I did find that some women described appreciating talking to me as a sympathetic listener because of the controversy that surrounds pole dancing, and which meant that they felt many other people did not understand or sympathise or were not prepared to listen. Charlotte described having lost friends as a result of pole dancing, due to friends not understanding what pole dancing was about and an assumption that she was stripping. Likewise, Kate's sister had refused to speak to her since she had begun pole dancing and she referred to Kate as a prostitute. Both Kate and Charlotte told me that they had enjoyed our conversations. Due to media and public assumptions as to what pole dancing involves, this may have been a chance to properly explain their participation in and feelings around pole

dancing to someone who was not involved, without that person expressing their own assumptions as to what pole dancing was about. Thus, whether or not my interviews would have been any different if I had been a fellow pole dancer I am not sure, although I should also note that despite feeling that I had been honest about my participation in pole dancing and the research, some women seemed to assume that my viewpoint towards pole dancing was favourable and that I would wish to continue to take part in classes in the future, offering me advice on DVDs on which I could pick up pole dancing tips or teach myself moves, and which websites I could go on to purchase a pole to put up at home. Upon finishing my interview with Hayley she handed me a class timetable and a promotional leaflet and seemed to assume that I may wish to sign up for a course of lessons with her. I did not lie and feign interest in attending Hayley's classes, but at the same time in situations like this I did not correct women's assumptions, and this clearly may have impacted upon their developing assumptions that I had a positive reaction to pole dancing and that I 'understood'. I will discuss more on my feelings around these assumptions in the section later in this chapter on 'feeling guilty'.

It should also be noted, of course, that had I been a pole dancer, this may not only have impacted upon women's responses to me, but it may also have impacted upon my responses to my respondents and my interpretation of the research. Samantha Holland's (2010) account of pole dancing classes could perhaps be described as a more positive account than mine and she writes that pole dancing classes allow women to exhibit agency and liberation, seeing these classes as potentially empowering in that women have made a choice to participate. Holland's research was conducted in two stages, the first in 2005, with Feona Attwood (see Holland and Attwood, 2009), and the second at the same

time as my own fieldwork, between 2007 and 2008. Like me, she also carried out participant observations at classes and in-depth unstructured interviews with women, although she also disseminated an online questionnaire and her research was conducted over a wider geographical span, which included the UK, Australia and the US. Since conducting the research, Holland has taken up pole dancing as a hobby herself and she has her own pole at home. On her online blog she has uploaded a photograph of her pole and in her book writes about her preference for a certain type of spinning pole. Thus, whilst my research was conducted at a similar period in time as that of Holland, using some similar research methods, and also coming from a feminist perspective, there are some major differences in our findings and an additional significant difference is that Holland has continued pole dancing post the research, whereas I have not. Not only may this have impacted upon Holland's role in her interviews, in that she identified as a pole dancer herself, but this could have impacted upon the ways in which we have each interpreted our data. *Of course we no doubt asked different questions and focused on different areas of interest in our interviews, and we interviewed a different set of respondents.* Yet I imagine that Holland's participation in pole dancing herself as a hobby, and her self identification as a 'sex positive' feminist, may have impacted upon her interpretation of women's stories in the same way that I feel my own biography has impacted upon my interpretations. Perhaps we would have interpreted one another's interview transcripts differently. We have also concentrated on different aspects of pole dancing in our write up. For example, in my interviews, discussions around risk and bruising came out strongly and this is reflected in that I write about these issues in depth in chapter five. In Holland's book, bruising forms a very short discussion spanning two pages, and bruising was seen as a negative aspect of pole dancing by her respondents,

whereas I found my respondents had a complex love-hate type of relationship with their bruises, with some describing them positively as 'trophies' at the same time as wishing to cover them up on occasions. It may simply be that the women that I interviewed had different views about bruising than did the women interviewed by Holland, but it could also be that this was a concept Holland did not find significant, yet it was interesting to me and thus I pursued this topic, asking more questions and exploring the concept of bruising more in my interviews, resulting in a greater amount of data collected on this issue.

Whilst I should point out that, having not seen the interview transcripts from Holland's research, I cannot comment specifically on her interpretations, I would in general tend to argue that, as Narayan (1989: 264) says, it sometimes takes someone not involved to take a 'perspectival view' on a situation. Thus, if a researcher is too close to the topic being researched it could result in distortion of the results, for an insider may be more likely to paint a more favourable picture than would someone who is detached from the setting. Miller (1952) suggests that researchers who identify too closely with their research subjects will produce less reliable information because they are likely to be less rigorous and less willing to critically interrogate contradictions in the subjects' worldview and Fay (1996) claims that although we as individuals have our own feelings and experiences, sometimes we are too caught up in our own feelings to be able to make sense of them. If I were a pole dancer, carrying out research into the motivations and experiences of others participating in my hobby, this thesis may have read quite differently. Many of my respondents denied a link between pole dancing as a fitness activity and as a sexualised practice, and perhaps I would also have denied a link and failed to explore the contradictions with this.

In short, I will never know the extent to which my biography impacted upon my research, however, the discussions here indicate that other aspects of my biography beyond simply a shared gender are likely to have impacted upon the responses given by my respondents as well as my interpretations of them. The nature of the methods used in this research, qualitative in-depth and mostly unstructured interviews, mean that every interview was different and it would be impossible to repeat the research exactly to test the findings and similar interviews carried out either by myself at another moment in time or by a different researcher may not yield the same answers. The same answers told to a different researcher may also have been interpreted differently. I should also point out that whilst I shared many similar aspects of my biography with my respondents, I am sure that there are other pole dancers who do not fit this biography. Indeed, whilst I did not come across any men during the course of the fieldwork, there are some male pole dancers (Holland's online questionnaire was answered by 132 women and 3 men and, as mentioned earlier, I became aware during the fieldwork of one male instructor who I contacted but who did not respond), there are some older women who pole dance, and news stories have told of pole dancing being taught to children. Thus, my sample cannot be said to be fully representative of the wider pole community and I do not pretend that it is. The findings in this study relate to those pole dancers that I spoke to at that moment in time and reflect my interpretations of the stories and the voices of the 24 women that I interviewed.

### *Analysis and Write Up*

During interviews I made mental notes (which were transferred to written notes once the interview was over) of body language and other non verbal aspects

during interviews, for example, when respondents showed me their bruises or displayed their muscles, or in my interview with Sarah when she left the room to fetch her pole dancing shoes to show them to me. All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed by myself as soon as possible after the interview so that the interview was fresh in my mind. In the typed transcripts, I recorded these non verbal signs as well as tone of voice used and instances of laughter in brackets so that when reading the transcript back it is clear whether something was meant seriously or jokingly and so on, for I was aware that in a transcribed interview, unless the context is explained, the meaning of what was said may not necessarily correlate to what is on paper.

Three major themes emerged from my interviews, which are reflected in the three analytical chapters of this thesis around; firstly, social class, impression management and being 'respectable'; secondly, the body and taking risks; and thirdly, developing friendships and feelings of community. These provide a context in which to explore the overarching research questions developed around the concepts of choice and agency, empowerment and women's positioning with regard to feminism. I began to pick these out of my interview transcripts. In order to analyse the data I initially explored the use of computer packages for qualitative research and I attended a course to learn how to use NVIVO for the analysis of qualitative data. However, upon taking this course, I immediately felt that this method of analysis would be inappropriate as it would remove my closeness to the data and confer a scientific objectivity onto what should be a subjective interpretative process. In practice I found instead that my own personally developed system of colour coding using highlighter pens was the system that

worked best for me and as this involved reading and re-reading my field notes and transcripts over and over, this ensured a closeness to the data.

During the research I offered information of myself whilst asking it of my respondents, and this has continued into writing up, in the form of reflexive accounts of the research process. Thus, I seek to explain how I have come to the conclusions and interpretations that I have. Due to the descriptive nature of the findings, which centre on respondents' feelings, opinions and frameworks of meaning, the results are presented in the following chapters in a typically qualitative manner, including excerpts of raw data, in the form of extended quotations, alongside my own accounts of them. This will enable me to give respondents a voice in the final write up which, according to Cockburn (1999), is a crucial aspect of qualitative research. It will also allow for justification of my account, by providing exact quotations from respondents as evidence of how I interpreted respondents' voices and came to my conclusions.

## **Research Reflections**

Overall, the methods employed in this research were successful in yielding a large amount of rich and interesting data and most aspects of the research process throughout my participant observations and interviews, for example, in gaining access, establishing rapport, and in the analysis of data, went reasonably smoothly. I enjoyed this period of my PhD very much. I did, however, have some inner thoughts and considerations which caused me some concern during the fieldwork period, which I outline and reflect upon in this section and which are



based around three broad areas; firstly, inner feelings of guilt about the ways in which I was interpreting my respondents' stories and an imbalance of power in the relationship; secondly, the need to acknowledge that respondents may answer in ways in which they feel the researcher wants them to, or may actively attempt to present themselves in a particular way; and, finally, around my own feminist position and making sense of myself as a feminist researcher throughout the fieldwork.

### *Feeling Guilty*

Mauthner and Doucet (1998) suggest that the data analysis stage can be viewed as a deeply disempowering one in which respondents have little or no control, whereby the researcher makes choices and decisions on their lives, how to interpret them, what issues to focus on, and which extracts to select for quotation. Thus, they argue that despite researcher attempts to ensure respondent's voices are heard, it is impossible to create a research process in which power is completely eliminated.

We have to accept that the entire research process is most often one of unequals and that, as researchers, we retain power and control over conceiving, designing, administering and reporting the research. (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998: 139)

It is therefore argued that there is no pure or real experience or voice of respondents because of the complex set of relationships between respondents' experiences, voices and narratives, and the researchers' interpretation and representation of these. However, feminist research argues that we can attempt to hear more of respondents' voices and understand more by the ways in which

we conduct our research. Thus, eliminating power completely may be impossible but a focus on the way in which interpretation is made allows us to understand the research context. I do not attempt to argue that my research is completely non-hierarchical. As discussed earlier, I feel that I was able to develop good levels of rapport with my respondents and to me the interview process went smoothly and respondents generally opened up to me and shared with me their stories, with some thanking me for the interview and claiming that they had enjoyed it. This may be indicative of their feeling comfortable in the interview situation and the validity of the stories that they told me. At times, however, this gave me some feelings of guilt as I was aware of my position as a feminist researcher and that my agenda was to appropriate a part of their lives for my own use. I was also aware that many of my respondents were telling me their stories under an impression that I would write a positive and favourable account of pole dancing. In an email after our interview, Kate thanked me for coming to see her and wrote 'I think what you are doing is so admirable. I will read your thesis from cover to cover'. I had never made claims when talking to Kate that I would be writing a positive account of pole dancing, yet she had clearly made an assumption that I would be writing a favourable thesis, proving wrong all the criticism and claims over links to the strip industry. Whilst some might see it as nice to have received such a positive email of thanks from Kate, I actually felt slightly uncomfortable with her wish to read my thesis from cover to cover, and suddenly aware of the power that I had in the relationship, to interpret her account and write an account of her narrative in a certain way. Ethical guidelines by the BSA (2002) argue that respondents must be fully informed about the research purpose, and this would seem to suggest that I did not make Kate fully aware that my thesis would not be entirely positive towards pole dancing and would be a questioning and exploratory

account. Yet it may be impossible to keep participants fully and comprehensively informed at all times – my research began without a specific hypothesis or set of questions that I wished to test, and it was impossible to outline exactly what each chapter of the thesis would involve, for example, when I began this research. I did not know at the outset of the research whether I would be writing a positive or negative account of pole dancing classes. Additionally, an ambivalent relationship with feminism, of both myself and my respondents, meant that to frame the research as a feminist study in the early stages of the research would have been extremely difficult. As argued by May (1997: 133), participant observation begins without any firm assertions as to what is important, and this is guided by the findings of the research, 'in contrast to testing ideas (deductive), they may be developed from observations (inductive)'.

The guilt that I felt around Kate's assumptions of the research was illuminated by the fact that I found myself liking Kate and many more of my respondents, and in our conversations I found myself seeing the women as people with whom, had we perhaps met under different circumstances, I could have been friends. My respondents were friendly, welcoming, intelligent and articulate women, and I enjoyed the conversations we had in every interview that I conducted. Indeed, in my interviews with both Helen and Sophie, we had lengthy conversations about the experience of doing a PhD and shared our stories and plans for the future. With Sophie, we seemed to have a number of mutual interests (except for pole dancing) and I saw her in particular as someone I could have been friends with. I feel that some of my respondents felt the same way about me. Once the interview was over, and effectively our relationship and need for communication had come to an end, several respondents added me as a 'friend' on Facebook and I had a

text message from Amy to wish me a 'Happy Christmas' a few weeks after our interview. Whilst developing these relationships and finding a mutual ground with my respondents may have helped to break down some of the hierarchical barriers between researcher and researched, I was acutely aware that I would be writing an account which would not be quite as positive as my respondents would have hoped.

During interviews, women were happy to speak about pole dancing as their hobby and something they enjoyed and their stories of pole dancing were always positive. However, understanding respondents' experiences and understandings does not mean, to me, accepting these at face value. Gill argues that researchers should have respect for women's stories and accounts of their experiences, but argues that:

Surely this 'respect' does not mean treating those accounts as if they are the only stories that can be told? The role of the feminist intellectual must involve more than listening, and then saying 'I see'. Respectful listening is the beginning, not the end of the process, and our job is surely to contextualise these stories, to situate them, to look at their patterns and variability, to examine their silences and exclusions, and, above all, to locate them in a wider context. (2007a: 77)

My own understanding of feminist research agrees with that of Gill, but this does not mean that I did not feel some elements of guilt that women had little control over my analysis and may disagree with the outcomes of my research. To me, their narratives didn't always add up and it was hard at times to shake the guilty feelings that whilst I was nodding and smiling as they talked throughout the interview, I was noticing inconsistencies in their positive spiel, questions were being raised in my mind, and when writing my thesis these stories would be

unpicked, questioned and interpreted with my own values and background. When respondents told me that pole dancing was not objectifying, not linked to the sex industry and was actually empowering, I could not treat these statements as a pure account of reality without exploring the contradictions in their accounts. As discussed earlier, I could not accept Hannah's description of pole dancing as being purely a fitness class without questioning the performative element of her classes. In my interview with Claire she spoke positively about how pole dancing was her 'life', 'it's everything' and 'I do this for myself because I love it', speaking about pole dancing as giving her real feelings of empowerment and agency. Yet, further on in the interview, she talked about a positive outcome of pole dancing being that it enables her to attract 'better looking men'. I almost felt guilt for my inner thoughts around how contradictory her statements were. I wanted to believe Claire that pole dancing was this amazing, liberating and empowering phenomenon and that she was exerting agency by a choice to participate, but in the back of my mind I knew that the validation of the success of pole dancing as coming from attracting better looking men did not quite add up to it being empowering, and I saw empowerment as a much more complex entity. I was aware that women were choosing to tell me their stories, they didn't have to, they may have not told these stories to another researcher, and they trusted me to tell me sometimes quite detailed personal experiences. Thus, I felt a requirement to do their stories justice, but at the same time as a social researcher I cannot ignore my own feelings and interpretations of the data, even if this conflicts with that of my respondents. As Gorelick (1991: 466) argues, the feminist researcher is faced with a dilemma – by presenting social relations occurring 'behind the backs of the actors' she claims to be a greater source of knowledge and understanding beyond

that of her respondents. But by not attempting to uncover and interpret respondents' voices, she limits her true contribution to feminist theory.

### *Impression Management*

In chapter two, I described Goffman's (1959) concept of 'impression management' where people use various strategies to make a good impression to others, and I discussed this in relation to feminist discussions of women's construction and management of the body in line with an idealised body image (Rogers, 1999; Jacobs, 2003). In interviews, impression management may occur when respondents make what they believe to be the right responses or the responses they feel that the researcher wants to hear, or where the respondent actively tries to present themselves in a particular way. As discussed earlier, I will never know if respondents behaved in a different way in observations, but I have no evidence to believe that they did and I feel that I did all that I could to make my respondents feel comfortable enough with my presence in classes. Likewise, to manage this in interviews I tried to present myself as unbiased, listening to respondents' accounts, nodding in what I felt to be the right places and trying not to make comments which appeared to condemn or disagree with what respondents were saying. I may not have got this right every time but generally I felt that respondents were comfortable, and private accounts of relationships and feelings began to emerge in their stories. I feel that an element of impression management did emerge in interviews, however, where respondents presented what felt to me like a 'mantra' of what they believed to be the positive aspects of pole dancing. With some, it appeared as if they were reading this from a script, no doubt because they had been questioned and had felt the need to defend pole dancing

before and this was a well rehearsed speech. It took my skills as a researcher to move the conversation beyond this and to question the statements they made. For example, many women referred to pole dancing as empowering and my task was to question 'in what ways is it empowering?' and 'what does empowerment mean to you?' Impression management also occurred, as I shall go on to discuss further in chapter four, with respondents trying to present themselves to me as respectable. In my interview with Julie she told me that she had been to a sex show when on holiday in Amsterdam but then repeatedly stated that she did not usually go to such shows, and that this was something that was part of the experience of going to Amsterdam 'for a giggle', appearing keen to stress to me that she was not the 'type of person' that would normally go to something like this. Similarly, Lucy, who I will discuss in chapter four, presented going to a lap dancing club as 'a giggle' and acceptable if going with her girl friends but repeatedly attempted to make it clear to me that she did not go to look at other women's bodies. It was also present in Sarah's interview in a different way. I interviewed Sarah at her home and when I arrived she gave me a tour of her home. I had not asked to be shown around and found it quite surprising that she did this. Partly this was to show me the room in which she practiced pole dancing, which was a room on the third floor of her three storey town house, which had a pole permanently fixed to the ceiling joists in the middle of the room, mirrors across one wall so that she could watch herself pole dancing, a stereo system and a pile of CDs next to it on the floor, and a bed pushed up against one wall for guests. She explained to me that 'I don't know how people feel about sleeping in my pole dance studio when they come to stay...it's not the spare room, it's my pole dance studio'. At the time, whilst I was interested to see the pole dance studio (and if I am honest I was interested out of pure nosiness to see the rest of

her home), I found it bizarre that she would give a guided tour of the rest of her home to a stranger. During the interview, which took place in the morning, Sarah was making soup for her lunch and after the tour of her home, the interview took place in the kitchen with me sitting at the kitchen table with my digital recorder, whilst she moved around the kitchen cooking. I offered to help and Sarah gave me an onion to chop as I sat at the table. At the time I was a little frustrated that she had decided to do some cooking just at the time we had arranged for me to interview her and thought this to be a little rude. The transcript from Sarah's interview is littered with references to cooking with Sarah asking at one point 'where did I put the spoon?' and at another we have a conversation where she shows me her new blender and tells me where she bought it. Impression management is said to encompass both conscious and unconscious behaviours and utilise both verbal and non verbal techniques (Schlenker, 1980), and on reflection after the interview, I realised Sarah's tour of her home and making soup may have been her attempts at impression management, to present to me her respectability, her domestic skills (also her house appeared spotless and at the time I had wondered if she had cleaned in preparation for me coming) and to present her financial success in owning her (recently purchased) home.

Thus, whilst I did my best to make women feel comfortable in my presence to enable them to be honest with me, some interesting examples of impression management did occur in interviews and, in chapter four, I explore in further detail women's attempts to present themselves as respectable and the strategies they used in order to present pole dancing as something which is an acceptable activity in which to participate.



### *Developing my Feminist Voice*

As I mentioned earlier, doing this PhD research has enabled me to explore and develop my own voice and perceptions as a feminist researcher. Born in 1980, I grew up in the conditions of the post second wave society that I described in chapter two, often a society deemed as post feminist, whereby women's greater visibility in society, in work and in education are said to indicate that we are past a need for feminism. It is also a culture where images of women's liberation proliferate in the media with seemingly strong and successful female celebrities and, when I was in my mid teens, the 'girl power!' mantra of the Spice Girls, as discussed in chapter two, told me that women were able to take control of their own lives and that feminism was no longer applicable. This society is also described by McNair (2002) as 'striptease culture' and by Levy (2005) as 'raunch culture' in which images of sex and sexuality are everywhere and being sexual and raunchy is marketed as female empowerment. I have grown up acutely aware of the media and general societal views on feminism as being opposed and binaristic to femininity, associated with images of bra burning and a hatred towards men (Brunsdon, 2000; Hinds and Stacey, 2001) and as a result felt a pressure placed upon myself as a young woman growing up to dis-identify with feminism. In chapter two, I described McRobbie's theory of the double entanglement (2009), in which young women today benefit from the campaigning and achievements of second wave feminists before them, but suffer a media and societal pressure to be feminine and to reject feminism. I can relate to this and have, as a consequence, felt confused about my views on feminism and have generally been reluctant over the years in general society and in conversations with friends or acquaintances to describe myself as feminist, or become involved

in conversations about feminism, feeling that I would be judged or labelled negatively if I were to identify as a feminist. As I began my sociological career, I began to explore further what it meant to be a woman in our society and what it meant to be a feminist. I grew up as an only child with parents who encouraged me to believe that, regardless of my gender, I could do and be anything I wanted and that being female should never hold me back. From my upbringing, I knew that I agreed with the general principles of feminism, as outlined by Beesley (1999), in that I disagreed with the discrimination of women on the grounds of their sex. I felt unable, however, to categorise my feminist views or put my views into a specific box, as liberal, radical, post or as any other 'type' of feminist. As I discussed at the start of this chapter, I entered my first pole dancing class with this somewhat confused perception of what it meant to be a feminist, but perhaps tending towards an approach influenced by writers such as Ariel Levy (2005) and Natasha Walter (2010), who argue that we live in a culture where women are encouraged to believe that they need to be raunchy and sexy at all times and that being sexy is a marker of female success. Feeling these pressures myself, I have grown up wanting to present myself as feminine, hoping to feel sexy and wanting to be desirable in the eyes of my partner. But at the same time being highly ambitious academically and having high career aims for myself, I have grown up feeling a dissatisfaction with women's positioning as sex objects in the eyes of men, and a resentment for persisting views in society that this is often all women are 'good for'. I entered this research with expectations that I would find evidence of Levy's raunch culture in pole dancing classes and not expecting to find any evidence of empowerment despite the claims made in the advertising of these classes. Whilst I agree wholeheartedly with Levy about the type of culture that we live in, and throughout my research and as I shall go on to show in this thesis, I

indeed found that women believed that pole dancing made them sexy and often believed that success was validated by their ability to be sexy and attract men, I instantly saw pole dancing as offering something else to women which went much beyond this, which was much more complex and which was clearly interesting for much more in-depth and exploratory research. I began to see the complexities in these classes, and quickly realised that it would be impossible to categorise fitness pole dancing as 'right' or 'wrong', 'degrading' or 'empowering', 'acceptable' or 'non-acceptable' or so on. Throughout the course of this research when explaining my PhD to others, I have often been asked whether I agree or disagree with pole dancing classes and I have found this question increasingly difficult to answer. Whilst I knew that I did not wish to continue with classes myself post the field research, and felt in classes uncomfortable with the sexualised linking moves that were taught to us, along with several other aspects of classes including the (lack of) clothing and, in particular, the heeled stripper shoes, I enjoyed other aspects of classes and I met some fascinating women with whom I often had things in common. I felt a great admiration for many women in the strength and skill that they possessed and, in particular, when watching the advanced moves in pole dancing competitions I was awed by the athletic prowess of these women and impressed by the sometimes quite dangerous and risky moves that they were able to pull off with ease. I also admired the close friendships that women made and the real sense of community that was fostered by both participating in these classes and in online conversations. At times during the early stages of the research process, therefore, I felt confused and frustrated that I was not uncovering a definitive conclusion about these classes, and felt that I needed to be able to make a decision as to whether I agreed or disagreed with pole dancing. As time went on, however, pole dancing became in my mind much more complex

than I ever had imagined and instead many new questions about these types of class began to be raised in my mind. Holland (2010: 177) also found that her research raised more questions than it answered and argues 'this is not to say we should lazily avoid discussion; only that sometimes we have to acknowledge that human actions often cannot be tied up in a neat bow'. For example, the fact that my respondents were telling me that they believed pole dancing to be empowering meant that at the beginning of this research I felt a need to conclude as to whether or not pole dancing was empowering for women. Yet as the research went on I began to realise that coming to such a conclusion would be impossible. Instead, what I deem as important is being able to acknowledge and explore the complexities of pole dancing and the concept of empowerment and interpret and explore the voices of my respondents. I realised that empowerment was a complicated concept with different meanings to different people, and whilst I do not necessarily believe that pole dancing is truly empowering, and would question whether women learning to pole dance is empowering in the eyes of others, including in the eyes of men, the women in this study told me that they had feelings of power, empowerment and liberation and that they felt they were exhibiting this by an active choice to participate in these classes. As Merl Storr (2003) argues, feeling powerful is not the same as being powerful, but the feelings of power described by my respondents cannot and should not be completely disregarded. If pole dancing gives women such feelings, it is my task as a feminist researcher to explore these feelings in women and to explore the social context in which these feelings have developed.

This research has therefore enabled me to explore and develop my own identity as a feminist researcher and Ivanic (1998) argues that through PhD research, the

individual learns to become an independent thinker and construct their academic identity, suggesting that academic identities are constantly produced, reproduced, challenged and negotiated throughout the course of PhD research. Through my research, I have come to realise that I can describe myself as feminist without having to specify 'what type?' and instead I acknowledge that my views and my feminist identity have been challenged and questioned throughout the course of this research and that I have come to appreciate the importance of understanding the complexities of women's individual experiences. Every woman that I met during the course of this research was different and every interview that I conducted was different. Many complex and contradictory accounts of pole dancing arose and I see it as my task as a feminist researcher to explore and interpret these accounts, acknowledging the subjectivities of both myself and my respondents and the differing epistemological claims of these women. Thus, I write this thesis still not being able to define exactly what type of feminist I am, but no longer feeling a need to do so, as long as I am self reflexive and acknowledge that I have explored and interpreted my findings in my own way, with my own subjectivities and background, and I hope that I have done justice to the voices of all of the women that I spoke to, whilst making my own contribution to feminist knowledge.

## **Summary**

This chapter has sought to describe the research methodology and choice of methods and the processes followed during the course of the fieldwork, as well as to highlight issues of reflexivity and feminist epistemology. I have reflected upon

my inner thoughts and concerns and the ongoing conversations that I had with myself during the data collection, in an attempt to locate myself within the research, demonstrate subjectivity and chart my changing voice as a feminist researcher. I have shown the subjective experience of research in that every interview and every observation session was different, conducted with different women who had different experiences and stories to tell, by myself as a researcher with my own feelings, values and background. This leads me to argue that the experience of research is complex and multifaceted and is experienced differently by different individuals. In the next three chapters I turn to a discussion of the findings of this research and my interpretations of the data and show the ways in which pole dancing, just like the experience of conducting research, is also a complex and multifaceted experience.

## **Chapter Four**

**'I dance around a pole...but I am not a pole dancer...'**

### **Impression Management, Class, Gender and Respectability in the Pole Dancing Class**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter, the first of three results chapters, shows some of the complexities of social class and gender in the pole dancing community and some of the ways in which social class and gender are negotiated as the women in this research talk about pole dancing. In the previous chapter I discussed ways in which women used the techniques of Erving Goffman's (1959, 1963) 'impression management' in interviews, in order to present a particular image to myself as the interviewer. In this chapter I demonstrate the ways in which women use impression management in their narratives in an attempt to justify their participation in pole dancing, neutralise any stigma attached to this as a fitness activity, and dis-identify with both women who pole dance in a lap dancing club setting and women who are feminists. Drawing on the work of Goffman on impression management, and also Beverley Skeggs (1997) on 'respectability', I look at the ways in which the concept of respectability enters the discussions as the women in this study attempt to present themselves as respectable women, showing that they have a deep concern with the way in which they present themselves to others, which infiltrates their discussions, and using a number of strategies to present pole dancing as an acceptable activity in which to participate. This is presented within a discourse of

choice and control whereby women present themselves as choosing to pole dance because they enjoy it and it is described as fun, allowing them to get fit and make friends, presenting themselves as having agency and arguing that pole dancing can be reworked as empowering and desirable through this discourse of choice and control. Presenting themselves as middle class and 'normal' women, and as having the freedom to make independent decisions, women contrast themselves with professional pole dancers who are assumed to be subordinated and disempowered and forced into this line of work, as well as being working class and unfeminine. I question the extent, however, to which these types of class can offer empowerment for women and suggest that messages of empowerment and agency are presented to women in the advertising of classes whereby marketing sells pole dancing to women as a feminine lifestyle choice. I argue that the techniques women use in order to manage impressions and present themselves as respectable are constructed around a desire to be seen as heterosexual and feminine, tied in with a respectable and feminine image for women as presented to them in popular culture, and arguing that whilst women may gain enjoyment and some feelings of power and agency within classes, this may not equate to empowerment.

### **Respectable Pole Dancing**

Beverley Skeggs' (1997) longitudinal study with working class women in the UK as they negotiated their class position through college, work and family, describes that working class women are specifically marked out as 'other', pathologised as deviant, and to be identified as a working class woman is to risk being seen as



dirty, dangerous and having little social value. Skeggs shows the ways in which these women made attempts to escape from such a position, aspiring to gain a sense of value and respectability. In the opening pages of her book *Formations of Class and Gender*, Skeggs offers her definition of respectability:

Respectability is one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class. It informs how we speak, who we speak to, how we classify others, what we study and how we know who we are (or are not). Respectability is usually the concern of those who are not seen to have it. (1997: 1)

Skeggs claims that respectability is the concern of working class women who are not automatically granted respectability, whereas it is seen as the automatic property of the middle classes, and is not recognised by middle class women, who do not have to prove their respectability. Skeggs draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1980, 1984, 1986), whose writings on different types of 'capital' describes four different types of capital; economic, cultural, social and symbolic, and illustrates how class is based upon the distribution of capital, describing that cultural goods, services and embodied states have symbolic value, the distribution of which can confer power and strength to individuals. For example, Bourdieu describes how the toned, ordered physical body is the desired form of physicality and has many more benefits in society than the unkempt, untidy and overweight body, and consequently is more acceptable, offers more power to people in social situations, and thus can be seen to improve social capital. For Bourdieu, individuals occupy positions in social space, articulated through every kind of capital that he or she can accumulate and articulate. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), Bourdieu describes how 'tastes' including artistic preferences, language, consumption and style, contribute to social mobility. Building upon Bourdieu's ideas, Skeggs' work shows that working

class women attempt to acquire value and negotiate their class position, through the ways in which they negotiate femininity and sexuality.

When I asked my respondents 'what social class would you say you belong to?' they provided me with a range of responses, however, the majority indicated that they saw themselves as middle class. Only one respondent claimed that she was 'unsure' and unable to identify her class position. Ten answered 'middle class' and the remaining women used a range of non-sociological terms including 'normal class', 'average', 'everyday woman', 'good background', or described themselves in terms of their occupational position, 'I have a normal job', 'I do alright' or home ownership 'I own my own home, I'm doing OK for myself'. In terms of social class, social scientists have historically used occupation as the criteria of social class in their empirical studies, and an assessment of the occupations of my respondents finds that these women work in a range of what appear to be middle class occupations. They include a marketing officer, an office manager, a recruitment consultant, a care worker, a business planning officer within the police force and a veterinary nurse. In terms of education, the majority of my respondents had either studied previously or were currently studying at degree level. I interviewed ten current students, which included seven undergraduate students at different stages in their courses and three postgraduates including two PhD students. A further eight interviewees had at least an undergraduate degree and most of these could be described as being at the beginning of their professional careers, as recent graduates in their first homes and in their first jobs, with ambitions to progress upwards in their careers. Claire described her ambitions to go on to do postgraduate study and pursue an eventual career as a counsellor or researcher in the prison system. Further

biographical details about my respondents can be found in appendix two. What is interesting is that my respondents indicated overwhelmingly in their narratives that they saw themselves as 'normal' women, and they showed a sense that they believed themselves to be part of the majority of society. The indication of 'normality' suggests a perceived 'abnormality' of being part of any other social grouping, and I indeed found that my respondents used a number of strategies throughout their interviews in order to present to me their normality, and to disassociate from 'other' women in a similar way to the women in Skeggs' research by presenting themselves as respectable and this chapter demonstrates the ways in which they did this. Thus, whilst Skeggs suggests that respectability is the automatic property of the middle classes, who do not need to concern themselves with respectability or prove themselves in this way, I have found that the middle class women in this research nevertheless worked hard to present themselves as respectable women and their narratives in actuality show a deep concern with respectability. They can be seen to use techniques of impression management, as coined by Goffman (1959), to present themselves as respectable and feminine. Goffman's analysis of interactions between people who are unacquainted with one another argues that people read each other through 'body idiom', whereby, through our body idiom, people glean information about us by judging us against conventional standards (1959: pp. 13-14). Anthony Giddens (1982, 1984, 1991) illustrates how, in modernity, we learn to become self-reflexive, monitoring ourselves and our behaviour against 'social rules' and he describes that self identity has become a reflexive project. Giddens suggests that we are not passive or cultural dupes, but rather we act intentionally, however, we construct ourselves through the social rules and expectations which enable us to get on in social situations, for it is noticed when social expectations are not

adhered to. In chapter two I highlighted feminist arguments around conventional beauty standards which are argued to pressurise women to work at themselves and their bodies in order to shape up, placing emphasis on conformity to a very specific way of looking and being (Wolf, 1991; Orbach, 1993; Grogan, 1999; McRobbie, 2009). Angela McRobbie (2009), in her analysis of media influences upon women and in particular in her discussions of television makeover programmes, argues that these types of programme stereotype working class women as less likely to present an 'acceptable' feminine appearance in comparison to middle class women, who are seen as 'naturally' having style and being acceptably feminine. She describes that working class women are more likely to be the subjects of these makeover shows, criticised and ridiculed for their dress and appearance by middle class female presenters, and being in need of being taught the skills of femininity. Whilst none of my respondents showed evidence of what McRobbie describes as a normalised response to the pressures placed upon women to match up and conform to an ideal, including eating disorders and 'illegible rage' (Butler, 1997; McRobbie, 2009) the women I spoke to did feel a need to work at themselves in order to match up, present themselves as respectable and to manage the impressions made of them by others. Impression management may be a conscious or unconscious act (Schlenker, 1980), yet women described in interviews, albeit without explicitly using the term 'impression management', that they consciously used certain techniques in order to present themselves in a particular way, and that they felt a pressure to do this. They described this pressure as partly coming from a cultural stigma against women who work as pole dancers in lap dancing clubs and, therefore, what they saw as a need to present themselves as respectable and as differing from this type of identity.

Certainly, research shows that women who perform pole dancing in a lap dancing club setting may face stigma for their occupation is viewed as deviant and has traditionally been associated with working class women (Boles and Garbin, 1974; Carey et al., 1974; Bruckert, 2002). In their research, Skipper and McCaghy (1970) carried out a survey with college students and asked them what type of women they thought took their clothes off for a living, finding that stripping was viewed as a low status occupation, with those working in this industry viewed as unintelligent, uneducated, dirty and immoral and being described as no different to prostitutes. The majority of women that I interviewed indicated that their own views of female strippers were not dissimilar from this and, indeed, none of my respondents claimed that they had any desire to go into this line of work and their interviews showed that they would not wish to be associated with such an image themselves. Respondents told me that there were differences between stripping and taking a fitness pole dancing class, yet claimed that the wider society was not aware of this, and as a result every single respondent named at least one occasion when their pole dancing had received a negative reaction from friends, family or new acquaintances, and several described themselves as facing negative comments on a regular basis, and having been 'disowned' by friends and family members as a result. Many respondents gave examples and told me stories of situations when they had been subject to criticisms, jokes or derogatory comments when telling people about their hobby. They described how people often assumed that they perform for men and either work, or wish to work, in lap dancing clubs. April told me that people often assume she pole dances in a lap dancing club '...it goes from 'April does pole dancing' to 'April is a pole dancer' So if you say 'oh I do pole dancing' they automatically assume you mean in a pole dancing club'. Women described their frustration with these responses to pole

dancing. Mel stated 'it's so frustrating, constantly having to explain to people... 'no, I don't do it for money', 'no, I don't do it for men' and Karen claimed 'there are so many narrow minded people, you are constantly having to explain it is not sleazy'.

On her online blog in 2009, Julie wrote:

Despite the obvious skill needed for this form of exercise, there is still a lot of stigma attached to it, and we often have people coming up to us telling us that what we do is disgusting...but this is usually before they have even seen us.

Charlotte told me that she has lost a lot of friends since taking up pole dancing:

*I've been called a slag, a whore. Friends I went to school with, so called friends, I've been called...I'm whoring around London, just loads and loads of things like that and, yeah, people just closing doors in my face and slamming phones down.*

In listening in interviews to women's stories of their experiences of being criticised, called names, and having assumptions made about them, I found that I could relate to this and on numerous occasions I shared my own stories and examples of this with my respondents. I have found myself subject to many assumptions and jokes over the course of the last few years when telling people about my research. The subject of my research has often been misunderstood and I have been teased many a time by male colleagues or acquaintances offering to 'help' with my research by accompanying me to lap dancing clubs, and I have also been offered stories of experiences of lap dancing clubs and assumptions about the 'type' of women who work in the strip industry by people with the best intentions, who seemingly believed that these stories would help me to write my thesis. When relaying these comments and experiences to my

respondents, many nodded in understanding and commented that this is a typical response and something which they face regularly.

Several of my respondents blamed the media for what they described as 'incorrect' assumptions around pole dancing for, as outlined in chapter one, pole classes have increasingly attracted media attention and feminist journalists have offered a number of criticisms of the claims that these classes are empowering (for example, Ariel Levy, 2005, and Natasha Walter, 2010, have condemned pole classes for what they describe as a false message of female liberation). In 2006, the BBC unveiled plans to launch a spin-off of the TV reality dance show *Strictly Come Dancing*, to be entitled *Strictly Come Pole Dancing*, in which celebrities would learn to pole dance in order to raise money as part of the charity event *Sport Relief*. The plans were later scrapped due to media criticism of the suggestion. In *The Independent*, Joan Smith argued against the idea in her article "Strictly Come Pole Dancing'? No, they're not Joking. The BBC Should be Ashamed' (Smith, May 2006). More recently, in an article in *The Observer* (Mitchell, April 2010) entitled 'Actually, you won't find Female Empowerment Halfway up a Pole', male comedian and newspaper columnist David Mitchell criticised the announcement that the University of Cambridge Students' Union were offering pole dancing classes for female students to become empowered, questioning the term empowerment and stating:

Pole dancing is grim and I don't see anything empowering about learning it. Even if you say that it's just dancing and good exercise, surely it would be more empowering to learn a dance that can be employed in contexts other than strip clubs?

These criticisms of pole dancing and what my respondents described as a lack of understanding about classes was described by several of my respondents as a negative aspect of pole dancing, something which they wished did not exist, that they often found upsetting, and something with which they have to 'deal' and 'manage'. When I asked what 'dealing' with these comments meant, women gave examples of the responses that they might give, were someone to criticise them, and described situations in which these responses had been used. Several respondents described their desire to change people's perceptions about pole dancing and a number of instructors had appeared in their local media attempting to demonstrate pole dancing as something appropriate for women as a fitness activity and to challenge public perceptions. Two of my respondents, Charlotte and Julie, wrote online blogs through which they attempted to explain and promote their experiences of pole dancing as an acceptable activity. In the following sections I outline and examine some of the techniques that women used in their narratives, in which to manage impressions of themselves and also to present themselves to me in interviews as middle class, respectable women.

### **Keeping Pole Dancing Secret**

Goffman's (1963) influential work *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* defines 'stigma' as any attribute that sets people apart, discredits them and disqualifies them from full social acceptance. Goffman differentiates between the 'discredited', those people whose stigma is visible and obvious, and the 'discreditable', those whose stigma is not yet known and not visible, but who would become discredited if the stigma should be uncovered. He shows how the



discreditable, in conversations with others, are conscious of managing information about themselves which might reveal their stigma and Goffman describes this as 'information control'. The women in this study all claimed that pole dancing is something which they should not be ashamed of, stating that there is nothing wrong with what they are doing, that they love their hobby and they believe that it should be accepted in our society as a sport or a fitness activity. The experience of pole dancing, however, assumes an 'other world' quality for the women in this research for they claimed that it is impossible to truly understand pole dancing unless you have tried it and therefore many 'outsiders' are deemed to not understand, resulting in the assumption of a relation to the strip industry and an attachment of stigma to this as an exercise practice. For this reason, some women found it necessary to control information about themselves, and several women described to me how they had kept their pole dancing a secret from new acquaintances and family members, out of a belief that they would not understand and a fear of their reaction. When I first met Kate she told me that she had not told her mother-in-law that she pole danced, stating that this was something 'she doesn't need to know'. Kate claimed that she has a good relationship with her mother-in-law yet she feared a negative reaction to her pole dancing and that she might consequently see Kate as not being good enough for her son. Likewise, Anna told me that she has not told her grandmother that she pole dances and also that she has a number of tattoos on her body, for she feared that she would not understand, and she wishes to retain an image of respectability in the eyes of her grandmother:

She doesn't need to know. It's a different generation. That's why I always have to wear long sleeves or arm bands when I go back down to see my nan, and trousers. According to my nan I'm the good grandchild, I'm the

best one, I'm the one who has never done anything wrong and I plan to keep it that way.

When I interviewed Sophie she was in the third year of her PhD studies. She described a conflict between the image of her as a PhD student and as a pole dancer and her attempts to keep these two aspects of her identity separate. While she stated that she believes that there is nothing wrong with pole dancing, Sophie feared that disclosure of her pole dancing would damage the professional image she felt she needed to maintain as a PhD student, particularly in the capacity of teaching other undergraduate students:

But...my friends, actually most of them think it's cool and also they think it's quite funny really, because I'm a PhD student and I pole dance. Cos the impression people have of PhD students is that you are a bit geeky, you know, and pole dancing the impression is totally opposite. So they think that's funny. That I do that outside of the PhD.

(Kerry: Well you've got to have a life outside of the PhD haven't you?)

Oh God, yeah. Otherwise I'd go crazy. I'm shut in my office all day everyday working so in the evenings I need to let my hair down, otherwise I'd go mad.

(Kerry: What about in your department, do other people know that you pole dance? Other PhD students and staff?)

I don't think any of the staff know, I think I would be a bit embarrassed telling my supervisors about pole dancing *[laughs]*. But some of the others know because, you know, both me and Helen do it. Some of the other students probably think we are a bit mad, I dunno, no one has really said much to be honest. I don't really talk about it cos...I dunno, I think people probably might not take you seriously in that context, do you know what I mean?

(Kerry: Yeah. Do you do some teaching as well?)

Yeah, yeah, I teach undergraduates. So I think...they don't need to know that I can pole dance, you know, they just need to take me seriously as a lecturer. Obviously the pole dancing I do is for fitness, I'm not a stripper, but even so...it's just people's images of it. I need to maintain a professional image at work and even though what I do isn't wrong, there's a chance people could think that it is.

Goffman argues that we are all stigmatised to some degree, and that at best we are discreditable, if we are not already discredited, and therefore there is a continuum between those he describes as 'normals' and those who are discredited. His theories thus suggest that everyone needs to make steps to manage stigma to some extent, we all need to work at managing the impressions that people make of us, and to control information that people glean about us. To this end, the women in this study do make steps to manage impressions, yet of course all do this to differing extents. Whilst the women that I met described there not being anything wrong with what they are doing, the fact that some women kept their pole dancing secret from other people indicates that they do acknowledge that it is something which could potentially be discreditable. In Sophie's narrative above, she acknowledges the cultural contradiction between her identity as a PhD student and as a pole dancer and that pole dancing is something which potentially has the risk to impact upon her professional image and result in her not being taken 'seriously', and this suggests an acceptance that pole dancing retains a stigma. Rather than challenging this, or stopping pole dancing, Sophie feels a need to control information about her pole dancing, seeing her alternative image as a PhD student and a lecturer as an image that is more appropriately acceptable in wider society.

The situation was different, however, for Nicky, who previously worked as a stripper for almost two years before beginning to teach pole dancing classes. When working as a stripper, Nicky used the techniques of Goffman's information control in order to manage potential stigma against herself with regard to her occupation, telling few people about her occupation and most of her family were

under the impression that she worked in a bar. She still does not tell many people that she used to work as a stripper:

Because you are kind of always a little bit afraid of people's reactions, that they're gonna say 'oh you were a stripper, oh my god, you're a hussy'. Do you see what I mean? People tar strippers with...I don't know, what's the word I'm looking for without using the word 'slag'? People look at strippers as being a bit promiscuous I suppose.

Nicky was the only interviewee, and in fact the only woman I met throughout the entire course of this research, who had previously worked in a lap dancing club. She discussed the differences between working as a stripper and her current job, teaching fitness pole dancing, describing the actions of dancing around a pole in the different settings as being 'it's the same thing you're doing, but it's also very different'. She explained that the similarities included performing the same types of moves, including spins and tricks on the pole, the names of moves were standardised, and that similar clothing and stripper shoes were worn in both settings. Nicky made attempts to distinguish herself from other women who worked as strippers, arguing that there is a certain 'type' of woman who lap dances for a living, and that she does not fit this mould. Nicky described herself as middle class and told me that she had a 'good upbringing and a happy childhood', however, she described every other woman she met during her time as a stripper as being working class, and as usually coming from a broken home, in particular having often grown up without a father figure or having a poor relationship with their fathers:

Most strippers have the...I don't know of any other way to put this...but the 'daddy wasn't there thing'. And first of all I started thinking, when I first started dancing, I heard a lot of stories about the girls that I was working with had maybe had hard times when they were growing up, hard family

life, some people were abused, things like that, and I started to wonder why, and wonder if everybody else was like this. I was thinking 'well I didn't'. It will be things like 'my dad died when I was younger' or 'my dad was never there' or 'I've got a step dad who tried to be my real dad for the rest of my life'. He was never there, do you know what I mean, the biological father, which is very, I don't know...it's weird to me, which...I find it very interesting but it's definitely...definitely something to do with a lack of father. Which is really strange. So if you can come up with anything about that I'd be interested to find out about it. Research why people want to be strippers, that'll be a really fascinating thing to find out about.

The lack of a father figure amongst female strippers is of course a subject for another research study, however, Nicky's interview was interesting as she went on to tell me that since she stopped working in the strip industry and set up her business teaching women to pole dance as a fitness class, she has noticed that she is now working with a different 'type' of woman who does not have the same background. '...I get the impression people who come to the classes generally come from good backgrounds, they haven't had that. And they have good jobs...they have money'. Nicky described herself as being much happier since she began to teach pole fitness classes, claiming that this line of work was 'more me' and talking about the friends she has made from teaching classes, and the fact that she sees the women taking pole dancing classes as more likely to be middle class women and more like herself in terms of family background and social standing, and thus women with whom she feels that she has more in common. She described herself as able to be honest now about her occupation and described her father as being proud of her success.

Theresa described her father as having been embarrassed when she first told him that she had taken up pole dancing, but stated that it is important for people to see fitness pole dancing, in order for them to understand exactly what it involves and to appreciate that it is nothing to be embarrassed about:

Well I think initially my mum and dad were mortified. We used to laugh because my dad for a long time wouldn't watch me dance. You know, if I were a tap dancer he'd be there every week, like 'look at my daughter, a tap dancer'. And then he watched...cos I've got an instructional DVD. And when the DVD was done and he watched the DVD and he was like 'oh my God, is that what you can do?' And it definitely changed the way he thought about it, cos I think he thought we were dancing seductively around the pole. Even though he didn't say it, I think he was a bit embarrassed about watching his daughter dancing around a pole. And now, you know, he's got me as his screen saver, things like that...and he's showing people like, you know, 'this is my daughter', telling people what I do...

Like Theresa, most women described fitness pole dancing as something which people have to see or experience, in order to fully understand that there is nothing wrong with what they are doing. When they do attempt to verbally explain fitness pole dancing to other people, there are a number of strategies which they use in their narratives and in their choice of language, to present it as 'respectable', which I found common throughout my interviews, and through which women presented differing identities, as being middle class women, as enterprising selves, as simply being women who want to have fun, get fit and make friends, and as not being lap dancers and not being feminist. The following sections describe these differing identities and the ways in which women presented themselves in more detail.

### **The Middle Class Pole Dancer**

During interviews I asked my respondents questions around their other interests, hobbies, and the sports or fitness activities they might have played at school and whilst growing up, in order to gain an idea as to the lifestyle habits of my respondents. Seven of my respondents listed horse riding as a hobby as well as

pole dancing and four of these women, Hannah, Maria, Lucy and April, all owned their own horse. April was studying Equine Management at University and owned a small riding stable where she taught horse riding lessons. When I interviewed Anna and she told me that she also regularly horse rides, I commented that several of my other respondents also rode horses, and asked her what she thought this trend could mean. Anna suggested that both horse riding and pole dancing may be middle class activities:

Well horse riding is a very middle class, kind of, if you'll pardon the...white British girl, middle class, kind of thing to do, maybe the pole dancing is becoming the white British middle class girl kind of thing to do as well. And both things are expensive...pole dancing can be expensive if you go to classes, the taster lesson I did was 20 quid. If you went every week that's really expensive. So...you need money.

Research does indeed suggest that horse riding is a sport in which the middle classes have been most represented. Research commissioned by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs shows that interest in horse riding is biased towards the higher social grades and that the stereotype of people interested in horses as young, wealthy women, is reflected in the statistics (British Horse Industry Confederation, 2004). As suggested by Anna above, traditionally horse riding requires expensive outlays including renting or owning a horse as well as clothing, boots, hats and renting of stables. Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) included a survey of differences in sporting preferences and eating habits between French professionals and the working class. In terms of leisure sports, in which he includes horse riding, Bourdieu notes that the working class face economic barriers, with these sports being practiced in exclusive locations and involving investment of time, money and training, and also social barriers in terms of family tradition and early socialisation. Bourdieu argues that the working

classes opt instead for sports that are easily accessible to them and suggests a theory of 'distance from necessity' to explain class differences in lifestyles, whereby the professional classes have greater time and freedom to develop and refine personal tastes in line with a more privileged class status.

Why then, might pole dancing be becoming a middle class activity? Like horse riding, pole dancing appears to be an expensive hobby. Classes range in price depending on location, with the average price in the UK being around £20 for a one hour group lesson and prices rising to around £35 an hour in London. Many classes run as a course and require women to pay in advance for a block of lessons, with the average being £150 for a block of eight lessons. In addition to this, most women buy poles for their homes, with the 'X-Pole' being the most popular and widely recommended type of pole, costing £180 on average (all prices here are what I have found to be average prices taken from internet searches in 2009). 20 of my 24 interviewees had their own pole at home, and all but one of these owned the X-Pole. Indeed, a number of women in interviews referred to the cost of participating in pole dancing and, like Anna above, suggested that this was indicative of pole dancing being a middle class activity, for it is not affordable to everyone. These discussions point to a discourse of choice, for these women present themselves as financially able to make a choice to participate in pole dancing and contrasting themselves with those women who they believed were forced to work in lap dancing clubs because they need the money. Helen also described the cost of pole dancing as being indicative of a sense of willpower and self control, for if women are willing to spend such large amounts of money on their hobby, they have to be dedicated to it.



Some women used a language of distinction in their talk about different types of pole dancing class and the classes which occur in different settings. Kate referred to the classes which take place in bars and distinguished between these classes and her own, which take place in a purposely designed studio. She suggested that a different 'type' of woman attends a pole dancing class in a bar:

Maybe someone...like a drinking culture type of person would want to go to a pole dance class in a bar and perhaps wouldn't worry if maybe they sprained their ankle or something. They wouldn't be bothered. They might chuck themselves at the pole, you know, and they wouldn't be bothered.

Kate went on to describe how she equates drinking of alcohol with being working class and in turn equates being working class as being less feminine, having less regard for safety, being more irresponsible during classes, and taking pole dancing less seriously. She regarded this as the 'type' of person she did not want to attend her classes. A number of researchers show that women's drinking has been largely a taboo subject and historically characterised as unfeminine, immoral and unrespectable (Plant, 1997; Skeggs, 2005; Eldridge and Roberts, 2008). Discourse analysis of British newspaper coverage undertaken by Day et al. (2004) found that women's drinking is most commonly constructed negatively and that women who drink alcohol were presented as 'subverting their normal feminine virtues (modesty, nurturance, etc)' (2004: 166) and Skeggs describes how the media presents that for women 'to smoke, drink, be fat and publicly fight and / or participate in loud hen parties is a national sin' (2005: 967). In what she openly admitted to me was an attempt to exclude from her pole dancing classes women who drink alcohol excessively and who she sees as working class, Kate described how she prices her own classes so as to make them unaffordable to people on lower wages:

You know, the classes are priced in such a way that it will...there will be professional people coming, really...If I had like a drop in system, where it was much cheaper and I had less poles and more people the quality of the class would be less and it would be more available to people on lower wages and so on and I think that would cause more problems...like safety is quite important and so generally I'd have more people mucking about and probably drinking and so on, and I can't have that in my class, so...I've purposely, sort of, priced it in a way that I get a certain type of person coming. And the way that the website's worded and so on. It's just...I've worded it in such a way that it attracts the same sort of people as me, really. Like, if I was, if I was looking then it would make me want to go, so people who've sort of got similar...people who've got similar sorts of ideas about life as me, sort of, come really.

Whilst there are many schools and instructors that teach pole dancing to hen party groups, Kate described how she does not teach pole dancing to hen parties, as this would also be more likely to attract what she described as a 'drinking culture type of person', claiming that she believes women attending hen parties would want to drink alcohol during the class and she claimed 'I can't have that...it's not safe. And it's not fitness. It's just not what I want for my school'. Skeggs (2005) describes how hen parties have come to be the subject of media obsession in Britain, and likewise Eldridge and Roberts (2008) describe hen parties as a source of controversy, portrayed in comparable terms to the stag do, as a night of drunken excess and embarrassing antics. Skeggs describes how women on hen parties are often viewed with distaste and a distance is drawn between the hen partying woman and respectable femininity where hens are viewed as 'the drunk, fat and vulgar' (2005: 965). Many of my respondents referred to the pole dancing that is taught as part of a hen party as offering something very different from that taught in a weekly fitness pole dancing class, suggesting that hen parties were more likely to involve drinking, would always involve wearing stripper shoes (whereas some pole dancing classes did not), and were more about a performance of sexuality than a fitness class, although it

should be noted that few respondents had actually attended a pole dancing themed hen party and these views were predominantly based upon assumption. Hen parties were assumed to be more overtly sexual and to involve teaching women much more sexualised moves on the pole, how to present themselves as sexual, teaching women a performance much more in line with that performed by professional pole dancers in lap dancing clubs and were said to also often involve learning how to lap dance or perform a striptease as part of the same class. Theresa teaches fitness pole dancing classes and also runs hen parties and described that groups of women attending a hen party want a more sexualised class as opposed to something constructed around fitness 'you can be a bit cheeky with it, so...in the parties it's much more tongue in cheek than I would do in a normal lesson, but they're having a drink and so they want to be a bit more flirty with it'. The pole dancing hen party, it seems, may be argued to be an arena where women (temporarily) present themselves as sexual. Tye and Powers (1998) describe hen parties in general as being about women creating an image of hyper female sexualisation via the imitation of sexual activity with male strippers and the presenting of sexually explicit gifts and clothing to the bride. In pole dancing themed hen parties, my respondents suggested that a similar theme is played out, where women play at being professional pole dancers for the night, turning themselves into commodities which follow a specific sexualised image. Respondents attempted in their discussions to distinguish between this and what occurs in their weekly classes, suggesting that this is very much a different thing, however, it should also be noted that the hen party was generally viewed as something acceptable due to its temporary nature and an association with being 'one of the girls', the 'girls night out' and having fun with friends, and pole dancing hen parties are certainly very much advertised in this way.

## **The Enterprising Pole Dancer**

In her research with women in management, Ann Gray (2003) describes the women she met at a Women in Management group as being 'enterprising selves', a concept where commentators (Du Gay, 1996; Rose, 1996, 1999) have emphasised how post-Fordist re-structurings of the workplace have created a need for workers in the postmodern society to be flexible, self-developing, self-motivating and self-regulating. Gray discusses how her respondents have set themselves up in business and embody the characteristics of the enterprising self, yet their businesses are predominantly around offering these types of skill to other women, and Gray describes how many of the women she met worked in occupations which involved impression management and care of the self, teaching the skills of consumption and the making of the feminine, for example, in occupations which involved the presentation of the self, as image consultants, care of the body and mind, as counsellors or in alternative medicine, and aesthetics and design, such as interior designers. Gray relates the numbers of women working in these types of industry to the media presentation of a feminine identity for women as being a project, citing a number of studies which describe women's magazines as manuals for women to learn how to construct a feminine self, presenting self-management as required in order to be successful (Winship, 1987; Hermes, 1995). In chapter two, I also discussed feminist theories on the presentation of femininity as a project. The pole dancing instructors that I interviewed in this research saw themselves as teaching others to become better selves, teaching women confidence, self-appreciation, and the skills of femininity. Kate described herself as offering a service to women, in teaching them to be more confident about themselves and, describing the negative reactions of her

sister to pole dancing, she defended her occupation claiming 'I mean, if I was stripping in a club, yeah, OK, fine, but if I'm doing something that couldn't be further removed from that, and helping all these women as well'. A number of the pole dancing instructors that I met, in a similar way to the women in Gray's research, have built up successful businesses and careers for themselves, and they also showed real elements of an enterprising self by the ways in which they have seized the opportunity to make money out of the popularity of pole dancing, developing and expanding their businesses, some in a very short time period, and becoming involved in local media to promote their classes. Charlotte, for example, described in her interview that, were pole dancing classes to suddenly stop being so popular, and she were to be out of work, she would be financially secure for some time. Sarah has taught fitness classes for a number of years and taught herself to pole dance as a hobby. Realising that she could make some money from teaching pole dancing, she had recently begun to teach classes and she now teaches more pole dancing classes than any other type of fitness, and explains that because there is an increasing demand for pole classes, she is able to charge higher fees:

It's still better money. So, yeah, it is fully booked and people are fighting practically to get in. And now...I'm not taking any bookings beyond Christmas and I'm virtually fully booked up till the nineteenth which is the last date before Christmas.

Sarah also described that her parents were sceptical at first about her teaching pole dancing, but that they would be impressed with the amount of money that she was making:

I think they'll approve when I start making lots of money, which I am. I think my Mum's quite impressed. I'm making nearly five hundred pounds a week teaching five pole dancing classes, and I think that's turning their heads a bit.

Kate described her employment trajectory, having been brought up in what she described as a 'typical middle class family' but having (as she described it) 'gone off the rails a bit', leaving school at 16 and having become pregnant with her son at the age of 19. After having her son, Kate went back to education and took 'A' Levels, and then studied for a degree. Whilst studying for her degree Kate began to teach herself to pole dance as a hobby. When I asked her what her original motivation was to pole dance she described this in terms of an enterprising and spontaneous self:

I'm quite erm...I'm quite spontaneous, so that's a real 'me' sort of thing to do, is to go 'right I'm gonna get a pole and then I'm gonna teach myself and that's it'. And so I did.

After her degree, Kate began to teach other women to pole dance, offering classes at her home to women on a one-to-one basis. She soon built this up and began to hire a studio for an hour each week in which she taught classes to groups of women, and within three years she had begun to teach pole dancing as a full time job, developed a website, promoted her classes nationally and she now owns studios in three different cities and is one of the most well known pole dancing instructors and performers in the country. Similar to Kate, Jessica has also built up her business and been financially successful. As well as teaching pole classes and owning a health and fitness club, Jessica also works for a Government funded scheme which aims to promote female entrepreneurs and

encourage women to go into business, for which she acts as a mentor to groups of women:

I go and speak, really just to...I talk about my experiences as a way of saying to women 'just get out there and give it a go', you know? Believe in yourself. And then if they need any advice or guidance or whatever then I do that as well.

Women described to me their progression towards successful pole dancing businesses as being about seizing an opportunity, and about also doing something that they love doing, and they described teaching pole dancing as being about getting paid to do something they love, this being described as something which no-one should deny to women, thus arguing 'how could anyone criticise women who teach pole dancing, for they are making money, they are doing something they enjoy, and they are helping other women?' Clearly, it would be wrong to suggest that these instructors are women who do not have agency – they are independent women who have set up their own businesses, are making their own money and who are finding financial success. They have made a choice to follow this career path and have used initiative to capitalise on this growing market in order to make money. They describe themselves as enjoying and gaining satisfaction from their work. I would also argue, however, that these women have capitalised upon consumerism and the persisting pressures placed upon women in order to make money for themselves, and instructors are offering an impression management service which teaches women to construct a very rigid and particular type of self, aligned to very specific ways of looking and presenting a particular view of feminine sexuality. Jessica described what she believed to be a positive aspect of her job teaching pole dancing:

The thing I love about it is, I notice this, when the women come on the 6 week courses they come in not feeling very positive about themselves, sometimes, and by the end of the 6 week course, they've kind of almost re-found their femininity, they've re-found a positive way of thinking about themselves.

Of course, giving women feelings of positivity has got to be a good thing, however Jessica appears to be suggesting that feeling feminine is the only way for a woman to feel positive about herself and the offering of these classes to women as a form of self-help, to teach women an idealised form of self, builds upon and contributes to the existing pressures in society which are placed upon women to be and act a certain way and to see the body as a project which they constantly have to strive to improve. Thus, pole dancing instructors may be seen as enterprising selves but this is via a clear engagement with the structures of consumption and they are, to some extent, reinforcing the structures and pressures placed upon women. They are also contributing to the promotion of pole dancing as something empowering, as I shall discuss in the next section, and appear to use this in their advertising as a way in which to encourage women to take up pole dancing classes.

### **Pole Dancing for Empowerment**

In their discussions, pole dancing was repeatedly described by respondents as something 'empowering' for women, and indeed, as I have already referred to, this was a message frequently presented in the advertising of classes. The suggestion that pole dancing can be empowering has been criticised by feminist journalists such as Ariel Levy (2005) and Natasha Walter (2010), who question



whether the performance of this type of sexualised dance can ever offer empowerment to women and suggest that a false message of empowerment is presented in order to sell these classes to women. In this section I explore and question the concept of empowerment through women's narratives and the ways in which they describe empowerment as being construed through pole dancing offering them fun, fitness, friendship, and the presenting of pole dancing as something domestic, performed in the home.

Pole dancing was repeatedly framed by my respondents as something which is fun, associated with fitness, and which enables women to make friends, describing pole dancing for them as being about having fun with the girls, getting fit and feeling good about oneself. The presenting of pole dancing as something associated with fun, fitness and friendship was commonly used as a way of negating any criticisms of pole dancing and presented as something seen as common sense, in that it has these benefits for women, so 'how could this be degrading?' Respondents' narratives around pole dancing as, firstly, a fitness class, and secondly, around developing an identity as being 'one of the girls', will be discussed in more detail in chapters five and six respectively, however, here I wish to concentrate on the concept of fun as a reason to pole dance. Pole dancing as being fun was mentioned repeatedly by women and featured highly in women's responses to my questions around why they persisted in attending pole dancing lessons. Fun was presented as something which should be seen as a desirable experience that we all should be entitled to, and those who criticised pole dancing were described as negative, ill-informed and wrong. Women questioned 'what is wrong with having fun?' and 'who could deny women having some fun?' Women presented having fun whilst pole dancing as being about

'playing around', they described 'having a play' on the pole and, indeed, one pole dancing school based in Bristol actually calls itself Pole Play. Sarah described pole dancing as being about going back to childhood, playing on the climbing frame in the school playground, and Jodie explained that it was a chance to play around, doing something far removed from the rest of adult life. Women also seemed to be playing around with a temporary identity, imagining themselves as a professional pole dancer, as desired by a male audience, and this was depicted in the class of Hannah's, as discussed in the previous chapter, where we danced on the lap dancing club stage and she described this as a chance to play at or imagine being a professional pole dancer working in the lap dancing club. This suggests the masquerade of being a professional pole dancer and seems to be as close to being a stripper as middle class women can get, but is deemed by Hannah as something women can do for fun without tainting their respectable image. Jessica described her classes as being about exploring a sexual side to women and that 'we believe in more about the fun element and about the exploring your sexuality and looking yourself in the eyes in the mirror, thinking 'yeah, I'm gorgeous''. She also described that women can put on a performance whilst dancing on the pole, regardless as to whether or not there was an audience:

And, yes, it's quite tongue in cheek, so to speak. But there are degrees aren't there? You can be flirty, can't you? You can be flirty, you can be a bit cheeky, you can have a wiggle and a giggle, you can be a bit saucy, you can be extremely explicit. So it's all about degrees isn't it?

Jessica claimed that pole dancing is 'empowering' for women for it gives permission for women to act out and experiment with different aspects of

themselves, suggesting that this was in the context of a society where women are under pressure to conform to a very specific ideal:

They feel fab, they've had so much fun, they've had a laugh. You know. Every woman wants to feel...every woman wants the confidence to feel like a whore, to feel desirable, wanton, they want permission to do that. Cos there's so...there's such a prophecy in society that, yes we're all supposed to be desirable and attractive and all the rest of it, but when we do display that, we get branded as being a prostitute. It's just double standards. So we give women permission to explore that particular side of them, in a safe, friendly, non judgemental environment, where they're not gonna get, you know, criticised or judged.

Jessica's interview is reminiscent to some extent of McRobbie's (2009) explanation of the 'double entanglement'. By this McRobbie refers to the messages fed to women that they are the beneficiaries of the feminist achievements of the second wave, enabling them to now have greater power and agency to make their own choices, yet at the same time they are fed a message of compulsory heterosexual femininity and fed images of the 'correct' ways of looking and being. In a similar way and following on from this, women are presented with a message that they need to be sexy, desirable and available to men (Walter, 2010), yet at the same time, what could also be described as a double entanglement means that being 'too available' or having 'too much' sexual experience is stigmatised (Lees, 1997; Holland et al., 1998). A recent article in *The Gloss Magazine*, a supplement in the *Irish Times*, argued:

Men are born liberated, because the rules of sexual decency and morality are conceived by men. Men who act outside the rules are rebels. Women who act outside the rules become outcasts: they are called whores or they are called frigid. (Baxter, 2010: 52)

Jessica, in the quote earlier, suggests that pole dancing classes allow an arena in which women can experiment and play with their sexuality and become comfortable with their sexuality, without running the risk of being judged, or, as described in the quote from Baxter above, 'outcasts'. Of course, the suggestion by Jessica that this therefore offers women 'empowerment' can be questioned – whilst classes might allow women to experiment with their identity and their sexuality, does this really equate to empowerment?

It seems appropriate here to outline briefly theories and definitions of the term 'empowerment'. At its' root, the concept of empowerment is about 'power'. Dictionary definitions of empowerment define it as 'to give someone official authority or the freedom to do something' (Cambridge Online Dictionary) and 'to give power or authority to; authorize, esp. by legal or official means, to enable or permit' (Dictionary.com). Although the terms 'empowerment' and 'power' are used frequently in our everyday lives, the meaning of both of these concepts spark debate amongst social theorists. For example, the literature on power is marked by a disagreement over the basic definition of power. Some theorists define power as being able to get someone else to do what you want them to do (as in, having 'power over'). For example, Dahl describes an 'intuitive idea of power' where 'A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do' (1957: 202-03). Others, however, define power as the ability or capacity of an individual to do something (to have 'power to'). Hannah Arendt's definition of power is 'the human ability not just to act but to act in concert' (1970: 44). The 'power to' approach tends to have more commonly been used by feminist theorists, who have generally criticised the 'power over' approach as one which is implicitly masculinist for it assumes that, by having

power, one then reduces the ability of others to exercise power. Indeed Held describes this approach as 'the power to cause others to submit to one's will, the power that led men to seek hierarchical control and...contractual constraints' (1993: 136). Many feminists have thus called for power to be reconceptualised as the gaining in capacity to empower oneself and others. Within this, 'empowerment' is described as being about the gaining in agency and ability to exercise choice. Mosedale (2005) describes that empowerment is perceived as a process which women have to achieve themselves, as the process by which women gain control of and power in their own lives and challenge their subordination. Rowlands' (1995: 102) discussion of empowerment argues that 'it is about individuals being able to maximize the opportunities available to them without or despite constraints of structure and state'. This approach suggests that empowerment may be individualistic, pointing to neo-liberal approach, as outlined in chapter two, in placing responsibility onto women to empower themselves, to gain control of and direct their own life chances.

The message of empowerment which many of my respondents put forward in interviews suggests that their definition of empowerment relates to having chosen to take part in these classes, suggesting that having a choice to participate equals empowerment. Yet does this really suggest that because these women have actively attended a pole dancing class or chosen to sign up for a block of lessons that they have empowerment? Does choosing to pole dance mean that women are no longer discriminated upon in wider society and face no power struggles in other areas of their lives? In chapter two I described conflicting debates regarding whether or not women now have increased agency and empowerment in late modernity and outlined feminist theory which suggested that whilst women may

have an increased ability to make choices in their lives, this does not necessarily mean that they are entirely free of structural constraints and that power structures are changing, complex and multifaceted. If empowerment relates to women challenging the power structures which subordinate them, then it follows that what is empowering in one context may not be in another, and also that the definition of empowerment will differ amongst different women, because all women experience power differently. I would therefore argue that the idea of attending pole classes as equating to empowerment for all women that attend is questionable. The women I interviewed feel that they have made a choice to attend pole dancing classes, and claim that they are attending because they want to and because they enjoy the classes. Clearly engagement in classes, purchasing a pole for oneself and engaging in conversations with others on online forums are not passive activities and women display some power and agency by their decisions to participate and their engagement in these activities. The acting out of different identities within the pole dancing class may, as Jessica describes, infer some freedom and relaxed attitudes to women's sexuality within the class, permitting them to construct their own sexualised identities temporarily in this environment. Yet, in the wider society, participating in pole dancing does not appear to have any real or significant bearing on women's ability to exercise choice or to challenge power relations, or on the ways in which women act or are perceived by others. Pole dancing does not seem to be a means of enabling women to gain in power in a social or political context, for example, and of course power may be experienced in women's lives in differing ways and will change in different situations.

Jessica's quotation above also seems to acknowledge that she believes women to be bound by social expectations around their sexuality. I will go on to argue in this thesis that pole dancing classes are seen by many of my respondents as a means of enabling women to construct themselves as feminine, heterosexual and sexy, suggesting that pole dancing can be used to enable women to construct a particular kind of sexualised identity. Whilst the message presented in advertising is that this is an active construction of identity and infers empowerment, the identities presented to women as options may be seen as limited and restrictive, bound in expectations around the ideal feminine and sexualised body, and, showing similarities with McRobbie's (2009) arguments, may raise further questions about the amount of free choice and agency that women really inhabit.

Some women stressed that the location of pole dancing classes was indicative of its respectability and a qualifier for their participation. Taken out of the lap dancing club, pole dancing is performed in the relatively safe arena of health and fitness club studios or purposely built pole dancing studios, well lit and modern arenas, in the suburbs of bigger cities or in trendy city centre areas, providing a sense of safety and respectability and seen as being performed in controlled and safe environments. Alongside attending weekly classes, pole dancing is also performed in the home and 20 of my respondents had purchased a pole for use at home on which they would practice regularly. Thus, women presented pole dancing as something that they can redefine and reclaim, for whilst the performance of pole dancing in the lap dancing club is conceptualised as something which is degrading and intended to arouse sexual interest, its removal from this setting and positioning in health and fitness clubs was said to indicate its position as a fitness class, and the performance of pole dancing in the home

suggests that this is something which can be domesticated. When I arrived at Jessica's home in order to carry out her interview, her 10 year old son opened the front door and led me into the living room where Jessica and her daughter were watching television. Jessica's living room was a small room, with a sofa pushed up against the wall at one side of the room, in front of the television, and the rest of the room existing as a pole studio, with a pole in the centre of the room and mirrors across one wall. Jessica stressed throughout her interview that there is 'nothing wrong' with pole dancing, and expressed surprise and frustration at anyone who would criticise it, describing these people as ill-informed. Certainly this is not the location of the sex industry, for being performed in people's homes pole dancing seems to become domesticated, and the existence of the pole in Jessica's family space suggests an acceptance into family life. She described that she sees the pole in a similar light to any other piece of exercise equipment and claimed that, were she to have an exercise bike or a treadmill in her living room, 'it would be the same thing'. A contradiction arose with Jessica's story, however, when she stated that she would not want her daughter to learn to pole dance until she turns 18, for she sees pole dancing as an 'adult only' activity. She told me that her daughter has had a go at pole dancing, and she has on occasions taught her some tricks on the pole, however, she would not want her daughter to go to a pole dancing class. When I questioned the contradiction with having a pole in her family space yet denying pole dancing to children, Jessica did not fully explain this but told me that she believed that pole dancing should only be taught to adults due to the continued stigma in society associated with pole dancing. Of course, as I mentioned earlier, Jessica described pole classes as enabling women to act out being a 'whore', 'desirable' and 'wanton' – perhaps these are aspects she does not deem acceptable or respectable for her daughter? The question over whether



children should pole dance also arose in my interview with Theresa, who has taught classes to children and deems this acceptable. Theresa argued that, 'if women claim that pole dancing is a fitness activity, then why should it not be taught to children?' She also stated that if children are not told that pole dancing exists in the sex industry, then there is no harm in teaching them this as a gymnastic practice:

I don't do anything...I don't do gyrating with children. So the children come in and it's about being strong, being fit, being able to climb, being able to go upside down, spinning, and...they all know how to dance. And there is a link with the strip industry but as long as we don't talk about that and we do it in a gym, then a lot of kids don't even know that that exists.

The idea that fitness pole dancing is domesticated and acceptable due to its location in health and fitness clubs and the home, however, does not account for the fact that some classes do take place in lap dancing clubs, for example, Hannah's class is held in a lap dancing club during the day when the club is closed to customers. The performative element of Hannah's class, where women are invited to perform for the rest of the class on the lap dancing club stage, raises questions about the true extent to which this can be described as 'fitness'. The fact that I was required to go onto the stage during Hannah's class, which I had not chosen to do, suggests that the concepts of choice and agency in pole dancing are not always clear cut. Whilst it should be noted that many of my other respondents deemed pole dancing as something they would never perform for other people, men or women, and I did not attend any other classes where we were asked to give a performance like this, Hannah's class suggests that pole dancing does, for some, continue to be viewed as something inherently performative in a way that other forms of fitness are not. Other forms of fitness are

not performed on a stage for an audience in this way. Surely this contradicts the claims of pole dancing as being removed from the sexualisation and objectification of women? For example, going to the gym is not typically marketed to women as a skill that they can show off or perform on a stage and where the participant imagines that they have an audience. This also demonstrates the complexities in the claim that pole dancing is empowering – my research found that no two classes were the same and thus pole dancing classes are experienced and ‘performed’ differently by different women.

### **I am not a Pole Dancer...**

The women in this study positioned pole dancing as something respectable often by describing it in comparison to other activities which were seen as ‘worse’ than fitness pole dancing, or less respectful, suggesting, for example, ‘it’s not like I’m taking my clothes off’ (Amy). Much of both the advertising of these classes and also the ways in which the women I interviewed describe pole dancing is by stressing what pole dancing *is not*. It is described as something unlike the ‘ordinary’ aerobics class, yet also unlike what is described as the ‘sleazy’ pole dancing which occurs in lap dancing clubs. Fitness pole dancing is instead positioned by my respondents as something which is separate from both of these spheres and which retains a superiority or distinction from both the ‘ordinary’ and the ‘sleaze’. In interviews women discussed how fitness pole dancing is more cool, fun and exciting and a better workout for the body than aerobics or going to the gym, but it also is nothing like the ‘inferior’ type of pole dancing which occurs in lap dancing clubs, which they believed to be associated with sleaze, low morals

and also where women are said to be working class, deviant, and the pole dancing itself is said to involve few physically challenging moves.

Lucy told me about her experience of going to lap dancing clubs on a night out. She claimed that she found lap dancing clubs to offer a 'different type' of pole dancing and:

*It was more your stereotypical, like, dirty dancing type thing, they did a few spins but apart from that they just bump and grinded on the floor, getting their boobs out and just, sort of, rubbing themselves up and down it, they weren't...I think one of them inverted but apart from that they weren't...they didn't really do much. I wouldn't call it pole dancing, I'd call it more like dancing with a pole. There is one, [a lap dancing club in her home town]...but that's really, really sleazy, we've been to that and it's just...they don't even really use the pole at all, they don't do any spins or anything, it's just, naked, and you're like 'oh no, I don't wanna look, put your clothes back on'. It's not really pole dancing.*

Describing what she can do as 'pole dancing' but that undertaken in lap dancing clubs as 'dancing with a pole' and 'it's not really pole dancing', Lucy distinguishes between the two and suggests that 'dancing with a pole' is a type of dancing which involves less skill and talent, during which the focus is on stripping rather than on showing any dancing skill or athleticism. This was also found by Catherine Roach, as I quoted in chapter one, who described few women who work in lap dancing clubs as being 'true mistresses of the pole' (2007: 31) by which she refers to an ability to perform athletic movements and tricks. By describing fitness pole dancing as 'real' pole dancing, Lucy rejected and dismissed any associations with lap dancing clubs and aimed to negate any suggestions that her hobby is in bad taste. Visiting a lap dancing club was also described by Lucy in a similar way. Ariel Levy (2005) described how women had come to believe that going to lap dancing clubs was a form of empowerment.

However, while Lucy told me that she has been to lap dancing clubs, the way in which she spoke indicated that she was trying to make clear to me that she does not really enjoy this and she presented it as only acceptable to go to a lap dancing club if you are with your female friends for 'a giggle' and to watch the pole dancing itself in order to compare the techniques used with those that she uses in her pole dancing classes, yet to look at the female bodies on display would be wrong. Hence she stated '...you're like 'oh no, I don't wanna look, put your clothes back on''. By doing this, Lucy seemed to believe that she can escape the taint of inferiority and stigma associated with being the 'type of person' that goes to a lap dancing club and retain a sense of superiority in that she has more 'class' than both the people that visit lap dancing clubs, and those that work in them.

Whilst Lucy above referred to her pole dancing as 'real' and described herself as participating in 'pole dancing' in comparison to strippers who are 'dancing with a pole', most of my other respondents used the reverse of this language in order to describe their hobby. Helen discussed in detail the terminology associated with pole dancing and described herself as not being a pole dancer, and told me that she takes offence when people refer to her as such, 'it's just dancing, it's just...I dance around a pole, that's the only similarity with the strip clubs. I dance around a pole, but I am not a pole dancer'. Similarly, Claire described that she sees the distinction between fitness pole dancing and pole dancing in lap dancing clubs as being about whether or not one performs for others, 'and it's never a 'pole fitness instructor', it's a 'pole dancer'. I'm not a pole dancer, I don't perform, I never perform for people. I only ever teach other people the moves'.

Helen and Claire seek here to present fitness pole dancing as normalised by referring to it, as stated in the quote by Helen above, as 'just dancing'. Similarly, some of my respondents referred to pole dancing as being a gymnastic activity. These types of statement not only seek to present pole dancing as something normal but also attempt to present it as ridiculous for people to see pole dancing as a degrading act – presenting that, 'it is just dancing / just gymnastics, so how can it be degrading?' The names of some pole dancing schools also suggest that they may be attempting, via the company name, to present a respectable image. In the UK, Pole Athletes, Polercise and Pole4Fitness seem to be named in order to highlight the fitness and sporting potential of pole classes, and Polenastics seems to be attempting to stress the links with gymnastics. Pole Play suggests that pole dancing is about fun for women, Pole Angels suggests an innocence and respectability of those involved, and others such as Vertical Dance, The Flying Studio and Butterfly Fitness have done away with the word 'pole' altogether.

Kate performs pole dancing at events including balls and dinner-dances, where she is hired to perform a pole routine on the stage. Kate has a young son, and she described in her interview how she had explained to him her occupation as a fitness pole dance instructor and as a performer at events by presenting it as something respectable, in comparison to working in a lap dancing club:

I explained to him, you know, 'this is what I don't do. What happens is people go into a club and men go there, and this is like, really not very nice men that go there, and what happens is they pay the women to take their clothes off.' And he went 'urrgh that's not very nice is it?' And he knows for a fact that that's not what I'm doing because he comes and watches my performances, and he sits in the audience and he like...one of them there was like two thousand people and they were all clapping and cheering and

none of the wolf whistling rubbish, and they were all very appreciative because it's dance.

Kate described that she performs pole dancing at 'really quite respectable events' and 'occasionally I get the odd like 'woooooo' as I come on stage, because they think I'm gonna do something else, and then I do like a dancey performance and it goes down well'. By contrasting this to the pole dancing which takes place in lap dancing clubs, Kate aims to demonstrate her own respectability, but by doing this emphasises her perception of the disrespectability of both strippers and their male customers.

In my interview with Hannah, she used the term 'Barbie' as a negative term to refer to the type of woman who pole dances in lap dancing clubs. Despite it being situated in a lap dancing club, Hannah told me that few of the women who attend her class wish to become strippers, and that most are 'ordinary women' who wish to pole dance for exercise and to feel 'a bit sexy'. Contrasting the women attending her classes with the women that she describes as the Barbie dolls who work in the club, Hannah presents a distaste for female strippers, stating that pole dancing for fitness and pole dancing for money are two very different things, populated by two very different types of women. Hannah depicts Barbie as beautiful but stupid, not having any other work options other than to be a stripper, reliant upon her looks, and having little personality. She described these women also as 'plastic Barbie dolls' and as often having had cosmetic surgery, naming three women who worked in the club as having had breast implants. Hannah's comparison of these women with the Barbie doll and suggestion that they are stupid may also imply that these women are seen as plastic and that all they are good for is taking their clothes on and off, like the doll. In comparison, Hannah

presents herself as being able to choose to pole dance yet also pursue an education and a career, thus she presents herself as having the agency and freedom to be able to choose to do this as a hobby. Hannah is a university student in her second year of studying Veterinary Science and hopes to one day run her own Veterinary Practice, and she tells me that many of the women who attend her class are also students.

McRobbie (2009) described Bridget Jones as an example of the post feminist character and in chapter two I described the *Sex and the City* characters in a similar way, as professional women presented as independent and liberated yet whose behaviours and the way they present themselves may be seen to play directly into male fantasies. Hannah's equation of pole dancing as something ordinary women or students like herself can do to feel 'a bit sexy' may be further example of this, as a way of maintaining and reinforcing the necessary femininity and heterosexuality which is prescribed to young women. Bell's (1987) discussion of sex workers is critical of women who work as strippers, suggesting that these women give men unrealistic expectations of their wives and girlfriends 'at home'. The availability now of pole dancing to women 'at home' (as described by Bell) or 'ordinary women' (as described by Hannah) to take a weekly pole dancing class and purchase a pole for use at home, however, now means that wives and girlfriends can learn the dancing skills and emulate the looks of these women. Hannah's interview indicates that she believes that she can escape the association with the Barbie doll as unintelligent and devoid of personality, by virtue of her active and visible participation in education and employment, presenting herself as having the agency to make choices about pole dancing. Yet, Hannah described pole dancing classes as offering women an opportunity to

temporarily pretend to be a stripper, and claimed that her classes teach women to be sexy. Thus, whilst critical of the female stripper, she also presents women as wishing to emulate and act out at being female strippers, if temporarily. She also, as I will go on to show in chapter five, displays an admiration for the look of women who work as strippers and the male attention that they induce and the way she presents herself and her desire to gain male attention and to be sexy thus shows similarities to McRobbie's post feminist character. McRobbie also describes a sexual contract for women, whereby as a result of second wave feminism women can pursue education, employment and become more visible in society, yet they must relinquish political identities and campaigning and seek to achieve a look which is consummately heterosexual and feminine. Hannah described herself as empowered and having agency, yet she pursued a look similar to that of the Barbie doll, describing this as the ideal female body and appearance.

The most common arguments that women gave when explaining the acceptability of pole dancing were that they do not perform for a male audience and that they do not perform for money. This was presented via a discourse of control, whereby women stated that they have control of their own decisions for they have chosen to take part in pole dancing, and they presented this in contrast to women who work as pole dancers in lap dancing clubs, stating that the monetary exchange in this situation is a factor which impacts upon whether or not pole dancing can be seen as empowering or disempowering, presenting being paid to pole dance as something very different and where a woman's choice and control is taken away. Respondents assumed that women who work in lap dancing clubs are often forced into this line of work and that control is in the hands of the male spectator,



thus women who pole dance in lap dancing clubs were generally understood as powerless and sexually objectified. In contrast to this, the women I interviewed presented themselves as having power and agency because they have chosen to pay for lessons, and they are exercising their own consumer choice. Strippers were described by many of my respondents as working class, uneducated, unintelligent and as having no other job options other than to pole dance in a lap dancing club for money. They were assumed to often be forced into this industry by men or by a sheer desperation for money, and as a result were described as lacking in self control, subordinated by men, and this was presented as something that my respondents would not want for themselves. Jessica described strippers as being:

Quite hard as a, as a person, I think you have to deal with a lot of personal rejection and maybe in some cases abuse, and maybe it gives you a hard edge. Because it's not a soft thing to do, it's quite hard, I think, because of, erm, the environments that currently exist, and everybody's perception of it.

The description of stripping for a living as a 'hard' thing to do by Jessica suggests that this is something unfeminine, and, likewise, Nicky describes that strippers are deemed as promiscuous and that women who work in the sex industry have to become 'the kind of person that can take the criticism, so it gives you a toughness, a hardness'. Women presented fitness pole dancing in contrast as something which is 'soft', as feminine, girly and fun. Anna positioned pole dancing as something that she has the freedom to choose to take part in, *contrasting herself to women who work in lap dancing clubs*:

It's really terrible that these girls feel they have to do this and take off all their clothes and wiggle around for men and all this to get money for

whatever reason and...you can't justify that. Unless they really like doing it which...going by what I've heard, it sounds terrible. It sounds like you have to pay the places to let you pole dance there, something like that, it sounds absolutely atrocious. And I wouldn't support girls being made to do that any more than I would support girls being made to be prostitutes or whatever. It's not that un-similar. So I would say, in terms of the feminist aspect, it's kind of, in a way taking it back, but taking it and making it different for yourself and doing it because you love it and because you want to do it. I think it's, personally, I think it's really quite liberating.

Anna thus presents stripping as something which is disempowering for many women on account of their being forced into working in the sex industry and on account of the assumed position of the (usually) male spectators. She presents pole dancing for herself, however, as something which can be liberating via a discourse of choice, implying that it is not degrading for those women like herself who are able to make a choice over their participation. Of course, describing women who work as lap dancers as not having a choice equates them to being passive, as having no agency and no power, yet previous research with female lap dancers, described in chapter two, for example that by Liepe-Levinson (2002), demonstrates the complexities of power, and suggests that lap dancers should not be understood as entirely powerless. Similarly, O'Connell Davison (1998a, 1998b) shows that prostitution is complex and multifaceted and that those involved in prostitution have differing experiences of their situation with not all women who work as prostitutes being forced into this line of work. It is clearly not as simple as to suggest that some women have power and agency, and others do not.

I got the sense, when talking to Anna and to other respondents also, that the idea that pole dancing is empowering is something which has been heavily internalised and which comes across as a type of 'mantra' which women have learnt and

repeated many times, and which is fed to them in the advertising of classes. Women used the term empowerment often without seeming to really know what the term means. This rhetoric is sold in the advertising of classes and the term is used like a defence mechanism in defending and explaining their participation. During our email communications before we first met, Jessica wrote:

A sensual woman is a confident woman who will get the most out of life...female sexual confidence leads to gender equality, a healthier lifestyle, a younger appearance and happier relationships.

Jessica repeated a similar statement to me several times during my interview with her and I got the impression that she had used this type of mantra many a time before. Certainly she has done a number of media interviews in her local area to promote her classes and also has appeared on national reality television programmes which she described as being a way to promote herself, and I imagine that the spiel she used when talking to me is similar to the ways in which she speaks about pole dancing when talking to the media. I participated in a pole dancing class with Jessica, and she taught me some quite physically challenging moves on the pole which required body strength and stamina and no doubt, if practiced regularly, would increase physical fitness considerably. However, whilst doing these moves and throughout the class Jessica encouraged me to pout and flick my hair whilst looking in the mirror, and she encouraged me to pretend that I was dancing for my partner. I couldn't help but wonder, when participating in Jessica's class, how learning to sexually arouse my partner by the performance of this sexualised dance would in turn lead to my gender equality, as she had described (in the quotation earlier) that it would.

When I asked my respondents if they had ever performed a pole dance for a partner, all 24 women stated that they had not. Several stated that their partners had never seen them pole dance. Some had shown their partner particular moves, in order to ask for help, to ask if they thought their positioning looked right, or to 'show off' when they had learnt a particular move, but they expressed surprise when I asked if they had ever performed for their partners in order to sexually arouse them. Lucy told me:

I think, cos I don't do any routines or anything like that I just don't...I don't see it like that, do you know what I mean? I don't see pole dancing like that myself. So...I mean, he helps me out a lot with moves, I'm always going 'oh is my leg right, is this right?'

Not performing for men was also presented in a discourse of choice and control. Women explained that they have chosen not to perform for men, and whilst they might have the skills and the ability to perform a pole dance which has potential to arouse their partner, they believe that they are exercising power by refusing to do this. In my interview with Claire, she suggested that this actually serves to arouse men even more, as 'when they find out that I don't actually pole dance for men they find it even hotter, because then obviously I'm not taking my clothes off for people but I still know how to do it'. This Claire saw as giving her power over men, and she described in her interview how pole dancing has changed her body for the better and made her more attractive to men and able to attract 'better looking' men than she ever could before. She described this as one of the positive outcomes of pole dancing. Of course, the attributing of success in pole dancing to being able to attract better looking men indicates that this may be not so much about empowerment but, for Claire, as being about increasing her own marketability to men, thus raising more complicated questions about the nature of

power. Similarly, whilst women are fed a message of empowerment through the advertising of classes, during classes a very conflicting message is then put forward by the teaching of attributes which are deemed purely as a turn on for men. Yes does this equate to empowerment in the eyes of men?

Advertising appears to present pole dancing classes to women in a particular way, targeting women as consumers and presenting them with a plethora of information on the supposed benefits of classes, suggesting that women should desire to be feminine, sexy, and to improve the body, and that pole dancing is a means by which to do this. As suggested by Appadurai:

These images of agency are increasingly distortions of a world of advertising so subtle that the consumer is consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where in fact he or she is at best a chooser. (1996: 42)

Thus, marketing may present us with certain options and although we feel that we exert power and agency by making consumption choices, our choices cannot always be seen as free choices for we are constrained and confined to the possible lifestyle choices that are made available to us. Similar to the television makeover shows described by McRobbie (2009), the advertising of pole classes suggests that women can transform the self through these types of class, and this builds upon the media pressures placed upon women to work at the self and to see the self as a project and argues that the self can be transformed via altering physical appearance.

In my interview with Helen she described how she had recently taken part in a pole dancing competition which was held in a bar and where many of the

spectators were men. She showed frustration that many of these men appeared to not appreciate the skill that she described the women performing in the competition as displaying and that men assumed that Helen and the other women performing were 'easy meat':

There were also lots of sleazy men there going 'oh yeah, she's gotta take her top off', 'oh look at that one' and that was quite annoying, well it wasn't annoying, it was just really pathetic, if I'm honest, because they just didn't understand. Because nobody took their top off and nobody did anything like that. And then one of them tried to talk to me at the end of the competition and just embarrassed himself.

(Kerry: What did he say?)

It was just a really stupid...there were, like, three of them, and they were all really drunk, and then one of them thought it would be really funny to, like, touch my arse, because I was wearing hotpants, and so I turned round to see what happened and it was like 'ha ha I touched your arse' and it was like 'I'm not gonna talk to you' so I just put my hand up and looked away and then he got really embarrassed cos his friends had all just seen that happen to him and they were like 'ha ha' and I just walked off. It just made them look really stupid, all of them, and I don't think I came off badly from that at all.

Helen went on to describe herself as being more powerful than the men at this competition by having the confidence to dismiss their advances and walk away, making them look 'stupid' and 'I guess there's something quite empowering about it as well, like, being more powerful than those stupid men at the pole dancing competition'. Describing the men as 'stupid' as well as 'sleazy' and 'pathetic' also attempts to assert feelings of power over these men. Similarly, a number of my respondents referred to reactions of what they described as 'sleazy' or 'perverted' men in bars and nightclubs, words associated with deviancy and disgust. Anna described men generally as only being interested in '...how little are you wearing, how big are your boobs and how prepared are you to swing your boobs in their face'. Of course, it should be noted that the fact that Helen persisted in talking

about her experience of the male reactions at this competition throughout her interview, raising the story again several times, may indicate that this experience may have affected her more than she lets on. Bloom (1998) writes of a woman in an interview telling a story of triumph against an employer who was fired for sexual harassment. The narrative describes herself as a powerful hero yet later in the interview when revisiting the story the respondent told how difficult and painful the experience had been. Bloom suggests that we cannot always take respondents' claims at face value and encourages researchers to steer interviews away from what she describes as the 'master narrative' to reveal more complex and hidden events and emotions. Showing similarity to Helen's story of empowerment against men at the pole dancing competition, Bloom's respondent may have felt powerful to some extent but power relations shift, are complex, and are interpreted differently. Whilst Helen described this experience as being about her having power, the men involved in this situation may have viewed the experience differently. Surely real empowerment would be that we lived in a social world where this man did not feel an entitlement to touch Helen's body without her permission, that none of the male spectators at the competition believed it appropriate to shout for women to take their tops off, and thus for Helen to have never been in this situation in the first place? This suggests that claims of power and empowerment may be seen as the master narrative (as described by Bloom) and should not always be taken at face value.

## **I am not a Feminist...**

My respondents expressed frustration with people who were critical of pole dancing, seeing criticisms as a negative aspect of their hobby. The women I spoke to described experiencing differing reactions to pole dancing from men and from other women. Men were seen as tending to find the idea of women pole dancing as sexually appealing and arousing. This was seen as frustrating as it meant that pole dancing was not taken seriously and women struggled to convince men that pole dancing was something physically challenging which they saw as a sport, yet they also suggested that this reaction was to be expected from men, and that men could not necessarily be blamed for their reactions. Women therefore seemed to make little attempt to directly challenge the views of men. There was also an element of satisfaction in being able to attract men, and I will show in chapter five how women constructed the body often in line with a perceived male gaze. Women described themselves, however, as being more hurt by the comments made by other women who were generally deemed to be more judgemental and critical than men and negative comments around pole dancing were said to be much stronger from other women as a result. As discussed in chapter two, it is argued that we live in a culture where women are said to be encouraged to judge one another, make comparisons with other women and that the media encourages it to be acceptable for women to criticise other women if they do not quite match up to the norm. Certainly, other women were deemed more likely to have a negative reaction and to call pole dancers names, and women told me stories of former female friends no longer wishing to associate with them due to their taking up pole dancing. Women seemed to deal with this by often turning the insult back onto the person who was condemning the



activity. Several of the women in my study claimed that negative reactions from other women were due to jealousy – stating that these women wished they too could pole dance due to pole dancers' increased marketability to men and by the toned and slim bodies which pole dancers achieve. April told me that she believes every woman would like to try pole dancing, even if they do not admit it:

I think they see it as a threat, because it's one of those things that every girl should and would love to try. Because it is...it's great, it's fun. But a lot of people wouldn't have the confidence to do it. So I think it's more of a jealousy thing that they're like, 'you've done it, I'd like to have a go at it', that kind of thing, because I guarantee that if you asked any woman in here *[indicating to people sitting at other tables in the pub in which the interview took place]* 'would you try it?' or 'at some point would you ever try it?' And most of them wouldn't ever do it but they would secretly like to.

There was a general assumption amongst the women I interviewed that to not agree with fitness pole dancing indicates that there is something wrong with you. Listing the many benefits which they associate with pole dancing including fun, fitness and making friends, my respondents like April above suggest an assumption that all 'normal' women would and should like to try pole dancing and that all 'normal' women would and should like to attain a similar body shape as those women who pole dance. Certainly, presenting pole dancing as something fun and enjoyable locates anyone who is against pole dancing as being, by implication, against the idea of women having fun and enjoying themselves. There was a perception also that criticism of pole dancing was indication of closed mindedness. When I asked Charlotte if there is a certain 'type' of woman who attends pole dancing classes, she responded that 'It's a person that's really not bigoted I think. Someone who is open minded, who is willing to give anything a go, and is a bit fun loving really, that's what it tends to be'.

Kate described how her sister had refused to speak to her since she began pole dancing and refused to let Kate see her two nieces or Kate's son see his cousins. Kate's sister was said to describe pole dancing as being akin to prostitution and had not spoken to Kate at a recent family wedding where they had seen each other for the first time in several years. Kate attributed her sister's reaction to pole dancing as being due to her having 'psychological problems' and questioned 'how can she criticise me for doing this when it's something that I get so much enjoyment from? You would think she would be happy for me wouldn't you?'

Another response to those who condemn pole dancing was to discuss the reactions of other people in terms of feminism. All respondents used the language of feminism in their discussions, in presenting pole dancing in terms of the 'girl power' message, describing it as empowering, liberating, and using a discourse of control and choice, presenting themselves as having agency and being entitled to make their own decisions, and contrasting themselves with others who they described as disempowered and with instructors presenting themselves as independent and enterprising selves. As I will discuss further in chapter five, women spoke of the empowerment that they gained via working the body and increasing in physical power and strength. Yet whilst women used this type of feminist language, very few explicitly used the terms 'feminism' or 'feminist'. Women showed an ambiguous and confused relationship with feminism, refusing to use the term 'feminist' as if this was a dirty word. Likewise, Betts (2010) claimed that 'many women will not even countenance the f word, being prepared to say only 'I wouldn't say I'm a feminist, but...''.

When I questioned women as to what they meant by empowerment, liberation, and how this fitted with the concept of feminism, generally my respondents were unable to define these terms and seemed to have a very complex and unclear picture as to what being a feminist meant. Most did not elaborate on their answers, changing the subject, making jokes about feminists and generally dismissing feminism as something that was not applicable to them or with which they associated themselves. For example, Fran joked that 'it means burning your bra and I couldn't do that, can you imagine not wearing a bra? I'd have back ache' suggesting an assumption that to be feminist means to be radical and right wing, and to require a rejection of femininity via the rejection of the bra.

Just two respondents, Mel and Kate, described themselves as feminists, and when I questioned them as to what this meant, both described feminism in terms of what Beasley's (1999) summary of feminism describes as a liberal feminist approach, a belief that men and women are equal and should be treated as so, yet neither elaborated in great detail upon their answers. Mel stated that she was a feminist because she believes women can and should be able to do anything that men can do and she told me a story about how she had set up a girls' football team when at school, not because she liked football but simply as a response to her two brothers who had said that football was unsuitable for girls, and she wished to prove them wrong. Mel was unable, however, to describe her definition of feminism in any more detail than this, and it is interesting that she participated in what is perceived as a historically masculine sport (Malcolm et al., 2000) when a teenager, yet as an adult she now participates in a physical activity almost exclusively seen as feminine.

Feminism was used by the majority of women in a negative light, and being feminist was actually seen as a way of explaining why someone may not understand pole dancing. As discussed in the previous section, the women I interviewed felt a need to disassociate themselves with female strippers, as they were seen to occupy an extreme version of female sexuality, deemed as promiscuous, deviant and dirty. Yet women saw feminism as occupying the other end of the spectrum, as anti-sex, prudish and uptight. This echoes media presentation of feminists as bra-burning and anti-sex and a cultural perception that all feminists are against the idea of women having any fun (Bulbeck, 1997; Brunsdon, 2000; Whelehan, 2000). Both the image of the female stripper and that of the feminist therefore went against women's perceptions of femininity and both were seen as unfeminine. Women thus felt a pressure to present themselves as occupying a very specific position somewhere in the middle of the spectrum – as representing a particular respectable image, not being promiscuous, yet at the same time not being against women having some fun, and wishing to construct themselves as feminine. Skeggs (1997) similarly described how the working class women in her study worked hard to construct a respectable heterosexual image, attempting to disassociate with working class promiscuity, but at the same time wishing to disassociate with what they saw as middle class feminism.

Being feminist was described by Helen as something associated with older women and no longer applicable to a new generation. Helen described her mother and grandmother as having 'all these feminist values' but regarded feminism as not something with which she needed to concern herself, as she had grown up in a society where women had equal rights in employment and education and, as a PhD student, Helen exercised this by pursuing an education

and setting high ambitions for herself. Helen also assumed that someone who was a feminist would automatically associate pole dancing as something degrading to women. She had not told her mother that she pole danced, for she assumed that, by virtue of her mother being a feminist, she would not understand. This suggests an assumption that feminism is always aligned to a radical approach, as being anti-sex, and Helen assumed that feminists would not be able to see that pole dancing was actually something fun for women. Likewise, Nicky described feminists as being older women and as being unlikely to understand pole dancing for they have different concepts of what is 'cool' and are out of touch with the younger generation, thus being more likely to be unaware of the popularity of pole dancing as a fitness class, associating it purely with the sex industry.

Whilst Baumgardner and Richards (2000) suggested that women could embrace both femininity and feminism, for the majority of my respondents a contradiction was presented between being a feminist and having a feminine identity. As discussed in chapter two, many theorists describe a view in popular culture that feminism and femininity are exclusive and binaristic (Brunsdon, 2000; Whelehan, 2000; Hinds and Stacey, 2001). Several respondents, indeed, described people who criticised pole dancing as being feminist and in turn assumed that this meant they rejected femininity or a heterosexual identity. Anna described her mother as disapproving of her pole dancing because she is 'straight laced and conservative' and Sarah accused her sister, who is critical of pole dancing, of being a 'weirdo' and a 'prude'. As chapter five will demonstrate, pole dancing is assumed to be something very much associated with femininity and women who pole dance are generally assumed to be feminine and girly by virtue of their participation.

Likewise, in chapter six, I show how pole dancing is seen to give women an identity as being 'one of the girls'. A disagreement with pole dancing was therefore presented by many respondents as a direct rejection of the values of femininity.

## **Summary**

This chapter has shown that the women in this study overwhelmingly show a desire to present themselves as middle class, 'normal' and respectable women in a similar way as did the working class women in Skeggs' research (1997), showing a deep concern with appearing respectable and with distinguishing themselves from other women perceived as less respectable, using the methods of impression management and presentation of the self (Goffman, 1959, 1963). Participation in fitness pole dancing was seen as having the potential to taint a respectable image because of a stigma associated with lap dancing as a profession and women made many attempts to locate themselves as different from those women who work as lap dancers. Also, feminism was often used as a negative term and generally presented by the women in this research as going against femininity and as a rejection of heterosexual values, whereas participation in fitness pole dancing was in contrast seen to invoke feelings of femininity and heterosexuality and presented as empowering for women as allowing them to feel good about themselves. Women, therefore, felt a pressure to disassociate with a feminist image, and thus felt a cultural requirement to maintain a very rigid and particular image which was not overly promiscuous or deviant (their image of the female stripper) but at the same time was not prudish or anti-sex (the image they

generally associated with feminism). Women used various techniques to present pole dancing for fitness as a respectable and acceptable hobby for middle class women and to present themselves as feminine. By denying that any harm is caused by their pole dancing, women present it as something fun, associated with fitness and which enables them to make friends, using the discourse which is fed to them in the advertising of classes. This discourse revolves around issues of choice and control in attempts to locate an individual choice to pole dance as empowering. Whilst I do not wish to take away from women the enjoyment that they clearly gain from attending pole classes, in this chapter I have presented a challenge to the description of pole dancing as empowering. The concept of empowerment is complex and its definition may be subjective, yet I have suggested that the extent to which pole dancing offers female empowerment is limited. Pole classes may offer enjoyment, the development of physical power, confidence in one's appearance, and the freedom to construct a particular kind of identity within the classes, yet outside of the pole dancing class, the extent to which women have changed or challenged power relations via attending the classes is limited. Attending pole dancing does not appear to give women authority or power in other aspects of their lives, and in fact seems in some circumstances to have a negative impact upon their social positioning, resulting in their being seen by men as 'easy meat', objectified and sexualised, and by other women as promiscuous and unfeminine, and thus requiring this need for impression management in order for women to present themselves as respectable.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Muscles, Strength and Risk...but still being Sexy, Feminine and**

### **Girly: Discussions of the Pole Dancing Body**

#### **Introduction**

Pole dancing is increasingly advertised as a fitness class and many classes now take place in gyms and health and fitness clubs up and down the country, positioned on their weekly timetables alongside classes in aerobics, step, pilates and yoga, for example. This chapter highlights my discussions with women about the ways in which they experience this as a fitness and exercise class, as something which they see as enabling them to transform and work their bodies in quite a unique way and which they describe as providing women with something quite different to other types of fitness. Discussions outlined in chapter two demonstrate a concept of the 'ideal' feminine body as depicted by Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* (1991) and Mary Rogers in *Barbie Culture* (1999), and contemporary feminist debates around this centre on whether or not women are able to actively choose their own bodies, or whether they are socialised to make the right choices around a body and a look which is most closely aligned to the perfect ideal so vigorously promoted by the media and linked to an image of feminine heterosexuality (McRobbie, 2009; Walter, 2010). Some writers argue that women have internalised a 'gaze', whereby women act upon a view of what men want and desire, turning themselves into objects of lust, to be looked at by men (Holland et al., 1998; Levy, 2005; Gill, 2007b). This chapter shows that the



women in this study in actuality demonstrate quite complex and contradictory relationships with their bodies. On the one hand they experience the body as a source of power and can be described as being actively engaged with their bodies, taking steps to maintain the body and demonstrating an ethic of hard work and dedication to transforming and working the body, a quite masculinised language of strength and power in conversations about muscles, and a masculinised discourse of risk taking in a celebration of bruising, pain and injury. Attending pole dancing classes holds great importance in this sense for the women in this study, and women spoke of experiencing themselves as physically competent beings and gained great enjoyment from their physical engagement, which provides them with some feelings of empowerment. Yet, on the other hand, these women persist in conforming to the norms of femininity via working on and controlling the body in line with a quite rigidly defined ideal, and whilst this might differ slightly from the ideal as presented by the Barbie doll or in *The Beauty Myth*, they nevertheless take steps to maintain what they personally believe to be attractive and they accept that they will be judged by others based upon their appearance and see their appearance, femininity and sexiness as key in attracting men. Whilst women regard muscles as desirable and indicative of strength and power for women, they do, however, place some limits on the amount of acceptable body muscle for women, showing concerns with becoming too muscular and being rejected by men, and their workouts are constructed with this constantly in mind. Thus, as implied in the title of this chapter, the women in this study embody a cultural contradiction between developing muscles, strength and a discourse of risk taking, but still wishing to be sexy, feminine and girlie.

## **Barbie Dolls: The Image of the Pole Dancer**

Chapter two outlined a number of approaches to feminist discussions of the female body and femininity. Wolf (1991) describes the idea of *The Beauty Myth* and McRobbie (2009) identifies a pressure which the media places upon young women to conform to this beauty myth via magazines and TV makeover shows which she suggests prescribe a very specific desirable classed and gendered identity to women, subjecting women to critique and ridicule if they do not quite match up to the norm. Wolf, (1991), McRobbie (2009) and Banyard (2010) discuss the dangers this poses as these pressures leave women confused, frustrated and angry, resulting in women subjecting themselves to constant critique and surveillance and it is argued that this has resulted in a range of eating disorders and 'illegible rage' (McRobbie, 2009). In a culture where young women are argued to be under pressure to be sexy, raunchy and sexually available to men (Levy, 2005; Walter, 2010) the very nature of the activity that the women in this research participate in, pole dancing, conjures up clear images of a specific type of female body, toned, tanned, large breasted, waxed and groomed to perfection, an image which is aligned with popular ideas around women who work in the sex industry and is usually promoted in the media depictions of pole dancers, seen in films, TV programmes, and demonstrated in the bodies of the female celebrities who are said to pole dance for fitness – actresses Jennifer Aniston and Teri Hatcher, and glamour model and pin up Pamela Anderson, for example. The image of the female body as depicted in these widely promoted images provides an image in popular culture of the type of woman who goes to a pole dancing class. I have witnessed reactions when telling male colleagues or acquaintances about my research topic that assume the women I interviewed or

met in classes would fit a type of stereotypical look, as being physically attractive and desirable. A number of times I have been asked by men 'have you got any pictures?' or 'can you introduce me to any of them?' My respondents agreed that there is a popular image of the type of woman who goes to a pole dancing class. Lucy told me:

I think people think that it's gonna be all, like, Barbie dolls, all long blondes. I mean, there are a couple of girls like that, there's one girl, she's a topless model for, like Zoo magazine and stuff, and she goes.

Talk of women who pole dance as being assumed to look like Barbie dolls was common amongst my respondents. In *Barbie Culture*, Mary Rogers (1999) describes the Barbie doll as symbolising the look of the ideal woman and states that many women work towards and try to emulate the ideal image that the doll represents. This appears to be the popular image presented in society as ideal and portrayed in lads' magazines and tabloid newspapers, epitomised by the image of the slim, toned, blonde glamour model. Theresa also described how women signed up to take part in her pole dancing classes believing that they would emerge from class with a 'slim Barbie doll figure'. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Hannah, however, did not describe women who take pole classes in this way, but instead described those women who work as strippers as being 'Barbies', using this in part as a negative expression, explaining that she saw strippers as beautiful, sexy and desirable to men, but also as being plastic, empty headed, like a doll, with no job options other than to strip for a living. She presented herself as different to this and as liberated by her 'choice' to pole dance yet to still pursue education and a career. As Hannah's class was held in a lap dancing club, she came across female strippers regularly, as they arrived for work

at the time Hannah's class was finishing and she sometimes spoke to them in the changing room. Throughout her interview, Hannah put herself in constant comparison to these women both in terms of appearance (describing strippers as having the advantage) and intellect (describing herself as more intelligent). My interview with Hannah took place in the changing room of the lap dancing club prior to her class and for part of the interview she was getting changed, straightening her hair and applying makeup as she spoke to me. She dressed in a black leotard with the side panels cut out to show the sides of her waist, a pink push-up bra which peeped out from under the leotard, pink leg warmers and black perspex shoes which had a heel of about six inches. Hannah's outfit seemed to be consistent with what the women who work in the club might wear, and indeed, she described her shoes as stripper shoes, telling me that all the women in the class wear them, as well as the women who work in the club. I decided to stay and take part in Hannah's class and sure enough, I was the only woman who had bare feet, the others all wearing stripper shoes and many were in hot pants and bikini tops or similar leotards to Hannah's. Describing the women who work in the lap dancing club as Barbie did not mean that Hannah did not admire the look of these women. She displayed jealousy of the male attention that she saw these women as getting, and whilst she stated 'I am not a Barbie', which was equated to intelligence and personality, Hannah's dress and appearance attempted to emulate the look of these women. Hannah told me that she wished she were a bit thinner, complaining of cellulite on her thighs and desiring in particular to look like one of the women, Jane, who worked in the club and who she had seen performing on stage before:

I mean, one of the girls is called Jane and she's like, you know when girls say 'the ideal figure' and you think of the Barbie look...it's like, all skinny and pretty and all...and Jane, she looks almost like Baby out of *Dirty Dancing* but sexier. So it's like, she goes on stage and all the lads are like 'wow, mint' and it's like 'oh fuck'. She gets on stage and all the men crowd round her and you're sat there going 'Hello? You were talking to me?'

Hannah's interview thus indicates that she feels she can escape negative comparisons to the Barbie doll via her intellect and pursuit of education, yet she works her body and persists in seeking a look which corresponds with that of female strippers, or those women she terms as Barbie, a look which she deems to be consummately heterosexual and feminine and what she believes men want and desire.

Whilst talk of the Barbie doll figure was common and seen as an ideal, generally, women described there actually being a variety of shapes, sizes and levels of attractiveness in women who attend pole classes. Fran told me:

When I turned up I thought it were just gonna be like loads of beautiful blonde birds, you know, really, really thin, but, you know, those types of people, but it wasn't. There were loads of different ages, different sizes there, people wanting just, you know, to do it for exercise.

Most of the instructors that I interviewed in particular were keen to tell me that pole dancing is open to all women, regardless of shape or size, and is suitable for everyone. This at times, however, seemed more like an advertising spiel to promote their classes to me, a form of impression management, to ensure that their classes did not come across as discriminatory. Also, whilst many respondents claimed pole dancing is for 'all women' and 'ordinary women', my own observations suggest that, whilst the women that pole dance may not fit so rigidly with society's image of the 'ideal' or 'perfect' woman as depicted in the

media, they do nevertheless have a common body type. Throughout the course of my research I met very few, if any, women who could be described as overweight, and most seemed to be very trim and toned. Most women had exercised before, with many having done aerobics or dance classes. As described by Sarah in her interview, most fitness pole dancers appear to be 'fit females in their twenties'. I would argue therefore that the majority of women in this research could be described as closer to the image of the ideal woman perpetuated by *The Beauty Myth*, or depicted by the Barbie doll, than not.

The popular image in society is of pole dancing as stereotypically feminine and as participated in by women. It was described as a 'girlie thing' (by both Fran and Jessica), 'it's about being a girl' (by Natalie), and women saw pole dancing as helping to demonstrate their femininity. Amy told me 'it makes me feel feminine in like a, sexually attractive to men way...this definitely makes you feel female, like men are looking, that kind of thing' and Jessica referred to pole dancing as being explicitly and consummately feminine, describing pole dancing as simply being about 'women getting together and having some fun. And that's what it's about. It's a real girlie thing'. Claire explained how her participation in this renders her feminine, 'girlie' and desirable almost automatically, and described men as being more turned on by her than by a female stripper, as 'when they find out that I don't actually pole dance for men they find it even hotter, because then obviously I'm not taking my clothes off for people but I still know how to do it'. Claire claimed that she would never consider performing a pole dance for a partner but that being able to tell men that she knows how to pole dance is a way to attract men and in talking about her ex-boyfriend she told me that '...for him to be going out with an older lady who was a pole fitness instructor he thought that all his

Christmas had come at once'. Claire depicts herself here as having power and control over men, an ability to turn men on, and she described her ex-boyfriends' perception that she was sexually competent and experienced due to her being older than him and her ability to pole dance. She described men's reactions as a positive outcome to pole dancing, and this shows correspondence with Theberge's (1987) description of women's goals for attending fitness classes as being for women to increase their sexual attractiveness and appeal. Of course, whilst Claire seemed to present this as her having a form of power over men, it could be questioned whether this is reinforcing male power by playing directly into the hands of male desires. Amy told me that pole dancing makes 'sex objects' out of women, but stated that she is happy with this status and pleased if people think that she is sexy:

I know it does make sex objects out of women but maybe women want to be sexy. I want to be sexy. I like people thinking that I'm sexy. That's good to me, I think, well, I don't want people to think 'Oh my God, she's not very sexy', that would be rubbish.

When I asked Amy why it would be so bad to not be seen as sexy, she told me that 'every woman wants to be sexy...it's nature to want people to find you sexy and attractive'. As discussed in chapter two, Ariel Levy (2005) argues that women have been persuaded that they must be sexy and raunchy at all times. Likewise, Walter (2010) states that our culture tells women that sexual allure is the only marker of success for women. Certainly, Amy's quote above suggests that she believes people thinking she is sexy to be indication of her success and she told me that she goes on a night out with friends to a particular nightclub every week where she would spend most of the evening dancing on the pole which is situated on the stage, and 'if you haven't got an audience, you're like, 'oh, what am I doing

wrong?' But as soon as someone starts watching you kind of feel 'this is going better'. She described wanting to be looked at, needing to be the centre of attention, and 'I always go out in, like, a bra and a belt, like, 'yeah, look at me!'" and told me that taking up pole dancing had enabled her to feel sexy and more confident. I interviewed Amy in the kitchen of the home she rents with her boyfriend and at one point he entered the room to make a drink. I asked him what he thought of Amy pole dancing. I should note that he did not seem to take this question seriously, perhaps because Amy was present when I asked him. He complained that Amy had never performed a private dance for him, joking that this was not fair, and asking her in front of me 'why not, anyway?' to which she laughed but did not respond and I found this a little awkward. However, he then went on to tell me that he had seen Amy dancing on the stage with her friends in the nightclub, and that he felt proud that Amy was getting so much attention from other men in the club, seeing this as 'proof' that his girlfriend was attractive. Amy laughed at this and seemed to regard this as a compliment. However, I wondered why Amy's boyfriend needed confirmation from other men that his girlfriend was attractive, and I also wondered why Amy felt the need to dance on the stage in order to gain validation herself from other men. Under the circumstances it did not seem appropriate to explore this further with Amy's boyfriend – I was present to interview Amy and he had not expected to be asked any interview questions, and he left the room after a couple of minutes. This does demonstrate, however, questions around the society we live in which suggests that female attractiveness is determined by the validation and approval from others, and the perception of success as being about meeting of the approval of a male gaze.



Whilst Amy did describe pole dancing classes as being about fitness, her story suggests that, for her, there is a very fine line between pole dancing being a fitness class and as something which teaches women to be sexy. As was also described by Hayley, pole dancing is seen as enabling women to 'discover' themselves as feminine:

You see women, when they come to classes, it's like they are learning a new way of looking at themselves...they are learning to be feminine, to be sexy, to be happy with the way they look...it's really nice to see...they are becoming more confident in their skin...and it's really...it's a really nice feeling, that I've helped them feel like that.

In this way pole dancing is presented almost like a type of self-help class which teaches women to be feminine and sexy. This concurs with arguments around impression management in which the classes can be seen to teach women the skills to construct and manage their bodies and their sexuality in a particular way which is said to meet the approval of others. For Amy, this was about teaching her body confidence, and what she perceived as sexiness, which she puts to the test by then dancing on the pole in a nightclub hoping for the approval of men, and for Hayley as an instructor she described her job as about teaching women to be feminine. In line with the TV makeover style shows that McRobbie (2009) discusses, for Amy and Hayley these types of class appear to teach women a very specific way of looking and being, which correlates with a specific feminine and heterosexual 'Barbie doll' image and specifically suggest that pole dancing is promoted as allowing women to explore, develop and construct femininity.

Other women, however, described pole dancing as first and foremost a fitness class. However, the association of pole dancing in popular culture with this

specific image of feminine sexuality, and an acceptance by some women like Amy that pole dancing makes women into sex objects, seems to result in the claims by participants that pole dancing is to be seen as fitness, and by some that it can be described as a sport, being ridiculed and not taken seriously in wider society. Several women expressed frustration that people simply did not accept that pole dancing could possibly be a physically challenging workout. This I can relate to as I too assumed that pole dancing would not challenge me physically before I first went to a class. I have also witnessed these reactions in others when telling them about my research. I have lost count of the number of times I have explained the topic of my PhD and people who have not heard of these types of class before have assumed that the research is being conducted in a lap dancing club with female strippers, however many times I try to explain otherwise, and refused to believe that this is being taught in a fitness environment. Also, even in those who have heard of the classes, there is generally a disbelief that they could be physically challenging. I recall telling a friend about a petition circulating around the pole dancing community, lobbying for pole dancing to be an event in the 2012 London Olympic Games, and my friend laughed out loud at the suggestion. Of course there was a time prior to this research when I too would have laughed at the thought of pole dancing being in the Olympics. Whilst I can clearly see why pole dancing is unlikely, due to the perceptions of it in popular culture, to be accepted as a sport and performed competitively in the Olympic Games (certainly not any time in the near future), having attended classes I can now see the links and comparisons with gymnastics and the physical skill involved in performing some of the most advanced moves, and I can now understand to some extent the logic behind women attempting to get this accepted formally as a sport.

Theresa teaches pole dancing classes in the health and fitness club that she runs with her husband. She preferred to describe herself as a 'fitness instructor' as opposed to a 'pole dancing instructor', describing pole dancing as simply another way to keep fit, using the pole as a prop, and comparing pole dancing with gymnastics. She described the major difference between pole dancing and gymnastics as being the positioning of the pole. 'And if I had a horizontal bar I'd be a gymnast. So why because it's vertical am I not?' Theresa disputed the links between fitness pole dancing and the pole dancing which takes place in lap dancing clubs, claiming the classes she teaches are much more physically challenging than anything a female stripper could do and:

I've even had dancers from the clubs come in and leaving cos they can't keep up with us. A few times they've come in and they've come in really full of themselves, and they've left on their knees. And I've just gone 'right, do this, do this, do this' and I've gone through all the moves, and they've come in really full of themselves thinking 'what can you teach me?' and they can't keep up physically cos they're not as fit. Cos we're teaching a fitness class. I'm not teaching people to lap dance, I'm teaching people to get fit.

Theresa claimed that one of the reasons pole dancing classes are so popular is due to the perception that this is a type of exercise which is feminine, sexy and deemed appropriate for women's bodies. She discussed the perceptions within popular culture of certain sports and physical activities being more appropriate for men, others for women. Certainly feminist researchers have frequently discussed the stereotypes around men and women in sport and suggested that the culture of sport is deeply rooted in ideologies of masculinity and femininity (Flintoff, 1993; Humberstone, 2002; Scraton and Flintoff, 2002). Kay (2003) argues that sport serves to reinforce the key assumptions of the basic gender ideology that women are less powerful and inferior. Humberstone (2002: 60) suggests that this is

emphasised in sport partly through derogatory put downs such as 'you throw like a girl'.

It is suggested that there is a dominant view of men as tough, strong, aggressive, independent and brave, alongside the corresponding view of women as weak, passive, dependent and vulnerable (Kay, 2003). Historically, competitive contact sports such as football and rugby have been regarded as male sports, and men have also identified more strongly with being sports fans than women (Crawford, 2003, 2004). Generally fitness classes including aerobics are said to be perceived as more feminine and suitable for women (Theberge 1987; Markula, 1995, 2003) and Dworkin's (2003) research shows that women who went to the gym preferred to work out on cardiovascular equipment rather than lifting weights as this was deemed more appropriately feminine, and women were concerned about becoming too muscular, telling stories of failed relationships as men had lost romantic interest in women if they had out-performed them athletically, were stronger or were in better shape than them.

Burstyn's discussion of gender identity and practices in *The Rites of Men* (1999) focuses on the ways in which the physical content of sports have been gendered and she argues that the celebration of 'higher, faster, stronger', the words of the Olympic motto, are a masculinist motto, 'for it condenses within its ideal bodies and activities the technomorphism of industrial capitalism (the ideal of the machine) and the biomorphism of maleness (the muscular superiority of males)' (1999: pp. 22-23). Burstyn also describes an image of 'heroic masculinity', an image of physical bravery and muscularity, associated with male heroes in films, soldiers and war heroes, who symbolise energy, strength and power. Burstyn

talks also of a comparison between the images of men displayed in both pornography and sport, where there is a common preoccupation with men's physical size, staying power and a common image of rough, aggressive and sexually charged athletes. She argues that sport is an arena where masculinity is spoken about most comprehensively, and contrasts these images of male athletes with an image of women in sport as associated with thinness and the likelihood of female athletes suffering from eating disorders, 'At the gender poles, the ideal athleticised body for males is a big power machine; for women it is the small anorexic flower' (Burstyn, 1999: 161). In my interview with Theresa, she described these popular images as influencing women's reluctance to lift weights in the gym:

When you get a woman in the gym she's going 'oh my back's getting bigger, I'll look like a body builder'....you know, and they'll look at themselves and think they're turning into this muscular woman that they've seen on TV, you know, they've seen these body builders. And they associate lifting weights with being a body builder. They associate pole dancing with slim Barbie doll figures. So they associate that...to me is where it comes from. And they look at me and they think they're gonna look like me. They don't think I get this from the gym, they think I get this from the pole dancing. I know it's a combination of the two, but they don't associate that...I've never had anybody say to me 'my arms...I can't come pole dancing anymore because my arms are too big' but I've had people go 'oh I can't lift weights anymore because my arms are getting too big' so...it's a different association definitely.

Most women indicated that because they saw classes as feminine and suitable for women, they did not see pole dancing as an activity suitable for men and it was in contradiction with masculinity. Of men pole dancing, Lucy stated:

They've got the strength to pole dance but they've just not got the grace, to point their toes and stuff, and I just think it's not really their kind of thing anyway. It's definitely seen as a women's thing, I think, and people probably just assume that the classes are women only.

Sarah claimed:

It's quite feminine dancing, and I don't think they'd like it. You know, maybe somebody gay might like it. Without sounding rude, but maybe if somebody gay were to turn up and do it, and they might want to do the feminine moves, but I think a bloke wouldn't enjoy.

Like Sarah and Lucy, several others suggested that men would not wish to pole dance anyway, suggesting that a male pole dancer's sexuality would be called into question and that it is something that would only be socially acceptable for homosexual men. In general then, pole dancing is an activity often associated in popular culture with an image of femininity, heterosexuality, the Barbie doll body type, and being desirable and attractive to men, as well as suitable physically for women in that it is not associated with the aggression and masculinity as might be associated with contact or competitive sports or with weight lifting in the gym, and it follows that this is regarded as something almost exclusively feminine and female. The women in this research appear to be reproducing this dominant image, even when questioning it. The next sections go on to show, however, that my interviews also highlight some much more subjective aspects of women's participation in pole dancing, such as improved physicality and bodily empowerment, whereby all of my respondents spoke of increased muscular strength as a positive aspect of pole dancing, described taking risks and suffering bruises and injuries, and women were actively engaged with their bodies and they demonstrated an ethic of hard work and dedication to improving their skill and ability at pole dancing.

## **Just Do It: The Ethic of the Fitness Pole Dancer**

All women that I interviewed agreed that being good at pole dancing requires dedication and the 'correct' attitude, and they stressed a need to practice pole dancing regularly. A number of women told me that in order to progress it is necessary to buy a pole to practice regularly at home. Most of the women I interviewed attended weekly classes but also owned their own pole at home, and in observations at classes women talked about buying their own poles, often asking the instructor for advice on where to buy one. As well as going to a class once a week, Helen had bought a pole which she had put up in her bedroom, and she practices what she has learnt in lessons regularly. She also goes to the gym twice a week and has constructed her workout in the gym with the aim to improve her performance at pole dancing. Once per week she lifts weights in order to build strength in her arms, with the aim being to improve her strength and thus her ability to do inverted positions when pole dancing, and the other session each week is focused purely on cardiovascular activity, for example, running on the treadmill, in order to improve her stamina to enable her to pole dance for longer. Not only are Helen's gym sessions motivated by improving her performance on the pole, but she also practices the splits, in order to improve her flexibility for pole dancing, and does daily hand exercises to develop the strength in her hands to improve her grip on the pole. Helen described herself as 'obsessed' with improving her ability at pole dancing. Her interview showed that she sees her body as something which she can adapt and change and with regular practice and commitment, she can achieve her goals. She desired to compete at pole dancing and had recently taken part in her first pole dancing competition where she came fourth. She saw regular practice as essential to improving her chances

of winning. Claire also told me that pole dancing takes dedication and commitment:

but, like, I'll say again and I'll keep on saying, you get out of it what you put into it, so if you come to a class and then you don't come for another couple of weeks and then you come for a couple of classes and you're like 'oh I can't get it', it's like 'well you won't', because if you went to the gym for a day and then you didn't go again for a couple of weeks and then you went for a couple of days, you're not gonna see the difference are you? Because its training and it is an exercise that you need to keep up and you need to keep coming to otherwise you won't get anything out of it.

Becoming a good pole dancer was suggested to require acceptance of what I describe as the 'fitness pole dancer ethic', which requires control, dedication, and perseverance. Having worked as a fitness instructor for several years I can say that I have never met a group of women attending any other type of fitness class who showed so much dedication and commitment to working at and improving the body and progressing and developing in skill. The women I interviewed were all of different abilities at pole dancing, some practiced daily, and some practiced less often, but all spoke of pole dancing as requiring commitment in order to improve. Claire described a need to keep practicing, keep working the body and, using the slogan associated with the advertising of the sports brand Nike, stated that women should 'just do it':

So just do it, just get over it and do it, cos that's how you progress, cos once you've done it once you can do it a thousand times, it's just that first time, it's just feeling what it's gonna feel like to do a move. A lot of pole dancing is what the move feels like, you can feel when you're doing it wrong or when you're doing it right. But you just have to do it that one time to just know that you can do it.

The 'just do it' slogan has been used in many advertising campaigns for the sports brand Nike, including those using celebrity athletes and professional sports



teams. Whether Claire consciously intended to quote the Nike slogan I am unsure, however, I believe that the meaning behind what she is saying in this quotation corresponds directly with that of the 'just do it' message promoted by Nike. Helstein's (2003) assessment of Nike advertisements aimed at women suggests that the slogan encourages a 'can do' attitude, capturing a philosophy of perseverance and hard work. She describes that the phrase was coined in the 1980s at the time of the fitness and aerobic boom, to advertise running and aerobic trainers, presenting exercise and perseverance at exercise as something which everyone should be doing and that, if you wanted to look 'cool', you should be doing it in Nike trainers. Helstein showed that the theme of athletic excellence is emphasised via endorsement by successful female athletes, and the Nike campaign indicates that, by following the prescriptions of the discourse of working the body, eating healthy food, exercising and so on, the female athlete would undergo self transformation and growth. Feminist debates suggest that the body in popular culture is presented as a piece of clay which can be moulded and transformed (Wolf, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Rogers, 1999) and in *Unbearable Weight*, Bordo (1993), in a similar way to Helstein's discussion of the message promoted by Nike, suggests that advertising for gyms and fitness classes often tells us that we can choose our own bodies. Certainly advertising for fitness pole dancing classes suggests that the body can be changed through pole dancing, claiming that participants can tone the body and strip fat. Most women that I interviewed had been motivated by these kinds of claims, initially trying pole dancing, in part, due to a desire to change their bodies. As already mentioned, advertisements for classes often list the names of female celebrities who are said to also take classes and several respondents were motivated by a desire to transform their bodies to look like these women. Amy described how she had been motivated to

try pole dancing from reading about it in magazines and Maria told me that her motivation had been reading a magazine article which described the actress Teri Hatcher as taking pole dancing classes to keep in shape. In the US TV series *Desperate Housewives*, Teri Hatcher plays the character Susan, who in a scene aired in January 2010 (season 6, episode 12), performs a pole dance in a lap dancing club in front of her husband Mike. There were numerous stories and pictures of this scene in the media, and alongside a set of pictures the *Daily Mail* described that 'she may be a few years off turning 50 but Teri Hatcher still has the body of a woman half her age as these pictures prove' (Littlejohn, 2010). Hatcher was said to have been taking pole dancing classes regularly for several years as well as in preparation for this scene for the TV series.

In chapter two I discussed research which argued that women's magazines implicitly suggest that women should strive to create the perfect body, presenting advice and guidance as to how to make oneself as attractive as possible to the opposite sex (Winship, 1987; Wolf, 1991; Kay, 1999; McRobbie, 2009). Certainly a media celebration of the looks of celebrities like Teri Hatcher seems to emphasise that women should strive to look as good as possible, and the quote above indicates that this is even more important as women get older. Consistent with Featherstone (1991), who argues that body maintenance has become an obsession of consumer culture, it can be argued that media articles like this encourage women to believe that their body will let them down if they withdraw from constant work and scrutiny. In my interview with Maria, the media celebration of Teri Hatcher's looks had encouraged her to pole dance, hoping that she too could look as good by attending pole dancing lessons. Women talked of pole dancing as a method of improving and perfecting the body and all 24 of my

respondents claimed to have witnessed some positive changes to their body since taking up pole dancing. Claire told me 'I'm proud of my body, I am. I don't think I've got, like, the best body in the world, but I know that I work hard to get it as it is and it is all through pole dancing'. Several pointed out to me the changes in their bodies, showing me various body parts in interviews and explaining the changes that had occurred. When I interviewed Helen, she had been attending classes for about six months and claimed that during this short space of time some quite dramatic changes to her body had occurred:

My arms have completely changed shape, I've got muscle there. I've never had muscle there. My legs have changed shape, I used to not...I mean, I never was disappointed with my body as such, but I had, sort of, chunky legs as such, which I didn't like and I used to think I had to cover my legs up. And...no, I don't think that now, my legs are fine, there's muscle definition in my legs now for the first time which is amazing, and I've got thinner at the top of my legs as well, which is amazing.

Women were proud of the changes in their bodies and cited the changes as an achievement on their part. It was felt that working out and changing the body and achieving pole dancing moves is a sign that they have discipline and willpower, and Claire suggested that others who do not put in as much time and effort can be described as being lazy. Claire described herself as encouraging the women who attend her classes to push themselves and suggesting to women that, if they really want to change their bodies, they must be committed to working hard. She expressed frustration when women were reluctant to try new moves on the pole or when she did not feel that women were making enough effort. Claire seemed to see the body as something which can be transformed if women put their minds to it and if they work hard. This indicates, however, an assumption that all women must want to change their bodies, to tone up and lose weight, assuming that all

women have internalised the feminine ideal, and live by the ideology which says that women should strive to improve and work at their bodies in order to appear as attractive as possible. Theresa, in her interview, described a woman who had criticised her for doing pole dancing as being 'some girl walking past eating a hot dog who is obviously five stone overweight'. This statement acts to demonstrate a view that women who do not push and work their bodies and who are overweight may be seen as disgusting and greedy, as well as serving to condemn those who do not 'understand' fitness pole dancing.

Kirk (1992, 2002) suggests that people actively try to use their body to portray a certain image or identity, and, in general, slender bodies are looked upon favourably as they are considered to signify health, self control and sexual attractiveness, whilst fatness is regarded with horror, and as signifying greed and a lack of self control. Both Claire and Theresa's interviews indicated that they believe all women should strive to work their bodies and failing to do this or being overweight was looked upon with distaste. Likewise Goffman's (1959, 1963) influential work on stigma suggests that physical imperfections can be stigmatised and 'the presentation of self' is seen as signifying the real character of individuals. More recent sociologists have suggested that obesity is not only stigmatised but also seen as deviant – those people who are obese fail to fit into the 'norm' of slimness, for they are seen as lacking self control and being lazy, and are viewed with disgust (Malson, 1998; Frost, 2001). Certainly Wolf (1991) suggested that we are presented with an image that if women do not work at their bodies then there must be something wrong with their willpower. Bordo (1993) suggests that working out is now seen as a glamorous and desirable activity, as a symbol of correct attitude, meaning that one cares about oneself and how one appears to

others. Bordo argues that social class operates within this, for fat is perceived as indicative of laziness, lack of discipline, unwillingness to conform and an absence of the managerial qualities of self regulation and control which, according to the dominant ideology, confer upward mobility (Bourdieu, 1980, 1984, 1986). This type of message can be seen in films such as *Flashdance*, where the ability of the lead character to prune and work the body, showing a commitment to weight loss and exercise, is portrayed as a clear symbol of successful upward aspiration and something which the audience is encouraged to admire. Thus, Bordo argues that the goal is within the self to persevere and self manage the body in order to be successful. This was very much the image presented in particular in my interviews with Claire and Theresa above, and demonstrates how women engage with a 'project' of the self, scrutinising themselves and blaming individuals who do not do the same.

In my interview with Hannah, she explained the reasons why she was applying makeup and straightening her hair in preparation for teaching her pole dancing class. As I earlier discussed, Hannah expressed a wish to look like the female stripper, who she described as occupying an ideal Barbie doll look. She described that she felt a pressure to look this way which she saw as placed upon her by the women who attend the pole dancing classes that she teaches:

Basically it's a case of I know I have to look good to show people...OK I know I don't look like a Barbie doll and I don't look brilliant but I look, or I hope, I try and look good enough so that they'll want to learn off me and they'll want to, you know, spend the time and effort to do it...because, like, you're looking at the instructor, in any class, like aerobics or anything, and the goal is to look like them, they're the expert, you want to be like them.

Hannah had also previously performed in a local pole dancing competition and told me that appearance is important in pole dancing competitions, as women are judged upon their appearance and clothing, as well as pole dancing skill. Indeed, the Miss Pole Dance UK competition awards competitors in the categories of not only 'overall winner', 'best entertainer' and 'best pole tricks', but also 'best outfit'. If pole dancing is about fitness, then why are women judged upon what they are wearing? This seems to have taught Hannah that physical fitness is closely aligned to physical appearance and would seem to present a message that one cannot be physically fit unless they look good and are made up in a certain way.

The theory of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975; Holland et al., 1998; Gill, 2007b) suggests that women learn to discipline their bodies in line with what men want and desire. As I quoted in chapter two, Samantha Holland's (2010) assessment of pole dancing argued that pole classes were not about the male gaze as they are not performed for men and men are not present in classes. Yet I have found evidence to suggest that the gaze is more complicated than this. There were no men present in Hannah's classes, yet she spent the majority of our one hour interview in the changing rooms prior to teaching her class applying makeup, straightening her hair and getting changed, explaining to me that it was other women that she was grooming herself for, constructing herself into what she perceived as the ideal that these women expect to see in their pole dancing instructor as well as what is expected from women in the judging of pole dancing competitions. In line with popular views on women who pole dance as discussed earlier, this was a very overtly feminine and sexualised appearance, epitomised by the Barbie doll, and Hannah attempts to emulate the women who work as strippers whose bodies she depicts as ideal. It is argued by Janet Holland et al.

(1998) that the gaze is an internalised view of what men desire, and women are said to construct themselves accordingly. Whilst Sophie agreed with this and stated 'a lot of it [*women's grooming and participation in fitness regimes*] is about, you know, how you will be perceived by men', Hannah, however, described herself as constructing herself in this way in part to please a female gaze, that of the women in her classes. Hannah did also talk about her boyfriend throughout the interview, who she described as having noticed positive changes in her body since she took up pole dancing and who she believed likes her to be 'a bit thinner and a bit more toned', describing this as a reason for her feeling that she needs to lose some weight. Thus, Hannah's construction of herself suggests that the common assumptions around gazes are more complex than the much discussed idea of the woman who adjusts her bodily look simply to be pleasing to a man. Hannah's story shows that, despite being a heterosexual woman, she works her body in line not only with that she believes men desire, but also with a perceived gaze of other women, and in line with a popularised media view as well as her own view of the appearance of female strippers. I talked in chapter three of my experiences of 'performing' on stage during Hannah's class. This performative element of the class, whilst not performed for men, nevertheless is about teaching women how to dance for a man and, indeed, Hannah suggested that 'you can pretend that you really are a pole dancer, working in the club, on the stage'. Thus, Holland's assumption that men's absence from pole classes means that pole dancing is not about the gaze seems to be quite naïve, for pretending to be a stripper dancing for a man in Hannah's classes indicates that women are being taught the skills of performing for a male gaze and women are encouraged to pretend that men are watching. Similarly, as discussed in the previous chapter,

when I participated in Jessica's class, she encouraged me to look in the mirror and pretend I was dancing for my partner.

### **Muscles and Strength: A Strong Pole Dancing Body**

For all women in this research, there was an internalised image of the ideal body for women. In all women this differed slightly, but generally the women that I spoke to were motivated by having a slim, lean and athletic figure, but also with some muscle mass and strength. Most women were highly conscious of the images of the ideal woman in our culture, talking about Barbie as well as using expressions such as 'the ideal body' and 'the perfect body' and they explained that they worked to move towards their perception of this image, by their participation in pole classes and also by wearing makeup, using sun beds and dieting, for example. However, the ideal image adopted by these women differed slightly from that commonly perpetuated in the media, in that women celebrated some increased strength and muscle, bodily characteristics rarely regarded as typically feminine. Pole dancing was said to develop upper body strength, placing demands on the arms in particular and requiring strength to lift the body and climb the pole. As mentioned before, in taking classes, I have experienced myself how physically challenging pole dancing can be and how much strength certain moves require and although I learnt a number of spins throughout my time doing the fieldwork, I could never master climbing the pole to the top, as I simply did not have enough strength in my arms and shoulders. Women described that they have toned up and developed muscle definition quickly after beginning pole dancing classes and have noticed that they are physically stronger.



Yet historically muscle has always been contrary to expectations of being feminine (Burstyn, 1999; Liston, 1999, 2001). As highlighted in chapter two, research has shown that female athletes who move too far from the widespread images of the ideal body and the boundaries of femininity are often subject to stigmatisation in our society (Lenskyj, 1986; Cahn, 1994; Griffin, 1998). The overly muscled body has always been regarded as masculine, and discourse around muscles, strength and power has historically been associated with male rather than female sports. It is argued that there continues to exist in our society widespread stigmatisation for athletes who move 'too far' outside the accepted boundaries of masculinity or femininity, for example, men who pole dance, as discussed earlier, and for women who participate in historically regarded 'male sports'. Much research shows that overly muscled female bodies, and in particular female bodybuilders, raise some quite extreme debates and questions in our society over whether the female body should be developed intentionally (Schulze, 1997; Griffin, 1998). Gorely et al. (2003) showed young people images of female bodybuilders and the majority of respondents, both male and female, showed disgust at the images and suggested that females who do bodybuilding are masculine or lesbian. As discussed in chapter two, it is argued that the label lesbian is used to police the boundaries of acceptable (heterosexual) femininity (Griffin, 1989; Bulbeck, 1997).

Several of my respondents acknowledged that muscle development is something which is historically associated with men, but viewed their development of muscle and strength as an indication of their commitment to the body and argued that women too can work out and develop the body. Whilst muscles may have historically symbolised masculine power as physical strength, many women I

spoke to relayed pleasure in being able to show, through the tightening and controlling of the body, a self control and dedication and that they have willpower as well as an ability to shape themselves. Respondents also suggested that having muscle gave them a source of power and confidence. All 24 women cited physically empowering benefits of this increased strength, which included being able to carry shopping bags, lift boxes and move furniture. They expressed feelings of independence and liberation in not having to rely on others for help and being able to look after themselves. Amy is a student and works part time in a catering outlet and told me that she had always had 'very skinny arms', yet since taking up pole dancing:

I can lift the boxes at work that I didn't used to be able to lift. Like big boxes of potatoes. Like 15 kilograms. I can lift them up now, but when I first started working there I couldn't shift one. And now, I'm like 'yeah, I'm strong!' [laughs]

Some women claimed to be proud of their muscles, and stated that they would show off their muscles to family and friends. During interviews, six women showed me their muscles. Anna lifted her top to show me the definition of her stomach muscles, describing her stomach as a 'six-pack'. Others showed me their arm muscles and two women, Claire and Anna, actually invited me to feel their bicep muscles. After feeling Claire's bicep, Claire encouraged me to tense my own bicep, by way of comparison in order to demonstrate to me her increased muscle size which she attributed to regular pole dancing. Seemingly this was to suggest to me that, if I wished to look the same way, which Claire seemed to assume that I should, I should also take pole dancing classes. As well as listing the physical benefits of being stronger, several respondents relayed pleasure in being able to blow people's minds as to how much they can do physically,

describing enjoyment in pushing the boundaries of what people expected of them. As discussed in chapter two, sports feminists have increasingly argued that the female athlete can push the boundaries of masculinity and femininity (Cahn, 1994, 1995, 1996; Liston, 1999). In my interview with Kate she described how she gains satisfaction in having more strength than some men, proving that women can also be strong and challenging preconceptions as to a woman's physical capabilities. She told me about going to a bar on a night out which has a pole on the dance floor and how men would often engage her in a 'dance off', challenging her to perform moves on the pole which required more skill and strength and she relished being able to prove her strength and capability:

Just before we leave the bar I shall just pull out some amazing trick that takes, like, amazing amounts of strength that none of them could ever do, and I'll just quickly do it, make sure they've all seen it and then just leave [laughs].

Mel also told me stories of going to bars on nights out with friends which have a pole on the dance floor. She described that many women would have a swing around the pole on a night out after a few drinks, but Mel would perform some of her most skilful and impressive moves on the pole, those which required the most physical competence and strength, so as to impress others in the bar, and she told me that this had resulted once in her being given a round of applause by others in the bar and a free bottle of champagne by the (male) manager. Of course, both Kate and Mel's perceptions are that people are impressed purely by their physical strength and skill, yet, as Amy pointed out when talking about her experience of pole dancing in a nightclub, she would always get 'a very good response from guys, they absolutely loved it, they thought it was great cos they're not having to pay to get into a pole dancing club'. Without having spoken to the

bar manager who gave Mel the champagne or any of the other spectators in the bars that Mel or Kate performed in, I would question whether it was their physical strength being applauded, or, like the men in the nightclub Amy goes to, the fact that a young woman was providing a free pole dance routine, something historically associated with sexual availability, and allowing herself to be watched by the men in the bar. This suggests perhaps that whilst women may feel that they are challenging gender assumptions by proving that they are strong, questions can be raised around whether gender assumptions are also reinforced by the fact that this revolves around a stereotypically feminine activity, pole dancing, that it tends to be women performing on the pole rather than men, and that it tends to be men who are the spectators to pole dancing, and men may have different views as to the purpose and nature of the performance.

In her research with women who worked out in the gym, Shari Dworkin (2003) found that women placed a 'glass ceiling' on muscle development for women. Similarly in my research, despite describing muscles and strength as positive aspects of pole dancing, women did express some fear about becoming too muscular, too big or too bulky, and suggested that there are limits as to what is an acceptable amount of muscle for women. This limit varied among women and some were accepting of greater levels of muscle mass than others. Sophie described that increased strength gave her feelings of liberation, however, she placed a limit upon how muscular she would want to be, 'it's quite liberating I suppose, but yeah there is, I guess, the occasional fear that I don't want to go too far and, you know, start looking masculine'. Generally, women described men as not being attracted to women who were perceived as too muscular or too 'butch', although Sophie suggested that this varies amongst men:

I think men are quite variable in what they like, and certainly some of the guys that...some of my male friends quite like a woman with, you know, a bit of muscle on, you know, her arms, and a bit of toning, so I think it depends on what you're trying to...who, if anyone, you're trying to attract or impress, or whatever.

Lucy described not wanting to become too strong or too muscular as she would not want to be more muscular than her boyfriend, and explained that she believed this would be unattractive in a woman, and she imagined it would be a turn off for her boyfriend. Women reported that they wanted to be strong, but did not want to be 'too big', as too much bulk and large muscle size are stigmatised in women, in the same way that being too big through being too fat is also stigmatised. As I have already referred to, women also claimed that one of the reasons men should not pole dance is that they often have too much visible bulk or muscle which, although making them stronger and enabling them to perform tricks and stunts much more easily than women, is unattractive and looks clumsy on the pole. The slimmer female figure was idealised as the most attractive body to be seen on the pole.

The historical association of muscle with masculinity is suggested to force many female athletes to make attempts try to prove their heterosexuality and femininity. This was dubbed by Felshin (1974) as the 'female apologetic', where women who challenge traditional notions of femininity by participating in sport 'apologise' for entering a male domain by explicitly attempting to manage their appearance, by wearing makeup, high heels and covering up their muscled bodies, so that they look more feminine. Burstyn (1999: 155) describes how an increase in breast implants in female bodybuilders was a way for them to indicate their femininity, and claimed that a similar proliferation of breast implants had taken place in

heterosexual pornography a few years earlier, suggesting that female bodybuilders, like all women, are pressurised to construct their bodies to resemble the images of women seen in pornography. She describes this as one of the ways in which the 'liberatory potential for sport is often cancelled out by the gendered requirements of beauty'. Bolin's research (1992, 1997) looks also at the world of competitive bodybuilding and her research is informed by her own experiences as a female participating in bodybuilding contests. Bolin argues that bodybuilding is saturated with contradictions for, on the one hand, women are conforming to femininity by controlling the body and taking steps to maintain what they believe is attractive, yet, on the other hand, the body takes on masculine characteristics by the development of muscle, strength and stamina. She claims that women's bodybuilding is thus both transgressive and containing of femininity, for female bodybuilders feel empowered by their strength and muscle size, yet they are also judged by their beauty, for example, by their hair, makeup and breast implants, and penalised if judges feel that their muscle size is too big. This suggests perhaps that female bodybuilders are able to push and challenge the definitions and limits of femininity, yet they must make concessions to emphasise their femininity and heterosexuality in other ways. I believe that a similar story, although not as extreme, is seen in the fitness pole dancing class. Some women described that on occasions they may cover their muscles and Mel told me that she occasionally worried that she looked a little too big and would sometimes wear long sleeved tops to hide her muscled arms. The covering of muscles would seem to indicate that some women do feel the need to 'apologise' for their muscled, strong bodies on occasions. Also, the wearing of heeled shoes and makeup and the showing of flesh in tight athletic clothing, bikinis and underwear to pole dance may be a method adopted in order to emphasise femininity and

womanhood. The pole dancing school Polestars describes on its' website 'pole dancing is fitness that is girly, sexy and done in high heels. No tracksuits or gymwear here!' If pole dancing is fitness, why can't women wear tracksuits or gymwear? Why is this type of clothing seen as inappropriate? Even though several women claimed that the (lack of) clothing worn is purely because bare skin enables a better grip against the pole, there is no denying that the style of the clothing, often pink and covered with sequins or sparkling jewels, and the cut of the clothing, tight fitting and showing cleavage, such as that I described Hannah wearing earlier, can be seen as explicitly traditionally feminine. Thus the fear of being too muscular does not stop women from taking part in pole dancing, and they still persist in learning to pole dance and taking satisfaction from their strong, toned bodies, but these women may be seen to conform to some extent with the female apologetic (Felshin, 1974), emphasising their femininity in other ways.

From my observations, however, I should note that the majority of the women that I met during this research were not overtly and obviously muscular women. They described themselves as having developed increased strength and muscle mass through pole dancing, but to me this does not seem to have resulted in any of my respondents having an overly developed body and, in fact, most appeared slim and toned. There was a general consensus by my respondents that whilst pole dancing does develop muscle and increase strength, it is not an activity that can give the participant massive bulk. It was suggested by Charlotte that pole dancing works the muscles in a different way to lifting weights, for when lifting weights and fatiguing the muscles, the muscles retain a 'pump' and are shortened, which makes them appear bulkier, however, because in pole dancing participants lift their body weight but also stretch the body, this relieves this and works to

lengthen the muscles, so that the limbs are strong and slim, rather than short or bulky. Also, a few women told me that women's bodies are not naturally muscular, as are men's, and that it is difficult for women to get too big, for women cannot get really bulky unless they spend hours and hours in the gym, similar to the views which Theresa described earlier as being common in the women who attend her pole dancing classes but who refuse to work out in the gym. These claims are touted by many pole dancers and are given as reasons why pole dancing is an appropriate activity for women. It also appears that, for female pole dancers, any development of muscle may be off-set somewhat by the very nature of the activity they are participating in. The sexualised and feminine image associated with pole dancing in popular culture may mean that women who participate may not have to 'apologise' for entering a male territory in the same way as do women who participate in bodybuilding for example, which has traditionally always been regarded as a masculine activity (Schulze, 1997; Griffin, 1998; Gorely et al., 2003) and thus they do not need to take such great steps to emphasise their femininity for it is seen as something coming 'naturally' to these women.

Patricia Choi (2000) identifies the limitations of a dichotomous approach in her discussion of female bodybuilders, and suggests that Judith Butler's (1990) work on gender performance can help explain how women negotiate space in sport. Butler's research, as outlined in chapter two, claims that we perform gender in a multiplicity of ways, some of which are fluid, changeable and contradictory. Choi suggests that in bodybuilding, women can playfully and self consciously be rebellious by combining feminine body markers with displays of physical strength, skill and competence. My respondents similarly display femininity by their participation in pole dancing, as well as by the wearing of typically feminine



outfits, heeled shoes and makeup, yet they combine this with a display of strength and power, taking satisfaction in being able to show that they are strong and skilful by pushing themselves to perform skilful and challenging moves on the pole and by showing off their muscles and their toned bodies, thus demonstrating the complexities of women's embodiment.

### **Bruises, Injury and Pain: Taking Risks in Fitness Pole Dancing**

In the absence of any real competition in pole dancing (competitions such as Miss Pole Dance are few and far between and a very small number of women compete in these), within classes themselves, there does exist to some extent a competitive element to pole dancing as women attempt to achieve better and more impressive moves, usually which involve greater skills, more strength, and some taking of risks. This is often individually competitive in that women compete with themselves, pushing themselves to achieve bigger and better moves, and in line with arguments around individualism women expressed a real sense of self satisfaction in their achievement of physically challenging moves. In interviews women claimed that they were impressed and admired women who have the 'guts' to try impressive moves and they discussed those pole dancing celebrities who are capable of some amazing feats on the pole. Helen described attending a pole dancing event where she had seen someone else perform a move called the 'death lay', a move where the participant climbs the pole to the top, then holds the body horizontally with the pole in-between the thighs, 'laying' with the back across the ceiling, facing the floor, arms outstretched. The death lay is named to reflect the risks involved, due to the risk of falling to the floor and causing injury. It is

widely thought of as the most difficult move possible in pole dancing and I am told that only a small percentage of pole dancers are capable of this move. To an outsider, the name of this move itself would most probably sound unappealing. Yet Helen described how impressed she was to see someone performing the death lay and how much strength, skill and guts such a move would take. Helen believed that taking risks by performing moves like the death lay marks women out as different, superior and is a sign of status, indicating bravery, being fearless, and of having real pole dancing skill. At the Miss Pole Dance UK competition in 2008, I myself saw Pantera, an American pole dancer and 'star' of the instructional DVD *Pole Tricks 101*, renowned across the pole dancing community, perform the death lay, and indeed the sound of the applause and appreciation from the crowd was deafening. The risks of injury and harm to the physical body through pole dancing may debatably not be as great as those involved in some competitive contact sports like rugby or extreme adventure sports such as sky diving or mountaineering, for example, and the risks associated with pole dancing usually take place in the controlled and managed environment of a fitness class, yet nevertheless women feel that they are participating in something unique and exciting for them, and present themselves as making choices about taking risks, describing a sense of being adventurous. Pole dancing thus seems to offer women an opportunity to engage in risk taking by the performance of physically challenging moves and routines, yet within a safe and controlled environment. Certainly, advertising of pole dancing classes claims that these classes not only have a positive effect on the physical body, but also suggests that these classes offer women something exciting, different and 'cool'.

Of course, not all women desire to achieve the death lay or take great risks within the pole dancing class. Claire, however, described that she finds it very frustrating when women give up or are reluctant or scared to try certain pole dancing moves:

You kind of have to be fearless as well because me and Sally and Naomi are fearless, we'll go up to the top and we'll do whatever and we'll fall, and we'll hurt ourselves, but we'll get straight back on again and we never don't do anything because we're scared that we're gonna fall or we're scared that it's gonna hurt, we just do it, whereas a lot of the girls are scared and are, like, 'oh I don't wanna do that, what if I fall?' when they're just standing up. And I really want to say to them 'well you're not gonna fall very far' or, you know, 'well you're not really gonna hurt yourself that much' (...)...sometimes you just wanna push them and just say 'look', you know, 'it's just like tripping up'.

The above quote from Claire indicates a sense of scorn and contempt for those women who don't take risks or who complain about the risks involved in pole dancing. By stating 'you have to be fearless' Claire suggests that there is no other option and, as I also discussed earlier in this chapter, she urged women to 'just do it', to overcome obstacles of fear and nerves and described herself and her friends as 'fearless'.

Most of my female respondents told me that when they went to their first pole dancing class, they had not anticipated how physically challenging pole dancing could be, in particular how much strength it would require, or that there would be any risk of injury and bruising involved in classes. Injury and bruising is something that I too had not expected before I first tried a class and I did not expect this to feature so significantly in my discussions with women, however, bruises in particular were a topic which featured in every interview and all interviews involved some discussion of aspects of risk – the risks of falling off the pole, of bashing a leg against the pole and causing injury, for example. Mel, Lucy, Jodie

and Amy all told me that they did not like this aspect of pole dancing at first, and the fact that they went away from their first class with bruises and blisters was initially both surprising and a negative aspect of pole dancing. They all described being nervous and scared of falling off the pole in their first class. Thus, they could be said to have entered pole dancing with what are seen to be traditionally feminine attitudes – being risk averse and disconcerted with getting bruises or injuries. Certainly, much research on risk taking has focused on men as risk takers, women as more likely to be risk averse. Waldron (1976) argues that men are typically more likely to engage in activities that are injurious to health, both at work and during leisure activities – he claims that they drink more, smoke more, drive faster and work in more physically hazardous occupations than women. In an analysis of the ways in which boys and girls learn certain aspects of masculinity and femininity, Askew and Ross (1988) discuss how images in TV programmes and cartoons teach children that females are the weak and vulnerable victims, who are rescued by tough male heroes. Greendorfer (1983) suggests that children begin to associate from an early age being tough, physical and taking risks with masculinity. Research on sport has historically shown that risk, pain and injury are routine aspects of recreational and competitive sports, and that playing while injured is something which is glorified for male athletes (Messner, 1989, 1990a, 1990b; Hughes and Coakley, 1991; Curry, 1993; Nixon, 1993; Young, 1993). These theorists argue that succumbing to injury by ceasing to play sport when in pain is seen as showing signs of weakness and the athlete is perceived as having shown a side to himself that is feminine and soft. Research has generally suggested that a sensitisation to bodily well being and health is viewed as the jurisdiction of women (Annandale and Hunt, 2000; Banks, 2001). Young, White and McTeer (1994) carried out research with male Canadian

athletes, all of whom had experienced in the past a serious sport related injury which had long term health outcomes for them. These athletes reported that they were encouraged by others, including coaches, managers and trainers, to continue competing whilst injured and they themselves believed that accepting the risk of pain and injury is 'part of it' and is the only choice for men to be taken seriously as athletes. They had thus learnt to detach themselves from the body, by disregarding and ignoring their injuries, suppressing their emotions and often denying that they were in pain at all.

In 1995, Young and White followed up their 1994 research by investigating the sport related injury experiences of female elite athletes in Canada. They found that female professional athletes, like the men in their previous research, would also subject themselves to risk and adopt similar techniques to displace the impact of pain on their athletic career, including ignoring and trivialising pain and being willing to continue to compete with pain and injury. Young and White thus argue that, in contrast to popular views around femininity, they have found evidence of both male and female athletes following the principles of what is seen as the dominant male model of sport. Whilst the women in Young and White's research are full time professional athletes, as opposed to the women in my research who, mostly, do pole dancing several times a week as a hobby, the women in my research similarly explained to me that they are reluctant to take time off from pole dancing and often will continue despite injury. Jodie described how her initial attitude to risk and injury changed very quickly and she now accepts the risk of injury as part of pole dancing, and in this sense she seems to be conforming to what seems to have always been seen as a masculine attitude, where risk has come to be seen as part of the experience and something which is

to be tolerated and accepted. Helen told me that she had been suffering for a while with pain in her back and shoulder, caused by pole dancing, yet she persists in pole dancing and ignores the advice of a Physiotherapist who had told her to take a break to allow her body to recover. She expressed her frustration, not that she was in pain, but that she felt this injury was affecting her ability to progress to the next level in pole dancing and perfect certain moves. Kate told me of her fears of becoming injured and not being able to pole dance:

Last week I bashed myself, like, I was just doing something simple, and all of a sudden, my foot, I was like 'please don't be broken, please don't be broken, please don't be broken' and it was hurting quite a lot...it was actually this time last week, just before my morning class, and I was just like 'oh please don't be broken, please don't be broken'. And I thought about like...I dunno, touch wood [*knocks hand against wooden chair*], I got this awful feeling like, what if I got hurt, and I wouldn't be able to do it?

This quote from Kate indicates the extent to which pole dancing is part of her life and could almost be described as an obsession – although as a pole dancing instructor, this is not just Kate's hobby but also her financial income, and thus it is perhaps natural that she would worry about being injured and unable to pole dance. Kate went on to tell me that she would persist in pole dancing regardless of serious injury:

Honestly if I couldn't do it...if I had some accident and I lost my leg I would get a prosthetic leg and I would carry on. Honestly. Like...I hope it doesn't happen. But...yeah, it's a massive part of my life, I can't imagine, I can't imagine. It really...it truly is my forte, I can't imagine doing anything else.

The suggestion that she would get a prosthetic leg and persist in pole dancing indicates that the different parts of the body are, for Kate, seen as easily replaceable and something from which she can be emotionally detached, similar

to Brohm's (1978) description of the 'body as a machine' metaphor which sees the body as a machine whose performance can be enhanced, and which can break down and be repaired just like any other machine. Brohm suggests that sports in industrialised societies lend themselves to an alienation between the athlete and his or her body and the body becomes a machine or a means of production, rather than a source of pleasure and fulfilment. In the quote above, Kate seems to be suggesting that she sees her body like a machine, made up of different, replaceable and changeable parts, and that she would be able to replace her leg and continue to pole dance. Both Seidler's (1997) and Burstyn's (1999) discussions attribute the machine metaphor, however, to a male approach to the body, and indicate that it is men who learn to treat the body as a machine where the body is to be trained and commanded, and that men learn to detach from the body and from the emotions and accept risk and injury. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Burstyn (1999: 161) refers to conceptions of the male body as a 'big power machine'. Kate's insistence in the quote above that she would persist through serious injury seems to indicate a masculinised language, and this shows some correlations with Young and White's research findings, that women too persist through pain and can show detachment from the body. I do believe, however, that there is an element of naivety in Kate's quote, for, if she really were to lose a leg, I would imagine that this loss would in reality have a much bigger emotional effect on her than she anticipates.

Pole dancing classes often involved women showing one another the bruises that they had acquired at the last class, and comparing the size and location of various bruises. In one class I attended one of the women pulled down her shorts to show the other women in the class a large purple bruise she had at the top of her inner

thigh, which she claimed was caused when learning to climb the pole the previous week. Likewise, in interviews, women showed me their bruises on several occasions. Claire rolled up her trousers to show me the bruises on her thigh, and in my interview with Anna she pointed out the bruises down the insides of her calf muscles and across the tops of her feet. Women also told me about their injuries in great detail. Charlotte showed me her broken fingers, and Mel showed me the blisters on the palms of her hands and also told me that she had burst all the blood vessels down the insides of her thighs. Feminist writers on the body have discussed the ways in which women in our world face constant scrutiny and criticism if they fail to adhere to the cultural imperatives of feminine perfection (Wolf, 1991; Orbach, 1993; Grogan, 1999; McRobbie, 2009; Banyard, 2010). McRobbie's theory is that this has created a standard of femininity that is impossible to attain and women suffer feelings of guilt, shame and unhappiness about their physical faults, a confusion and frustration which had led to a proliferation of eating disorders and 'illegible rage'. However, in a world where the female body is supposed to be flawless, perfect and unblemished, the women that I have met through this research have bruises and blisters on their bodies, acquired through pole dancing, yet these women persist in the activity which causes these imperfections, and actually often draw attention to their imperfections instead of concealing them.

The displaying and comparison of physical imperfections like bruises thus indicates some ambiguities with regard to the ways in which these women see the female body. The ways in which these women speak about their bruises and injuries suggests that they are playing to some extent with the idea of femininity and challenging notions of gender. Whilst showing me their bruises, some women



presented an attitude of 'laughing it off' and made jokes about their bruises. They joked about the size, colour and shape of bruises. Anna joked that people 'must wonder what on earth I've been doing to be covered in so many bruises' and laughed that people might think she was a 'battered wife'. Claire told me a story about a night out where she had briefly considered covering up bruises which she had all over her legs. She told me that she eventually decided to wear a short skirt so that her bruises were visible, and claimed 'I should be proud of them'. Refraining from covering her bruises and actually taking steps to display them indicates that Claire is challenging the idea that women should cover their imperfections. In arguing that she should be proud of her bruises, Claire is referring to what her bruises symbolise. She suggested that bruises symbolise the toughness of pole dancing and her ability to perform tough moves was something she should be proud of. As discussed earlier, Claire repeatedly used the slogan 'just do it', emphasising persistence and perseverance, and by displaying her toughness through bruising, suggesting women should work hard and push the body, she argued that bruising is a physical evidence of her hard work and perseverance. Jodie described hating the bruises when she took her first class, but when I asked Jodie if the bruises bother her now, after she has been pole dancing for six months, she told me:

No. It's part of it. No, it's quite funny. It's funny, it's like, 'there's another one, there's proof of what I'm actually doing, that I'm actually doing something'...proof that it's hard. Because people think it's quite easy, because obviously the professionals do make it look easy, but they were in the same position as we were when we first started, like, you know, just absolutely killing, so...everyone just thinks they can jump straight in and you're like 'no chance', having been there, done it, you're like 'no...it takes a lot of practice and it's hard work'...

Jodie's interview indicates that bruises are seen as a visible proof of pole dancing as an authentic sporting experience. The experience of pole dancing assumes an 'other world' quality for the women in this research, where they claim that it is impossible to truly understand pole dancing unless you have tried it, however, the showing of bruises and injuries may be an attempt to try and explain and prove pole dancing to others and are seen as evidence that they are not doing something which should be considered degrading or sleazy, and that actually pole dancing is a physical activity and something which involves risks which they are willing to take. Similar to their attempts to present themselves as respectable, as outlined in the previous chapter, the displaying of physical evidence of the risks involved is a way in which women perhaps feel that they can protect themselves against criticisms and mark fitness pole dancing as different from its' origins in the sex industry. Bruises thus give these women feelings of authenticity and they believe that acceptance of bruises and injury is a way for pole dancing for fitness, or as a sport, to be taken seriously.

Some respondents referred to their bruises in affectionate ways and saw their bruises as desirable. Claire described how the location of bruises could be attributed to certain pole dancing moves, and would indicate at what stage each individual is at in learning to pole dance. She described bruises as being:

...like 'trophies'. So when you come into class it's like 'oh have you seen this bruise?' and it's like 'oh that's a teddy bruise' or 'that's an inversion or climbing bruise' so you know, you see, if people come in and, like, there, under your arm there [*indicates to the tricep area of her arm*], you get a bruise there, which mines gone there unfortunately, but that was from doing a teddy, but mainly when you first start inverting then you get bruises along there [*indicates her inner thigh*] and on the tops of your feet from climbing you get lots of bruises, so you can tell what move people are doing and so...bruises are good.

Describing bruises as trophies is further indication that bruises are seen to show the authenticity of pole dancing as a sport. Whilst for many athletes, the goal is to be awarded a trophy in the form of a silver cup, plaque or a medal, the relative lack of competition in pole dancing suggests that for Claire, bruises are the badge of honour. Sophie also used the term trophy to describe her bruises and she claimed that bruises give her a sense of achievement, for they show that she is working hard and they are proof that she has been working on a particular move. Like Claire in the quote above, Sophie suggested that particular bruises on particular parts of the body can be attributed to certain pole dancing moves, thus bruises in certain places indicate what move she is currently learning and can demonstrate to other people that she is at an advanced level of pole dancing, which she believes is something to be proud of. Helen, whilst not explicitly using the term trophy, also indicated that she sees her bruises in a similar way. She claimed also that bruises are an expected part of pole dancing and indicate level of pole dance ability:

I was very bruised, I remember having massive bruises. Yes I did...I still ache now to be honest...not as much, I tend to ache and bruise now in a different way to what I did when I first started. When I bruised when I started, it was because I'd done things wrong, like when spinning crashing into the pole and banging your leg and stupid things like that, and I don't have that anymore. I bruise less. But now my bruises are from doing things like teddy, which bruises you every time, where you hang on and the pole is right up in your arm pit so it digs in and bruises every time, so a lot of my bruises now are like 'that's because I've done that move and it bruises you'...'oh that must be a teddy bruise'...

Thus Helen, Claire and Sophie's experiences suggest that, when you reach a certain level in pole dancing, bruises no longer indicate that you have done something wrong, but that you are performing high level moves and they describe bruises therefore as actually being something impressive, for example, in

indicating to others an ability to perform the 'teddy', an advanced pole dancing move. In the quotes above, both Claire and Helen refer to the 'teddy bruise'. The move teddy involves the upper arm being pressed against the pole and the pressure can easily cause bruising. The name teddy bruise brings up an image of the teddy bear, something soft, comforting and harmless, and creates an image of this as something pleasurable. Naming bruises could indicate a level of affection for bruises, and may diffuse, for these women, the pain and unsightliness of bruises, suggesting that they are actually something desirable and pleasurable and perhaps indicating that it is seen as acceptable for the female body to be marked by bruises in this way. Helen's story, however, depicts a type of love-hate relationship with her bruises and whilst in these discussions she seems accepting of bruises and gives them affectionate names, she also described covering them up and putting cream on them to reduce the swelling, and hating bruises on occasions:

I try and get rid of mine, I put arnica cream on them to stop them swelling and get rid of them quicker. If I have bruises I'm not really that bothered that they're there because, as I say, it's just part of pole dancing and you do get used to it, but I'd like to not have bruises ideally. They just look so ugly, really unsightly. Most of the time it's OK, but when you have something to dress up for, a wedding or something, and you've got a massive bruise on your leg, that's when you hate the bruises.

Lucy described that she worried that people might think her boyfriend was responsible for her bruises and so would cover her bruises whenever she went out with her boyfriend. In Holland's (2010) research, bruises were regarded as negative by women, and whilst my respondents like Helen and Lucy expressed some negative aspects of bruises, the acceptance of bruises and the reference to them by name, and by Sophie and Claire as trophies, indicates that women have

an incredibly complex and interesting relationship to bruising and their responses seem to both challenge (by the displaying of bruises) and reinforce (by covering their bruises on occasion) traditional expectations of femininity.

Showing some similarities with the ways in which women talk about bruises, muscle pain is also something with which women seem to have a complex relationship and which is often referred to as desirable and something which women have affection for. Hayley claimed:

It's pain. But it feels nice because you're like 'oh I've worked hard, I've worked out' and it just feels nice, it does. It's satisfying. You know you're doing your body some good if your muscles ache the next day. If you couldn't feel anything you'd want your money back, it wouldn't have been a good enough work out. You need to push yourself to the limits. So, yeah, it's a nice pain.

In our society, pain is something which is usually regarded as undesirable and negative, yet Hayley's reference to pain as 'nice' suggests that, to her, having aching muscles the day after exercising is seen as evidence that the body is changing for the better, thus pain is sought and desired. Lucy claimed that it is necessary to 'work through the pain', for pain equals benefits in terms of improving the physical body via muscle toning and she suggested that pain must be tolerated and accepted in order to achieve physical benefits. Lucy and Hayley thus suggest that they accept pain as it is evidence that they are working their body for the better. Hayley described part of her job as a pole dancing instructor as being to reassure women who are new to the class that the bruises and pain are part of the experience of pole dancing and should be tolerated in order to change the body:

I always warn the girls when they start 'you're gonna ache tomorrow and you're gonna get bruised, but that's cos it's hard work and you're working your body'. No gain without pain.

The exercise slogan, 'no pain, no gain', which is similar to the phrase used by Hayley in the extract here, famously came into prominence when the actress Jane Fonda began to produce a series of aerobic workout videos in the 1980s, and Fonda used this to encourage women to think about the physical benefits of pushing the body through muscle aches and pains, also using the phrase 'feel the burn'. Similar to Claire's argument that women should 'just do it', Hayley promotes to her class participants that women should attempt to work their bodies in order to measure up and achieve an ideal body, yet to do this she promotes a tolerant approach to pain, working out past the point of experiencing muscle pain. Thus women are encouraged to take increasing risks, persist in exercising when in pain and tolerate bruises and blisters, all in the name of achieving the ideal body. These are trivialised as if they are side effects and something with which women just have to deal. This shows some clear ambiguities and contradictions in the ways in which women see the body and their approach to pain. Whilst pain is accepted and tolerated, correlating with masculinised approaches, it is often seen as a means to an end – i.e. as a way to achieve the perfect feminine body.

After I conducted my interview with Anna, the following day she added me as a 'friend' on the website Facebook. On the site, members can update their 'status' to tell their friends what they are doing or thinking at that present moment in time. Whilst writing this chapter of my thesis, by coincidence I logged onto the website one day and found that Anna had updated her status and posted some photographs under the heading 'pole pain'. Her status read 'Anna is in the most

pole inflicted pain she has ever been in'. I looked at her photographs, many of which showed her performing various pole dancing moves, some of which showed close up images of bruises on her legs, and one which she titled 'map of pole pain', on which she had taken an outline of the female body, and added arrows pointing to various body parts, with a description of the injury or pain Anna was suffering to that particular part of the body. She wrote that 'all the injuries on the map are either scrapes or bruises (or both) that I have right now'. A set of exclamation marks followed this statement. She identified the injuries as being to her inner right wrist, back of head, right armpit, right shoulder, upper outer left arm, lower outer left arm, back of right knee, inner thighs and left shin and for each injury she named the particular pole dancing move or moves which caused it. Whilst Anna persists in pole dancing when in pain, laughs about her injuries and seems to make them into a joke, seemingly to show that they are trivialised and she does not take them seriously, the fact that she had taken the time to produce a map on her computer which highlights and explains in detail her injuries, and then display this on the internet, and download and display photographs of pole dancing injuries, suggests that these injuries actually mean something significant to her and are a huge part of her pole dancing experience. Young and White (1995) found that both male and female athletes would often ignore injuries or deny that they were in pain. Anna, however, does not suppress her emotions or conceal pain in this way and she certainly does not deny that she is in pain. She in fact is keen to broadcast it and talk about it, share her experiences, and she seems to see pain and risk as a method of proving herself. Bruises and injuries are used as an attempt to explain pole dancing to outsiders, and are used by Anna as a way of showing outsiders a physical evidence of the authenticity of her experience of pole dancing, as a way of attempting to prove

pole dancing to be a serious activity and also as a way of attempting to present a particular image of herself. The displaying of pictures of herself performing skilful pole dancing moves, alongside pictures of injuries and bruises may present an exaggerated image of herself as 'crazy', 'fearless' and 'adventurous', while in actuality, her response to risk is much more complex than this.

Whilst the women in this research claim that they accept and tolerate bruises and injuries, the fact that they talk about their bruises and injuries, compare them with one another and even name their bruises, shows a different response to that indicated in research with male athletes and the findings of Young and White's (1995) research where men and women showed detachment from the body via ignoring their injuries, dismissing and trivialising them. The women in my research, whilst they claim to accept bruises, do not dismiss them and in fact they show an emotional attachment to them, they draw attention to them, talk about them with others, and see them as an important part of their experience of pole dancing. In the pole dancing community, the talking about bruises and injuries may be a way for women to make sense of and understand their experiences, and may also be a method of forming friendships and seeking support and understanding from others. Certainly, talking about bruises makes up a large part of the conversation during pole dancing classes. Whilst conducting my fieldwork, I found that initiating conversations around bruises was often an easy way to strike up a discussion with women. Linguist Jennifer Coates (1996, 1997) shows that female friendships are based around the sharing of personal experiences which helps to improve women's mutual understanding, to check their perceptions against those of other women and allows them to seek support. Whilst women adopt what have always been seen as the masculine characteristics of accepting



and tolerating bruising, they also seem to conform to traditionally feminine characteristics of sharing their thoughts and feelings, and using these discussions as a way of making sense of their experiences. Female friendship and discussions form the basis of the next chapter where these concepts will be referred to in more detail.

## **Summary**

The discussions in this chapter show that, for the women in this study, participation in pole dancing can be seen to both challenge and reinforce traditional definitions of femininity. The popular image in our culture is of pole dancing as something consummately feminine and heterosexual and pole dancing conjures up ideas of sexy, toned and attractive women, as portrayed in the media and celebrated in the bodies of female celebrities who are said to pole dance. For several respondents, the image of the pole dancer portrayed in society was described as the Barbie doll image, in a similar way to Roger's (1999) description of Barbie as embodying the ideal. Thus it seems that women who pole dance may not have to work hard to be naturally seen by others as feminine and girly, and women describe their pole dancing as enabling them to attract men and be seen as sexy and sexually available to men. For many this is a positive aspect of pole dancing and they state that they want to feel sexy and desirable, deeming this as a marker of success. The idea of what constitutes the ideal body and concepts of the gaze differ slightly amongst the women in this study, however. Women have different ideas as to the extent to which the female body can be developed and they also express different ideas as to what men want and desire,

with different levels of muscle mass being described as desirable. Contradictory to the ideas of the ideal female body populated by media culture and described in *The Beauty Myth* (Wolf, 1991), women expressed satisfaction in some muscle development, gaining in strength, and saw this as a source of power, with some describing pleasure in pushing the boundaries of what people expect of them physically. Pole dancing is thus seen as offering an opportunity for women to challenge the discourse of masculinity and femininity and to challenge assumptions of the limitations of the feminine body. The women in this research do, however, place an upper limit on muscle development, stating that they do not wish to become too muscular, and suggesting that there remains a glass ceiling on muscle development for women. The describing of pain and bruising as desirable and the drawing of attention to physical imperfections again challenges traditional ideas of femininity. However, despite this, women seem to make some concessions to emphasise their femininity and sexuality in other ways, by the wearing of explicitly feminine clothing, makeup and showing of flesh and cleavage and the wearing of what are described as stripper shoes. The talking about risk, bruising and pain, using this to demonstrate what they see as the authenticity of pole dancing as a sport, as well as the uniqueness of pole dancing, indicates that risk is seen as part of the pole dancing experience which shows alignment with a masculinised approach to injury and pain, in the tolerating of risk and persisting in pole dancing through injury. Yet the fact that women talk about risk and share their experiences and stories of injury and bruises, not just in interviews but amongst one another in classes, suggests a feminised approach to understanding and making sense of their experiences, and the covering of their bruises and their muscles on occasions suggests a notion of impression management which differs and changes depending upon the situation. The findings outlined here thus show

that the fitness pole dancer and the fitness pole dancing body cannot be seen as one dimensional, women have very complicated and contradictory relationships and understandings of the body, and that women work hard to balance a challenge to masculinised ideas around the active body with a persisting desire to maintain a feminine and heterosexual body image.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Being 'One of the Girls': Female Friendship, Empowerment and the Pole Dancing Community**

#### **Introduction**

The women in this research state that one of the greatest benefits of pole dancing is that it extends much beyond just attending a weekly class – they have made friends with whom they socialise outside of classes, they feel a shared bond with others who pole dance and they are able to talk to fellow pole dancers over the internet. Using studies of friendship by Lipman-Blumen (1976) and Pahl (2001), and research by Harrison (1998) and Storr (2003), in this chapter I argue that pole dancing can be understood as a type of female 'homosocial' community, in which women are able to identify with other women through mutual support and understanding, offering feelings of belonging and a sense of community, enabling women to develop an identity as belonging to a collective group, and providing opportunity for the affirmation of self. Talking to other women who pole dance, in both a face to face context and over the internet, allows some opportunity for women's interests to be centralised and taken seriously. In chapter two I discussed the 'power feminist' argument proposed by Wolf (1994) and epitomised by the Spice Girls in their catchphrase 'girl power' which depicts women as being in control of their lives, able to please themselves, and stresses the supposed power of female solidarity and friendship, promoting the importance of same sex friendship and community. Many of my respondents cite pole dancing as enabling

them to develop confidence and feelings of empowerment and, most notably, this is said to stem from this being a women only space in which women are said to develop self confidence from developing an identity as being 'one of the girls'. I question, however, the extent to which this offers collective empowerment, particularly in a context where it appears that the male perspective of pole dancing is seen as continuing to conceptualise this not as a fitness class but rather as something titillating for men, where validation and approval from men is often cited by women as evidence of pole dancing 'making a difference', and in the context of a culture where these classes are advertised to women as offering a space in which women can help and support each other to construct themselves as acceptably feminine and heterosexual.

I also show the ways in which concepts of what constitutes 'friendship' can be seen as subjective, complex and multifaceted, for friendship exists for women on different levels and within different contexts, on 'thick' and 'thin' levels (as described by Pahl, 2001), women move in and out of different friendship and hobby groups and there is also some evidence of conflict and power struggles amongst those who are both included and excluded from the group. Thus I argue that pole dancing cannot always be described as an entirely harmonious and cohesive group and it can be described as a type of postmodern friendship or homosocial community in which the boundaries of the community are blurred and the community exists for different women in many different forms.

## **Making Friends in Pole Dancing Classes**

Much research on friendships or 'homosociality', social relationships between members of the same sex, seems to have historically tended to focus on the relationships between groups of men, particularly in the workplace or in leisure activities such as playing or watching sport (Storr, 2003). The work of Jean Lipman-Blumen (1976) defines homosociality as a social preference for members of one's own sex, in the context of gender inequalities where men and women are socially unequal. Thus, male homosociality is seen as a reflection of male dominance in a society where men are included and allowed access to all areas of society and women are positioned as exchange objects which men can use to heighten their own status amongst groups of men. Lipman-Blumen argues that women are commodified as sex objects, however, she suggests that this is not simply forced onto them by men but it is also adopted by women themselves as they seek resources from men and attempt to entice them away from their homosocial bonds with other men. Since Lipman-Blumen's work was written over 30 years ago, however, many changes have occurred in this time to impact upon women's position in society, including legislative acts which have given women increased access to education, employment and an increased visibility in society. In chapter two I examined the power feminist argument of Naomi Wolf (1994) which suggests that a 'gender quake' has occurred and that women have a newfound power and are able to take control of their lives. The 'girl power' message presented in popular culture and made famous by the Spice Girls in the 1990s also has encouraged a view in our society that women have increased agency and power and can please themselves in all aspects of life. If this is the case, then it could be questioned whether Lipman-Blumen's arguments can still

be applied to our society or, with women's (supposed) increased power, whether this theory may now be out of date. The Spice Girls promoted a view that by coming together women can show real power and, as I quoted in chapter two, they claimed 'women can be so powerful when they show solidarity' (1997: 48). Recent examinations of women's friendship groups, however, have suggested some continued alignment with Lipman-Blumen's theory. Merl Storr (2003) applies the concept of homosociality to women and argues that female homosocial settings are indeed designed, to some extent, to help women to promote the interests of men. She suggests that the 'girls night out' provides women an escape from their domestic chores, but ultimately it enables them to return to their chores the next day relaxed, refreshed, recharged, and able to continue to serve the needs of men. Thus, she suggests that homosociality for women does not present a challenge to unequal power relations, but it allows women an arena by which to cope with these power relations. Likewise, Kaeren Harrison's (1998) research on friendship focused on the friendships of middle class married women in the 1990s, and shows the ways in which friendships and girls nights out were important to these women, who showed a real commitment to their friends, yet she also argues that friendships with other women were a way of escape and release, and to some extent resistance, albeit temporarily, from their domestic lives, allowing them a compensation for the inequalities they experience in their relationships with men. She suggests that conversations with other women enabled women to make sense of their own experiences in a capitalist society and to validate their own sense of self.

Pole dancing classes take place in a variety of settings; in health and fitness clubs and gyms, in bars or nightclubs, in lap dancing clubs when the club is closed to

customers, in instructors' own homes, and in specifically designed studios owned or rented by the instructor. Regardless of the venue, however, these classes are almost always a women only setting. Certainly there are few male pole dancers and there are few images of male pole dancers in popular culture. The majority of classes advertise themselves as 'women only', and where they do not specify this, they tend to be women only anyway. As already mentioned, throughout the course of this research I have not met any male pole dancers (although I did hear of one male pole dancer, as described previously, who did not respond to my request for an interview) and in my interviews the indication was that the women only aspect of pole dancing was one of the major appeals to women when deciding to sign up for classes. Many of my respondents told me that, were a man to join their class, this would put them off attending. Of course, as discussed in the previous chapter, it was also commonly believed that most men would overwhelmingly not have any desire to learn to pole dance anyway. Women describe this as a feminine activity, a female space, as a space exclusive to them, and that for a man to attend would be to compromise his masculinity.

Pole dancing classes are advertised very much as a chance for women to escape temporarily from their everyday lives, allowing them to become a different person, to have fun, let their hair down, and experience themselves as something other than wives, girlfriends, students, professionals and so on. The website of the Miss Pole Dance UK Competition states that 'women are born with a powerful, exotic sensuality so often lost in today's demanding lifestyles' (Miss Pole Dance UK, 2010), suggesting that pole dancing allows an arena for women to explore these aspects of their selves. Classes are advertised as an opportunity to experience being glamorous and sexy, as a pole dancer for the evening, the ultimate male



fantasy, but promoted as a safe space in which to do this within the confines of a health and fitness club and led by a trained instructor in a women only environment and, as argued in chapter four, where women believe that they can return to their 'respectable' day jobs and middle class lives the next day. When I interviewed Jodie she had recently graduated from university with a degree in history and worked as an Administrator for a building firm. She described this as 'just a job', as something which she did not enjoy and found boring but which she was doing whilst figuring out what kind of career path she wished to follow. Jodie attends a pole dancing class one evening each week and described this evening as a 'buzz' and like being 'in a little bubble', as doing something so far removed from the rest of her life, allowing her to experience something different, fun and exciting for the evening, thus providing her with a temporary escape from her everyday life. She also described part of this escape as being about 'having fun with the girls'.

Women frequently told me in interviews about the female friends that they have made via pole dancing and the social life that they have outside of classes with women that they have met through pole dancing. Charlotte told me '...it's so social...it's not just a class, it's the whole thing that branches off of it' and Claire in particular talked about the friends she had made throughout her interview, naming the people she had met and telling me stories about nights out at pole dancing events as well as in nightclubs, and she stated:

Like, my whole social network is through dancing, before this I never knew anyone, I never went out, never did anything, never had any friends, and then I started dancing and now I've got a whole life out of it.

Claire described pole dancing throughout her interview as 'my life', 'it's everything' and by this she refers not only to her enjoyment of pole dancing itself, but also to the friends she has made and the social group that she has built up from attending classes. She shows a sense of strong commitment to the friendships and the relationships that she has made, stating that this is something that she would never want to lose, 'for me and Sally this is our life, this is it, we love this...dancing, we just live and breathe it'. The 'girls nights out' which Harrison (1998) discusses are amongst groups of women who have long standing friendships, however, in her research into Ann Summers parties, Merl Storr (2003) suggests that the women attending an Ann Summers party often do not all know one another beforehand. Similarly, in the pole dancing class, many women attend an initial class with a friend or a small group of friends, but rarely know all of the other women in the class beforehand. The pole dancing class, however, seems to be an instigator for developing friendships, and women make friends with others in the class and continue to see them when the course of lessons is finished, or arrange to meet one another outside of the lessons to practice pole dancing as well as to socialise and go on nights out. Kate described the friendships which women make in her classes as akin to those developed at school or university and maintained throughout people's lives:

I think it's the same sort of thing...you know like you meet people at uni and you become friends with them and you might be friends with them for the rest of your life, sort of thing, it's actually that sort of bonding, you know? And like at school even....so yeah, they really...yeah they really bond.

Mel has made a group of friends in her class with whom she now attends other types of dance class and socialises with on nights out:

You form a little group of you, you've been going from the beginning and you know each other really well, and there's about 5 of us all in the same class and we've really gelled with each other. There's Katie and Adele, and me and Caroline will go street dancing with them, and then I'll go to jive with Caroline and I see her every day. It's really, really nice.

Certainly in attending and observing classes myself I was struck by the numbers of women who would exchange telephone numbers and arrange to meet to practice pole dancing at one another's houses, some after only having met one another in classes on just one or two occasions. I have also been surprised by how many of my respondents actually knew one another despite living in different cities and attending different pole dancing classes. Several times during interviews, women would tell me about friends that they had met through pole dancing at events, competitions or over the internet, who they now kept in touch with and would meet up with at pole dancing events or to practice pole dancing at one another's studios or homes, and I would realise during the conversation that they were actually referring to women who lived miles away that I had previously interviewed.

Many studios offer packages for hen parties to take a class in pole dancing. Advertising for pole dancing themed hen parties states that 'the classes are held in an all female environment so you can feel free to let yourself go and swing your legs above your head without having to worry about men's prying eyes' (Hen Heaven, 2010) and 'a fantastic way of celebrating with the girls on your hen night...let your hair down and have some fun' (Pole People, 2010). Advertising for hen parties thus shows similarities to that of regular classes, where although hen parties are advertised as a one off opportunity for women to have fun, let their hair down and learn some pole dancing tricks for the evening, consistent with regular

classes they also use the language of 'all girls together', and they are promoted as something in which women can bond and have fun in a women only environment, as something to participate in with the girls. Being 'one of the girls' is a notion that is mentioned regardless of whether women attend a weekly class or a one off hen party and it is mentioned in my interview with April who also describes pole dancing as 'a real girly thing' and Hayley, who tells me that in classes '...you've got your friends there with you, you can have such a giggle'.

Storr (2003) describes female homosocial settings as an opportunity for emotional nurture and support, for being 'one of the girls' is about being recognised and affirmed by other women, and the sharing of events, experiences and provision of support amongst groups of friends enables women to both establish and reinforce their own identity. Many studies of community (Pahl, 2001; Delanty, 2003; Spencer and Pahl, 2006) argue that, in an increasingly globalised and postmodern world, there has been a decline in traditional forms of community, based upon location and work roles, and instead contemporary community is based on new kinds of belonging. No longer bounded by place, we are able to belong to multiple communities based on lifestyle, gender and consumption, for example. Anderson (1983) in his book *Imagined Communities*, suggests that community is not underpinned by lived spaced and immediate forms of social interaction, but is an active search for meaning and a sense of belonging. Thus, community and culture are concepts that exist in the mind of individuals and not in their structure or behaviour. Gerard Delanty (2003) tells us that contemporary postmodern communities are nomadic, elective and emotional, rather than based on given relationships or tied to physical spaces. Ray Pahl (2001) argues that friendship is increasingly important in social relations and that, in a society

characterised by family breakdown and the dispersal of families across the world, personal networks based upon friendship groups play a crucial role. The importance which my respondents place upon the friendships that they make in their pole dancing classes indeed indicate that these friendships may offer women real opportunities for collective identity and belonging.

With the possibility of greater levels of diversity in people's experiences and a heightened emphasis on lifestyle issues, friendships may be recognised increasingly as one of the main sites of activity giving life meaning. (Allan, 1998: 699)

Studies on friendship differ in their definitions of what actually constitutes friendship and Jennifer Coates (1996, 1997) refers to female friendship as being about feeling comfortable enough to disclose and talk about intimate details of lives, relationships and families, suggesting that when female friends meet they participate in a mutual exchange of stories about both positive and negative experiences in their lives. In my interview with Kate she described the relationships that she has developed within classes as being so close that women will talk about intensely personal topics, and pole dancing enables an arena in which women can talk about and share such issues:

You know, we talk about periods and bras and things and you can't do that if there's a bunch of guys in the class. Or a nice sports bra, you know, I had a nice silver one on the other day, or something. And I know when my students are pre-menstrual as well. I do! If I really get to know them I know, and if they're like 'oh I really can't do it this week' and like, they just can't click and I'm like 'are you due on?' 'Yeah'.

This shows a real level of closeness amongst women and certainly other literature on female friendship has also emphasised its essentially private and intimate nature (Johnson and Aries, 1983a, 1983b; O'Connor, 1992). However, whilst

other women that I met in this research, like Kate, described themselves as having made close friends with whom they share this intimate type of conversation, for many, talk seems to revolve often primarily around their shared interest in pole dancing and the sharing of ideas and tips on routines and pole dancing related experiences. Following Coates' definition, this would not necessarily constitute friendship. However, many of my respondents did refer to this as an example of them having conversations with their friends and I would suggest that women have differing meanings of friendship, for example, differing and subjective definitions of what constitutes a 'friend' or an 'acquaintance', or what makes a 'close' or a 'casual' friend. This is evidenced for example in my interviews with Sophie and Helen, who attended the same pole dancing class together, were already friends prior to beginning pole dancing, and were studying for a PhD in the same university department. In my interview with Sophie she described herself as not having made any new friends through pole dancing, describing Helen as the only friend she had in classes and the other women she had met as being acquaintances. Yet in my interview with Helen she claimed that both herself and Sophie had made a number of new friends in classes and described the social aspect as an important part of pole dancing for her. As argued by Ray Pahl (2001), friendship can exist on thick or thin levels. My respondents described their relationships with others that they have met through pole dancing as variable in the degree of support and intimacy – they have made some close friends, which can be described as on a thick level, with whom they socialise outside of classes, and some more casual friends, which can be described as on a thin level, who they may meet up with outside of classes occasionally to practice pole dancing. Definitions of what constitutes these different types of friendship are subjective. Regardless of the degree of

closeness, however, all relationships made are characterised by a mutual interest in pole dancing and the perception of a mutual support and understanding. As argued by Smith (1992), community is characterised by a shared belief and often a shared cause or cooperative action. In the case of pole dancing, my respondents indeed described themselves as having a shared understanding with other pole dancers, claiming that those who have never participated in pole dancing cannot understand what pole dancing really is all about and thus women who do participate have a common bond. What is common throughout all of my interviews is that women gain a sense of belonging via their participation in pole dancing, due to the perception of a shared understanding and shared cause, and the following section shows the ways in particular that this is enacted through online communications.

### **Talking Pole: Conversations in the Pole Dancing Community**

The women I interviewed described that whilst men might buy a pole for their partner as a present, and were often likely to be the person who would put up the pole, attaching it to the ceiling joists and ensuring it was attached safely, this was generally as far as their involvement extended. Women generally accepted that men were not interested in talk about pole dancing beyond the realms of sexual fantasy and the titillation aspect and described men as generally not interested in talking about the fitness benefits of pole dancing or helping their partner with achieving particular moves, for example. Sarah described how her boyfriend has become bored with talking about pole dancing and watching her attempt certain moves:

He appreciates I've got quite good at it and he, you know, he'll sit and say 'you're actually quite good now, aren't you?' and I'm like 'yeah! Thank you!' But I'll still, you know, when I try and learn a new trick I'll call him up the stairs going like 'come and see this, come and see this' and he, like, wearily plods up the stairs and watches me fall over and going 'I can do it, I can do it', and watches me fall over again and 'I can do this, wait a second' and he'll be like 'I'll be with you in a bit' and he'll come back down and play on his Playstation. No...he's weary. He's sick of it.

In my interview with Charlotte she also talked about her boyfriend's lack of interest in talking about pole dancing moves and skills, and joked to me that he is bored of hearing her talk about it. Despite her laughing this off, however, I felt a sense of disappointment from Charlotte. After all pole dancing is not only her hobby but also her job – she teaches classes and also performs pole dancing at events as well as running teacher training courses to train other instructors. She also told me that she has financially been very successful from pole dancing and that, were the popularity of pole dancing to suddenly end, meaning she was out of work, she had enough money in the bank to be financially secure for some time. Her boyfriend's lack of interest in talking about her hobby and her job and that he '...can't stand it. It's boring, heard all about it a hundred times....' and '...he hates pole dancing, 'oh bloody pole dancing, blah blah blah'' indicates that, despite her financial success and her enjoyment of pole dancing, this is trivialised by her boyfriend and seen as unimportant. In contrast, Charlotte talked about his job as an IT manager and his recent promotion with a real sense of pride. It is unclear what aspect of pole dancing Charlotte's boyfriend is so uninterested in, or whether it is simply that he regards Charlotte's job and interest as of limited significance in comparison to his own. It is also unclear whether he would react this way whatever job Charlotte did. The lack of interest from her boyfriend, however, means that Charlotte turns to friends to talk about pole dancing, and she finds that other women who also pole dance will give their attention to talking about pole



dancing, whether it is about particular moves, putting together new routines or also talking about the reactions of their own partners. This enables Charlotte to make sense of the reactions of her boyfriend as well as validating and reinforcing the importance of pole dancing in her life as something not trivial or boring but something important to her and a large part of her existence and identity. Research on linguistics shows that men and women have different ways of communicating and in particular theorists on male and female friendship (Johnson and Aries, 1983a, 1983b; Miller, 1983; Coates, 1996, 1997) show that while men's friendships are characterised by a lack of self-disclosure, female friendships are focused around talking and sharing personal experiences. Linguist Jennifer Coates (1996, 1997) shows how talk forms the basis of women's friendships and women's talk is highly important for women as a method to construct, maintain and understand their personal identity. She argues that the sharing of experiences helps to improve women's mutual understanding, and to seek support from other women. As I discussed in chapter three, on a number of occasions my respondents thanked me at the end of the interview and Charlotte, for example, told me that it had been nice to be able to talk to someone who was interested to listen, contrasting this to her experience of having pole dancing conversations with her boyfriend and joking that whilst I had listened to her talking for almost two hours, he would have stopped listening after less than two minutes. Talking to friends about pole dancing has huge importance to women as a way of being able to understand their experiences and reinforce their own interests and validate their sense of self, enabling them to reinforce that pole dancing is not meaningless or trivial but, in the case of Charlotte, for example, it is actually something which she not only enjoys doing, which she regards herself as entitled to do, but which she has also been very successful at financially. Orbach (2010)

describes that the feminist movement began with small groups of women getting together to talk about 'the problem which had no name', during which they talked about and shared stories of their ambitions, relationships, work and children. The friendship groups that women develop in pole dancing classes appear to allow them a similar opportunity to talk to other women in a women only space, and to share and reflect upon stories and experiences.

The internet plays a huge part in the pole dancing community, for many pole dancing instructors and schools have their own websites and there are also websites on which online lessons are posted, to enable women to learn to pole dance at home. Many social networking websites such as Facebook have groups dedicated to pole dancing, where women can talk online to other women about their experiences and also share tips on particular moves and positions. Indeed, as I discussed previously, I used Facebook to recruit three of my respondents, all three of whom had pictures of themselves pole dancing on their profile and were also members of pole dancing groups. Groups to which my respondents were members on Facebook included those run by their instructors on which class timetables and information were posted, and also other more general interest groups such as 'Addicted to Pole', 'Pole Dancing Fanatics' and 'I Love Pole'. Jodie was a member of the group 'Girls who do Pole Dancing and the Guys who Love them', the name of which seems to suggest an acceptance that men and women might have alternative perspectives on pole dancing. The website YouTube hosts a plethora of videos which women have posted of themselves and their friends performing pole routines. There are also a number of internet forums dedicated solely to the discussion of pole dancing and on which women can ask for tips and advice and which also offer an opportunity for women to post videos

or photographs and give one another feedback. There are also threads on forums on which women share and discuss what are perceived as negative reactions to pole dancing. Not all of my respondents posted regularly on the internet, however, all were aware of the existence of pole dancing forums and web groups and all had looked at these at least once, with most describing themselves as using them occasionally. Helen, Anna and Charlotte were regular posters on forums and Helen was a member of several different forums on which she would post every day. Anna was unique from the rest of my respondents in that she had never been to a group pole dancing class and she had taught herself to pole dance at home, solely with the use of the internet. Anna had paid a subscription to a website on which it is possible to download video lessons. She had also used YouTube to gain ideas from other people's videos on how to put movements together into a routine and used a forum to gain advice and help and ask questions from other women. Despite not physically attending regular classes, Anna described herself as belonging very much to a community of pole dancers, and in her interview she told me about women she had communicated with on these forums with whom she now emails regularly and describes as friends. When I interviewed Anna, she had recently been to a 'pole jam', an event in which women meet up, which is held at someone's studio but does not take the format of a lesson and is more a practice session and social gathering amongst advanced level pole dancers. These events are arranged online via email or on networking websites. Anna described this as having been an opportunity to meet face to face many of the women with whom she had previously had numerous email and internet conversations. She had also exchanged contact details on the day with other women with whom she now also communicates regularly on the internet. Thus, for Anna, the internet means that she does not have to attend the

same weekly class as other women to identify them as friends and identify herself as belonging to part of a community. Kate also told me that she has friends who live in Australia who she met on pole dancing forums, one of whom had travelled to the UK on a holiday and they had met and had lunch together.

As argued by Rheingold (1993), the idea of community as place based is increasingly challenged for the internet has made possible the establishment of virtual communications, creating new possibilities for relationships and opening up connections between people who otherwise would have no contact. Had the internet not existed, Anna may never have come into contact with this group of women, who she now describes as her friends, and Kate would never have got in touch with the Australian pole dancer and subsequently met her face to face. The term 'virtual community', coined by Rheingold, refers to the number of online spaces in which participants are able to engage in communication. In the postmodern world, fitness pole dancing may be an example of a contemporary form of community – performed in different contexts, and where women have a number of possible ways to keep in contact with one another in particular via social networking sites and online forums – showing elements of a virtual community. To some extent the virtual or online community is a notion similar to face to face situations in which communication between individuals takes place. However, in online groups, individuals are motivated by talking about a common interest and talk remains focused primarily on a particular topic. On pole dancing forums, there are threads to enable 'off topic' conversations, and users are therefore not restricted to only talk about pole dancing, however, this is the primary focus and users go onto online discussion groups in the first place because they are interested in the topic of discussion and see it as a source of

information. There are numerous debates around the quality of relationships built up over the internet and whether or not life online is equivalent to 'real life' interactions. Brian Turner (2001) argues that the virtual community may be described as a 'thin community' for it is not based on strong ties and often is made up of strangers. Nancy Baym (2000), however, in her discussion of the use of online forums by TV soap opera fans, suggests that, while participants are initially strangers, motivated to join an online forum as a source of discussion and information about a particular topic, these online groups prove to be an interpersonally complex social world and for many users, fellow participants come to feel like friends. Parks and Floyd (1996) found that women are much more likely than men to establish online relationships and describe the people that they talk to on the internet as friends and also Baym argues that the online language styles used differ between men and women, for in online groups occupied by more men, conversations tend to be more fact based, whereas those occupied by more women tend to be more likely to involve self disclosure and, with reference to soap opera fans, Baym found that women would compare storylines and situations seen on TV soap operas to their own feelings, life events and experiences. Certainly some of my respondents, in particular Helen, Anna and Charlotte, described a strong attachment to their online gatherings and friendships and for these women, the virtual community seems to offer much more than thin friendship. Charlotte uses internet forums and writes a weekly blog in which she tells stories about classes, pole dancing events, and her experiences of putting together routines. As discussed above in reference to Charlotte's boyfriend and his perceived lack of interest in talking to her about pole dancing, Charlotte's use of the internet again gives her a means to communicate with others who are interested in pole dancing, her blog allows her an arena in which

to put forward and express her feelings, and the use of forums allows a space in which her interest is centralised and taken seriously. For both Anna and Charlotte the people they speak to regularly via the internet are described as friends to whom they appear to have a great sense of emotional attachment. But in my interview with Sophie she told me that whilst she does go on the internet and uses web forums, she feels that the people she speaks to on the internet are not friends but more accurately described as acquaintances. Thus, some women may see this as offering a very thin type of friendship for them and may describe friends only as those women that they see regularly and share intimate conversations with about experiences and feelings in their lives. Thus, in both face to face and online interactions, relationships vary in terms of the degree of support and intimacy that is offered and women differ in their interpretations of what these relationships mean.

Many users of the web forums that I visited during the course of my fieldwork posted photographs and videos of themselves, and many had an 'avatar' which was attached to their posts. An avatar, from the Sanskrit word for 'a form of self', refers to a picture or icon which the web user attaches to their posts to represent themselves. Some people post a picture of themselves as their avatar, or of an object or picture which means something significant to them. On pole dancing forums, the vast majority of avatars are a picture of the user pole dancing. Similarly, on social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, pole dancers often upload pole dancing photographs and videos of themselves and use these as their 'profile pictures'. The sharing of pictures of oneself may create a sense of embodiment and mean that online relationships between respondents seem more real and anonymity can, to some extent, be broken down. The use of pictures can

also be an attempt to create status, for users tend, it seems, to post pictures which show themselves performing the most advanced or skilled moves in their repertoire. Helen told me that she had never posted a video of herself pole dancing on the internet, but she indicated that she might do this once she has perfected a particular move called the 'Split Heel', indicating that she wishes to wait until she is able to post a video of herself performing something impressive:

I've never done this, but people put pictures up of things that they've done. I think I would like to but I don't think I'm good enough yet. Well I probably am good enough but I'm not very good at video editing and things like that. Until I feel really confident I wouldn't put a DVD of me pole dancing up on the internet. Until maybe I've perfected my Split Heel.

Charlotte uploads videos of herself pole dancing onto the website YouTube and she told me how one particular video that she posted a few years ago has had a large number of viewers and a huge number of positive comments have been posted on the web in response. This praise and encouragement of her pole dancing is something which Charlotte seems to be missing in her relationship with her partner and it seems to provide a compensation for this, giving Charlotte a real sense of worth and affirming her identity as a successful woman. By posting videos of herself performing spectacular and skilled moves, Charlotte also gains an identity by the gaining of status within the pole dancing community, defining herself as an expert within the community. Indeed, Charlotte is well known in the pole dancing community, and is regarded by some as a pole dancing celebrity and several of my other respondents mentioned her in their interviews and had watched Charlotte's YouTube video. Charlotte's use of videos and photographs of herself enables her to demonstrate to others her expertise and skill and 'wow' other women, and it appears that status within pole dancing is based upon an

ability to perform some of the most risky, skilled and spectacular moves. Within the pole dancing community, therefore, Charlotte sees herself as having an opportunity to develop a status and power which appears to be denied to her in her relationship with her partner.

### **'Girl Power!' through Pole Dancing**

In the pole dancing community, these opportunities for belonging and identity development as 'one of the girls' goes some way to explaining statements that pole dancing is empowering for women. Rowlands (1995: 103) describes three dimensions to empowerment; firstly, individual empowerment, as in developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity; secondly, close relationships, thus an ability to negotiate and influence relationships; and finally, collective empowerment, where individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact, and through which groups of people are involved in political movements or collective action. Many of my respondents told me that they had found a collective empowerment from attending pole dancing classes and certainly pole dancing is advertised as a women only activity which centres around identification and solidarity with other women. The following is an excerpt from the website for the pole dancing company Polistic Dance which teaches classes in Hollywood, California:

Enjoy a community of women unlike what you may have ever experienced before. One of the gifts of this movement is the discovery of the unique beauty that lies within each curve, crevice, arch, stretch and emotion of the treasure that is you. Upon this self-discovery, we all come to the genuine realization that every one of us is beautiful in our own individual way,



leading us to a path of true encouragement and support of our sisters.  
(Polistic Dance, 2010)

The language used here which describes a 'community of women', 'this movement', 'true encouragement and support of our sisters' shows parallels to the language that could generally be associated with the feminist movement, in offering 'sisterhood' and mutual support and understanding for women. Also 'self discovery', 'the treasure that is you' and 'everyone of us is beautiful' could be described as the language of self-help and motivation, with the classes being promoted as a form of self-help, to enable women to construct and improve themselves in a positive way. Polistic Dance's play on the word 'holistic' may also be an attempt to put forward this message, in implying that pole dancing helps an individual to become 'whole'. The message given here is that pole dancing is unique in that it is something to unite women in their seeking of self improvement, providing a sense of 'sisterhood' and empowerment. Of course, as with the respondents in this research (as discussed in chapter four), Polistic Dance may be using the language of feminism, but they refrain from actually using the terms 'feminism' or 'feminist', perhaps as this is deemed as likely to actually encourage women not to attend classes due to the ambiguous and problematic nature of these terms for many women. On attending her first pole dancing class, Mel told me that:

*The teacher was really, really nice, and she just explained at the beginning that, you know, we didn't do it for men, we just did it for ourselves. And it's all about confidence and building up strength and getting fit while having a giggle. And it was a lot of fun. And I signed up for lessons there and then.*

The message promoted by the advertising of classes and by the instructor described by Mel above, is that women are doing pole dancing for themselves, it

is not about men, and that this is something women are entitled to do, in a similar way to the arguments of Baumgardner and Richards (2000) which I outlined in chapter two, who call for the enjoyment of feminine products and suggest that women are entitled to have fun and do not need to reject their looks or reject having a good time in the postmodern society. In my interview with Jodie, she described her participation in pole dancing with a sense of entitlement, telling me that her husband spends money and time on his hobbies, such as watching and playing football and going to the pub with his friends, so why shouldn't she do this? She also talked with excitement about an upcoming weekend away, shopping and going to the theatre in London, with some of her friends from pole dancing classes, again with a sense of entitlement to do this – her husband goes away with his friends, so why shouldn't she go on a 'girlie weekend'? Jodie also suggested that pole dancing allows her to develop feelings of independence from her husband, and she told me 'he's got his football, I've got my pole dancing'. Thus, pole dancing classes are advertised as something women are able to do and entitled to do and that women can show female solidarity and 'girl power' whilst continuing to embrace their looks and femininity. In this sense they could be seen as a clear example of the 'girlie feminism' that Baumgardner and Richards describe.

Of course, McRobbie (2009) criticises Baumgardner and Richards' message of girlie feminism as playing directly into the hands of consumer culture. Certainly, women described that they were encouraged to take up pole dancing due to the promises made in advertising, that pole dancing would bring them empowerment, femininity and sexiness, and that it would improve and change the body for the better, as well as enable them to meet friends and feel part of a community.

Studies on consumption debate whether or not people are active agents who select consumer items independently, or whether they are influenced by structures which frame and constrain people's choices (Willett, 2008). Research on youth subcultures have historically focused on how consumption is used as a marker of identity by young people (Hebdige, 1979; Lury, 1996). Willett's (2008) study of the use of the internet by girls argues that the consumption of online cultures are a resource by which young people play with and mark out identity and that young people are not passive victims of this process, but rather consumer culture positions them as active participants within it. Yet this does not mean that choices are entirely free. Young people are targeted by marketing and presented with information and images through which they are able to 'choose' and define their identities, thus Willett argues that choice is constructed by commercial mechanisms. For the pole dancers in this research, the marketing of pole classes clearly presents a particular identity which can be created by the consumption of pole dancing, and thus women's choice to participate must be constructed to some extent by the marketing of these classes, and a message of girl power promoted by the advertising of classes may be about, as McRobbie argued in her discussions around other 'girlie products' and 'sex entertainment', playing on young women's rising incomes, where companies may be concerned more with making money rather than really giving women empowerment and confidence. As argued by Taft (2001: 4), girls are encouraged to think in terms of consumption rather than social and political action. Sure enough, whilst pole dancing is advertised as confidence building, empowering and liberating for women and the women that I met in this research use this type of language in their descriptions of classes, they are not motivated to make steps to challenge their position in society. The extent to which pole classes therefore constitute

what Rowlands described as collective empowerment may therefore be questioned as pole dancers do not appear to be achieving any impact or gaining of power within wider society and are certainly not participating in collective or political action.

Many pole dancing classes are run by individual women who have set up classes in their local area, and Kate described how she originally hired the studio at her local gym to teach classes once a week and that these were so successful that she eventually could afford to buy her own permanent premises in which to run classes. This seems fairly typical for many instructors and when I interviewed Sarah she was teaching classes in a hired room above a pub, but I have since found out that she now has her own studio where she runs classes every night of the week and employs other instructors. There are also a number of large national franchise companies which offer pole dancing classes across the UK, which often run other classes alongside pole dancing, including striptease, belly dancing and burlesque. Advertising on the website of the franchise company Polestars claims that 'women strut away from our classes feeling fabulous and with a new found confidence'. Kate in her interview spoke negatively about the people that run these types of franchise company, suggesting that they were more motivated by money than the smaller pole dancing companies like her own, which are owned by individuals who share a love for pole dancing. She described that 'I think people who, sort of, franchise tend to not really care about pole dancing too much. They care about money' and told me that there are some franchise companies who have a bad name because of this. I noticed that the classes run by these types of company in general tend to be more expensive than smaller companies and individual instructors, and they also tend to have larger class

sizes, and when I commented on this in my interview with Kate, she suggested this to be about:

...filling the classes, making more money...but that means less time on the pole. Sometimes you have eight women for one pole in those types of class, so there's loads of standing around waiting for your turn. The big companies get some criticism for that. You're paying to stand around. My classes...five poles, ten maximum in a class, so two to a pole. So you get more pole time and more attention from the instructor.

This quotation from Kate echoes the arguments of Jacobs, (2003: 70), in her discussion of the social pressures placed upon women to adhere to an impossible beauty ideal, where she argues that big corporations 'create' the needs of the public in order to sell products:

This is why all of the advertising is geared to making you want the unachievable because it keeps us striving and buying until we finally reap the social benefits. But the only ones who reap the benefits are the big corporations who do not really care if we reach these goals.

This discussion questions the extent to which empowerment is available to women through attending pole dancing, and the extent to which women are exerting choice in signing up for classes, when these are advertised to women as a particular lifestyle to which they should aspire. I do not dispute, however, the argument put forward in the advertising of classes that pole dancing may be seen to offer women a belonging and sense of community. I would argue that pole dancing may be described as a source of 'we-feelings', a term which Dunning (1999: 6) uses in reference to sporting communities to indicate a sense of belonging to a collective group, which is evidenced in several of my respondents by the statement that they are 'one of the girls'. In classes myself, I have noticed the immense support and encouragement from other women in the class. When

someone achieves a particular move, other women in the class will clap and offer words of praise to one another. These comments of approval are very satisfying and confidence building, which I felt myself in classes. The feelings of working the body and achieving some physically quite difficult movements and challenging positions on the pole, but also receiving approval and praise from your audience, may of course lead to some feelings of pleasure and be seen as a positive experience. Women will also give one another tips on particular moves and sometimes will offer actual physical help and assistance in 'spotting', being there to assist to hold the legs, to help support someone's body weight, or support their landing in the more difficult inverted moves. This provides feelings of community and friendship, as well as developing a real sense of trust amongst women to allow them to touch one another and support one another physically. The lack of competition in pole dancing classes is something which is also mentioned by several of my respondents as a significant aspect of pole dancing which appeals to them. Anna told me:

And everyone's really, kind of, supportive as well. You just, kind of, go 'oh can you teach me how to do that' and they'll, sort of, show you and help you out and then go 'oh wow, that was really good' and if you do something really well everyone will give you a round of applause. The feeling I got from the pole jam was that everyone was really supportive and there wasn't any kind of 'oh she's better than me errgh'...or 'I'm better than you ha ha' and everyone was just at their own level which was great...It seems to me that everyone's kind of united in their love for the dancing and if somebody's a bit better than somebody else then that person can learn from them or just appreciate that they are really good and just go 'wow, that's fantastic'.

Kate refers to pole dancing as non-competitive also and tells me that, were a man to be part of the class, this would change the class dynamic and atmosphere, and she tells me about an experience which she sites as evidence of this:

I had, erm...a...a man who was a bit confused about whether he wanted to be a woman or not, and I let him come into my class. I taught him privately at first, and I had a group of women in my class and they...erm...they...I asked all their permission first basically. I explained it, I explained it as he explained it to me...I said, you know, 'he's genetically a male but he feels like a female inside, and he wants to come into the class like a woman.' So I taught him because he wanted to, I taught him how to pole dance like a woman, because he felt he was. And he came into class, and caused problems. As soon as he came into the class he became competitive. Yeah. I had to...I had to kick him out. I had to. Because it wasn't just competitive, it was that he changed the whole dynamic...it was awful. He changed the whole dynamic of the class, it was so nice and close and supportive and, you know, women all together, and as soon as he came into the class it changed. Even though he felt like a woman, at the end of the day, genetically he was a male, and as a male you can't stop that instinct of being competitive. You can't. And that's what happened.

Kate's indication here is that, in group situations, men are instinctively more competitive than women and that this is something genetic which is not inherent in women. In the quote above she describes women only classes as being close and supportive and throughout her interview Kate describes the friendships that women make and the support that they provide to one another in classes. As described in chapter five, competitiveness has historically been assumed to be a feature of male sports (Messner, 1989, 1990a, 1990b; Hughes and Coakley, 1991; Young, 1993) and in Kate's interview she indicates that she generally agrees that being competitive is something which is genetically a male characteristic. It should be noted that whilst there is a relative lack of competition in pole dancing, competitions do exist, such as the national competition Miss Pole Dance UK. Whilst a relatively small number of women participate in competitions, there was generally an admiration amongst my respondents for those women who are 'good enough' to compete and several women in interviews described a desire to be able to take part in competitions in the future.

In my interview with Nicky, she described pole dancing as empowering, and when I asked her what she meant by this, she described that women develop self confidence through pole dancing, and gave an example of this:

And what I've found which is really, really lovely, is that pole dancing actually increases your self confidence. Only last month I had a girl come up to me, she pulled me to one side after a group lesson, she pulled me to one side and she goes, she goes 'Nicky, I've only been to two lessons, but I came to pole dancing because I wanted to increase my self confidence, because I've heard that it can do that, I've only been to two lessons and I went out the other night, and you have to understand Nicky that no one, no blokes, no men ever speak to me', and she goes 'I went out Saturday night and everybody was speaking to me so it must make a difference' and I was like 'oh bless you, that's so nice'. So, yeah, there's a lot of people that say that it really has made them more confident in themselves.

Of course, in this example, this woman's perceived increased confidence and suggestion that pole dancing can 'make a difference' can be seen as stemming from validation from the men who approached her and talked to her on a night out. It is suggested by Walter (2010) that women see sexual allure as a marker of success in contemporary society. The quote from Nicky above suggests that the success of pole dancing classes is attributed to making this woman more attractive to men. As with the arguments of Lipman-Blumen (1976) earlier, perceived empowerment may be linked to pole dancing as a way of helping women to look and feel sexy, thus maintaining their marketability and enabling them to attract men. Many women in this research, however, stated in interviews that they were not participating in pole dancing to attract men. They described that the general reactions of men to pole dancing are frustrating, for men tended to position pole dancing as a spectacle or as a fantasy for themselves and appeared aroused by the thought of pole dancing. My respondents discussed the male imagination in that pole dancing is presumed to be about women parading



about in their underwear, rubbing themselves up against the pole and against one another – being potential sex objects for men. Women claimed that the strength and skill involved in pole dancing is invisible to men, contrasting this with their own experience of watching women pole dancing, in which they are awed by the skill involved. Claire told me that she often watches videos on the internet of pole dancers and can appreciate the physical skill and technicality of the performance. On one particular video which shows a renowned Australian pole dancer, she told me:

She's incredible, I watch her again and again and again because she's my idol, absolutely, 100 per cent. The stuff she can do is incredible and she's so graceful with it. She does it to this, like, really slow song and it's really, like, emotive, and she's just awesome, absolutely, like, in the technical sense of the word, you are in awe watching her.

Expressing frustration that men cannot watch pole dancing in the same way, women stated that their participation in pole dancing does not make them sexually available, and told me that they are often frustrated with male assumptions that they are 'easy meat'. This of course, I should note, is the perception of men's imaginations. This is what the women in my study believe that men imagine about pole dancing classes. Having not interviewed any men, I have no data on what men actually think, although I should also note that from my own informal discussions on pole dancing with male friends, acquaintances and colleagues over the last few years, my own perception of the male imagination is similar to that of my respondents. It does appear more difficult for men to conceptualise pole dancing as a fitness activity and see pole dancing as anything other than a titillating thing, and this is also the way in which pole dancing is presented in media depictions.

Of course, women's self improvement, body toning and weight loss are expected to prove attractive to men, and even though women told me this is not the primary reason that they pole dance, there is part of them that is pleased that pole dancing does enable them to attract men, and they did acknowledge this in interviews. Whilst pole dancing is said to enable women to develop friendships with other women and many women described classes as empowering because no men were present in classes, nevertheless women still talked about men and they described male reactions as both frustrating but at the same time positive, giving women a sense of confidence that they are sexy and able to attract men. Women construct themselves as heterosexual, developing themselves in a way perceived as meeting an idealised concept of female beauty. In the quote above from Nicky's interview, the evidence given for pole dancing 'making a difference' is equated to being attractive to men and being chatted up on a night out, and having the confidence to engage in conversations with men. Jodie described the reactions of the male builders that she works with as being turned on by the idea of her pole dancing, teasing and flirting with her, and she described that pole dancing gives her 'a bit of an edge' when talking to men, as they are intrigued and it gives off an image of sexiness and mystery. I previously discussed my interview with Claire in which she described men being turned on by the idea of her being able to pole dance. Thus, perhaps men do not need to be present in classes, as they are still, as Holland et al. (1998) argue, 'in the head'. Whilst women may gain feelings of community and make friends in pole dancing, part of this may be about consuming and displaying oneself in a particular way and being validated as meeting society's beauty standards may be about achieving an appearance or a version of femininity which is appropriate and acceptable to men. The fact that women are doing this in a class, as a community, and with friends, suggests

women are helping and supporting one another to fashion themselves in this way and the quotation above from Nicky suggests that she deems her own success as a pole dancing instructor as being about helping women to construct this type of identity. In the classes I observed, women often got changed together in the changing rooms or, in the absence of changing rooms when the class was held in a hired room, at one side of the room together or, in one class, behind the bar. Whilst changing, women would talk about what they were wearing for the class, comparing outfits and shoes, often trying on one another's shoes and giving one another advice on where to buy shoes and other pole dancing clothing. As described previously, a number of studies have looked at the ways in which girls explore and construct their identity via the use of girls' magazines (Winship, 1987; Kay, 1999; McRobbie, 2009) suggesting that they offer advice and guidelines for women on constructing a feminine body, presenting the body and femininity as a project. Gray (2003: 496) argued that 'within these popular genres, the constituted feminine subject is a self in the process of transformation with the expectation, or at least the possibility, of achieving an ideal self'. Pole dancing classes, in a similar way to women's magazines, seem to offer women a form of self-help, guidance and advice, as a class which teaches and enables women to construct a particular type of self – promoted as teaching women sexiness and femininity via physical activity to work at and improve the body, and enabling women at the same time to develop mutual friendships and gain support from other women with the same goals.

There is also an increasing body of research which examines girls' activities and identity development online (Harris, 2004; Sevic Bortree, 2005; Willett, 2008). Harris describes that online spaces offer an opportunity for girls to develop

identities without the surveillance that they receive in public spheres. Shade (2002: 50) lists a number of activist websites which resemble the printed magazines written by earlier feminists, such as the 'Riot Grrrls', a feminist movement based in America in the 1980s and 90s, linked to the development of punk and rock music, who produced their own 'zines' (magazines) covering a range of feminist topics. Shade argues that new online activist communities are resisting the lifestyles that are marketed to them and producing their own forms of community. Yet my respondents, whilst they may form their own unique community, are not resisting the lifestyles that are marketed to them, and on the contrary they are adopting and embracing these lifestyles and seem to be accepting the messages around femininity and heterosexuality which are presented to them. But this does not mean that women are passively accepting these lifestyles – they may be accepting the structures which continue to create power relations but they are not entirely without agency. These women are not forced to attend classes and they certainly do not have to engage in online communication with other women who take classes, post their pictures and videos on the internet and write online blogs about their experiences of pole dancing. Clearly, this type of engagement is not a passive activity. As I showed in chapter five, there are complexities in these women's construction of the body and female pole dancers do offer some challenge to stereotypes of the female body, in particular challenging assumptions that women cannot be strong or take risks. Pole dancing classes, therefore, can be seen as enabling women to exert some forms of agency and power, yet it is evident that the pole dancing class is not an entirely free and open environment at the same time.

Several respondents told me that their partner would often brag to his friends about being with a woman who could pole dance, showing correlation with Lipman-Blumen's theory on male homosociality, with men using women as objects in order to gain status or social capital amongst their groups of male friends. On her husband, Jodie told me:

he's got one of the photos [*of Jodie pole dancing*] on his phone and he's like, showing it to all the lads, so they're all like 'give us a demonstration' and it's like 'no', so he's not bothered cos he shows all the lads and thinks it's quite funny, like 'my wife's a pole dancer', like 'look what my wife can do' and then he gets the usual comments like 'oh I bet it's good sex' and all this lot, like the lads do. So I think he likes it for that, you know, to show off with the lads, and to make them jealous.

There is a sense of acceptance from women that this is just what men are like, that their being turned on by pole dancing is to be expected and also that men will never understand what pole dancing is really about – they will always see this as something titillating, and this is something which women who pole dance just have to accept. Of her boyfriend's reaction to pole dancing, Lucy told me:

I'm just more like 'no, stop being like that Liam. Stop acting like that, this is not sexy, this is serious' [*laughs*] but, I mean, he can't help it, I suppose, when I'm upside down and my legs are apart and stuff...

The reactions of men and the perceptions of the male imagination are used by some women as a way of reinforcing the importance of the friendships with other women that are made within pole dancing classes, stating that within the class, they can converse with other women who truly understand what pole dancing is all about. There is very much a sense that not everyone will understand fitness pole dancing and that they will see it as something either deviant or titillating unless they have tried pole dancing themselves. In the following section I show

that, within fitness pole dancing, there are also differing levels of understanding, some examples of conflict, and debates around what constitutes 'proper' pole dancing, suggesting that the pole dancing community is not always an entirely cohesive and harmonious group.

### **Conflict in the Pole Dancing Community**

Whilst most of my respondents described positively the friendships that they had made in pole dancing classes and the support and sense of belonging that they gained from their participation in pole dancing, as described in the previous sections, in my interview with Charlotte, however, she told me some stories about her experiences of conflicts between women and what she described as the 'bitchiness' which occurs in pole dancing:

There is so much bitchiness, so much nastiness, it's incredible. And because it's such a new, a relatively new fitness form, everybody's clambering for the top, everybody wants to be the best. Which means that if somebody...for example, this is the case that happens everywhere, you start your school, you get somebody, you teach them to be a teacher, they decide after 6 months they wanna start up next door. Then there's a war that happens so you've got one school warring against the other school, which...I see it happening in all the new places.

Charlotte described several occasions where other women had been openly hostile towards her and in particular where one woman had used the internet as a means to threaten Charlotte, by sending her threatening emails and messages and posting negative comments about Charlotte on an online blog. Charlotte described this as an attempt to undermine her status as a successful pole dancing instructor and performer, by criticising her abilities to pole dance as well

as criticising Charlotte as a person, in order for other pole dancers to elevate their own status. She suggested that this is most common amongst instructors who would compete for customers to attend their classes, and would compete online by the displaying of videos and the creation of websites and blogs which aimed to be better and more popular than those of their rivals. She also suggested that competition and bitchiness is rife between pole dancing celebrities who compete in national and international events and described this as the reason why she no longer participates in competitions. Whilst Charlotte described pole dancing earlier as enabling her to gain a sense of belonging and understanding and a source of friendship, these experiences indicate that the world of pole dancing is not immune from competitiveness or debates around who should be included into the homosocial group or community. These power struggles may exist between women who are both included and excluded, women who run different pole dancing schools and even women who take part in the same weekly class as one another. Hills (2002), in his book on fandom, suggests that fan communities are social hierarchies in which fans share a common interest while competing over knowledge and access to the object of interest. Whilst Hills is referring to fan communities here, this can also be related to the women in this research. These women share a common interest and feel a common bond, but, in Charlotte's experience, there exists some competition for status and cultural capital and the pole dancing community is based upon some elements of a hierarchical framework. Charlotte described how she feels that the women who she describes as 'bitching' about her are envious of her success, describing this as being about competition and envy. Likewise, April referred to some women (who don't pole dance) as being jealous of those women who can pole dance, due to their

perceived attractiveness to men, the perceived Barbie doll appearance, and their ability to create feelings of arousal in men:

Women look down their nose, but mainly as they think you are going to steal their boyfriends...women see you as a threat well cos a pole dancer is every guys' fantasy isn't it? So they think their boyfriends will fancy you. So they're a bit insecure. And they wish they had the confidence themselves. And cos it looks so impressive, they wish they could do it. But you just have to ignore them...and remember it is just jealousy.

Kate also described that women can be quite hostile when they find out that she pole dances and this is because she is seen as a threat, describing how '...people get sort of defensive about their boyfriends, you know? Cos they think you're gonna steal their boyfriend away'. Thus, returning to Lipman-Blumen's theory, *some competition seems to arise around the ability of women to gain access to men and to men's resources.*

In chapter four I referred to the discussions I had with Kate in her interview about the 'type of woman' that she wants to come to her classes and that she aims her classes towards, reflected in her pricing and in the wording of advertisements. Kate referred to her classes as being aimed at middle class women and expressed a desire for her classes to be attended by professional women, women she described as being like herself. She was critical of classes held in bars and nightclubs, suggesting that these appeal to a lower class woman, who she described as a 'drinking culture type of person', equating drinking alcohol with being working class and in turn being working class with being less feminine, being more likely to be irresponsible in classes, take greater risks and have less regard for safety. As I showed in chapter five, women generally accepted risk in classes, yet Kate suggested that whilst many pole dancing moves carry some



elements of risk, in her classes this is performed in a safe environment amongst women who she describes as responsible, and she indicated that working class women might have less respect for safety measures. Kate also described a need for classes to be held in an environment away from bars and nightclubs if they are to be taken seriously as a fitness class. Many other respondents debated in their interviews the differences between classes held in studios and health and fitness clubs versus those held in bars and nightclubs. Theresa also dismissed those held in bars and nightclubs as offering a 'different type' of class, where women would drink alcohol and were more concerned with learning how to be sexy than taking part in a physical exercise. Hannah, however, taught her classes in a lap dancing club but still described her class as being fitness, and Karen attended classes in a hired room above a pub and defended this by describing that women would not drink alcohol in the class and instead would socialise with a drink in the pub after the class had finished.

Debates also proliferate around the wearing of heeled stripper shoes in classes and whether or not this is appropriate. These debates for or against wearing heels were strong with women adopting one position or the other. Kate dismissed the wearing of heels in classes and argued that women should not wear heels for pole dancing as this is not fitness and equates pole dancing more closely to the strip industry than to the fitness industry. Theresa agreed with Kate and told me:

They do it in bare feet. I don't have the heels in the club because it's not fitness and I'm teaching [*a fitness class*] so I have to keep that image...I wouldn't have it in the class. It changes the way it...it's just a different image, it's not what it's about. And I can't sell that I'm doing a mainstream form of exercise, and then say 'right put your heels on'. You know, that's not a mainstream form of exercise, that's teaching people to dance in heels...

In other interviews, however, respondents did wear heels for classes yet still described their class as a fitness class. The reasons for wearing heels differed. They were described by some as a technical requirement to assist in particular moves, for example, Mel told me that her stripper shoes have a rubber sole which helps to grip to the pole, and in one of the classes I attended, the instructor told us that heels helped with climbing, for they made women much taller and therefore 'you don't have as far to climb'. Anna told me that for certain spins it was possible to hook the heel around the pole to hold oneself in place. Heels were also described by some as worn purely to make women feel good about themselves and to increase confidence, for heels were seen as feminine and sexy, elongating the legs and making women walk in what was perceived as a sexier way. Charlotte suggested, 'they make you look fantastic, it makes your legs look beautiful'. Thus, whilst pole dancing was described as a fitness class, the wearing of heeled shoes allowed women to continue to present themselves as feminine and sexual. As the shoes that women wore tended to be the same style of shoe that are typically seen in the images of female strippers, heels also tended to provide some women with an 'authentic' experience, as argued by Hannah, to enable women to feel like a stripper for the evening. Dancing in bare feet or trainers was criticised by some women as clumsy, unattractive and unfeminine.

These discussions demonstrate that the pole dancing community in reality is based upon a number of debates around who should be included or excluded. Being 'one of the girls' means inclusion into the pole dancing homosocial group and by definition, implies the exclusion of others as outsiders. Also, within the community itself, i.e. those who are included, there exist debates around what constitutes proper pole dancing, and with classes being held in different venues

and taking on differing formats, including those where heels are worn and those where heels are not, women who pole dance have different ideas about what is appropriate in the pole dancing class and what is not. In chapter four I discussed how the women in this study worked hard to distinguish themselves from women who work in the sex industry who were seen as deviant and dirty, and also from women who condemned pole dancing who were described as feminist, anti-sex, uptight, and generally were assumed to be older women. Women often presented themselves in terms of what they were not, i.e. by describing themselves as not being strippers and as not being feminist. In his book *Community*, Gerard Delanty (2003: 3) describes 'a view of community as shaped by what separates people rather than by what they have in common'.

Delanty (2003) argues that the postmodern community exists in many forms and there is not one kind of community that is more real than other forms, for in fact there exist traditional face to face communities, virtual communities and transnational communities, for example, which often complement one another. The discussions in this chapter show that the friendships women make via pole dancing may take many different forms and women's sense of community or friendship is open, changing and flexible. Pahl (2001) also argues that friendship communities are fluid and temporary groups which people move in and out of. Pahl suggests that Maffesoli's (1996) concept of the 'neo-tribes' is the most accurate way of describing the contemporary community. Neo-tribes are described as friendship or hobby groups and Maffesoli claims that people demonstrate their collective identity via consumption and consumer goods. The boundaries of these groups, however, are blurred, as people may be members of many different friendship groups and they may have several different hobbies.

Certainly my respondents, whilst describing the importance of the friendships made via pole dancing, do often have other groups of friends made at work or university, for example, and also many participate in other hobbies alongside pole dancing. Mel takes part in other types of dance class, several of my respondents horse ride, and on websites like Facebook women are members of other groups and they also access other websites, use other forums and have other interests. Sarah teaches other forms of fitness class as well as pole dancing and describes the friendships made in these classes. Also, it should be noted that the discussions on homosociality do not take into account that some women may have friendships with men. Whilst pole dancing offers homosociality to groups of women, and the nature of pole dancing as well as the perceived lack of understanding from men about pole dancing means that men are generally excluded from pole dancing classes, in different contexts and settings and when involved in different hobbies women may have shared interests with men and may describe men as their friends. Certainly, Sarah told me that her best friend was male, and that she had taught him a couple of pole dancing spins but generally he had no interest in pole dancing, and their friendship was based around a mutual interest in music.

## **Summary**

Advertising of pole dancing proposes that these classes help women to become empowered, offering an opportunity to unite with other women in their search for community and for self improvement, and is aligned with a power feminist argument (Wolf, 1994) which suggests that women have the freedom and the

agency to make a choice over attending pole dancing classes, and a girlie feminist argument (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000) which states that women do not have to reject consummately feminine and girlie activities like pole dancing in a postmodern world. I have shown in this chapter that participation in pole dancing may indeed offer individuals satisfaction in the achievement of new moves and encouragement, support and appraisal from others, and women show a true enjoyment of pole dancing and a real commitment to the friends that they make. They are able to engage with their friends in classes and through online communications. Women are offered, via their homosociality, an arena in which to gain support and encouragement from others and gain a sense of worth, making sense of themselves and their relationships, and an opportunity for their interests to be centralised and taken seriously. For the majority of my respondents, their shared interest in pole dancing has enabled them to make a number of close friendships and it is heartening to see the friendships that women have made and the importance that these friendships have to them. Yet pole dancing can be seen as something which has developed in the context of a consumer raunch culture and women are sold these classes with the promise of offering empowerment as one of the girls, and the extent to which pole dancing can really offer a collective empowerment to women can be challenged. Women can be seen to exert agency in their choice to participate in classes and their engagement with the community, particularly online, yet their identities are shaped by commercial mechanisms and outside of the homosocial group and particularly in the eyes of men, the women in this study suggest that pole dancing remains seen as a titillating thing, associated with women as objects in a society which views pole dancing as something to arouse and excite men. Whilst Kaeren Harrison (1998) suggested that women's homosociality was indicative of resistance in the face of their inequalities, the

women in this study do not seem to be challenging power relationships with men. On the one hand women express frustration with men for not taking pole dancing seriously or being seen to dismiss the skill that is involved in pole dancing, yet on the other there is a sense of acceptance that men may always see pole dancing as something arousing, and women gain some pleasure in their ability to attract and excite men. The community appears to be constructed around helping one another to construct themselves as feminine and heterosexual, creating a particular kind of self and thus reinforcing social structures via the presentation of themselves as objects to be gazed at. Thus, pole classes enable women to make friends and online communities provide important spaces for expression and identity development, yet it is evident that these spaces are at the same time not entirely free, open environments.

This chapter also shows that the concept of friendship is subjective – not all women involved in pole dancing are friends, and those who do describe themselves as friends have different definitions of friendship and see one another in differing ways. Women also have differing ideas about what constitutes 'proper' pole dancing and about who should be included or excluded from the group. As was argued by Pahl (2001), concepts of friendship are complicated and multifaceted and friendship is a flexible type of community which exists on thick and thin levels. The homosocial group of pole dancers takes on different forms – whilst some women attend a weekly class, some attend more regularly, some meet friends in between their weekly classes to practice, some go on nights out with pole friends and some women like Anna have never attended a pole dancing class but communicate with other pole dancers via the internet. Some see their friends every day but some have never met their friends face to face and have

only ever communicated online. In this sense pole dancing can be described as a type of postmodern friendship or homosocial community, where women have other friendship groups and other hobbies and interests and friendship exists for women on different levels and in different contexts, definitions of friendship are complex and changeable, and women may move in and out of the group as they participate in other types of community and develop other friendships outside of pole dancing.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Conclusion**

Pole dancing is something which in contemporary society carries with it much controversy and is something that everyone seems to have heard of, have an opinion about, and have a particular image in their mind of the 'type' of person who pole dances and what this involves. For many this seems to be linked to the image of a female stripper. Pole dancing is an activity which is most popularly associated with the sex industry, for it is performed nightly in lap dancing clubs across the UK, and the stereotype of a class clearly appears to be that of young attractive women, 'Barbie dolls', semi-naked, gyrating around a pole for the sole purpose of male titillation. This is the image most populated in the media and which was also described by my respondents as the typical male assumption as to what a pole dancing class involves, as teaching women to perform for men. For these reasons there have been a number of critical feminist accounts of the rise in pole dancing as a mainstream fitness class for women, which have described these types of class as degrading and objectifying for women, and regarded them as offering a false image of female empowerment. These debates have described pole dancing as growing in the context of a sexualised raunch culture which puts expectations on women to be and act sexual and raunchy and to see being sexy as a marker of success (Levy, 2005; McRobbie, 2009; Walter, 2010).

Samantha Holland (2010), however, provides what she describes as a 'sex positive' feminist account of pole classes and in describing the arguments of those writers who have criticised classes she states that 'the assumption being



that pole, since done primarily by women, can only be about women's objectification and sexualisation whereas all the women I spoke to talked about fun, friendship and increased confidence and strength', and she describes those who have criticised pole dancing classes in the past as being 'detractors' and 'feminist academics or journalists needing a quick fix of titillation for their readers' (2010:56). I am, however, neither a 'detractor', nor needing a quick fix of titillation for my readers. I do see my account of pole dancing classes, however, as offering a challenge to Holland's work, but also as moving beyond the critical work of other feminist writers on pole dancing classes, showing that pole classes are much more complex and multifaceted than any of these previous accounts suggest. Many a time throughout the course of this research I have been asked my own opinion on pole dancing classes by friends or colleagues, in particular whether I agree with these types of class or not, whether I see pole dancing as 'empowering or degrading', 'right or wrong', whether my account is 'critical or positive' and whether classes are really about 'fitness' or whether they are only about teaching women to be 'sexy'. As I described in chapter three, at the beginning of this research I felt a need to answer these types of question and come to a conclusion as to whether or not I agreed with pole classes. Yet throughout the course of this research these questions have become in my mind increasingly difficult to answer.

Pole dancing is an activity which exists in a variety of different formats. There are classes held in bars, nightclubs, lap dancing clubs, health and fitness clubs, women's homes and specially designed studios. Different clothing is worn by women in classes, in particular some women wear stripper shoes, others pole dance in bare feet or ballet pumps. Different classes also follow different formats.

Some classes teach women a routine, choreographed to a piece of music, others concentrate on teaching pole tricks and some dedicate a few minutes in each class to stretching and body toning work, for example, abdominal crunches and squats. During Hannah's class, women are taught to perform on a stage to an audience, and this performance appears to focus on women learning the skills of a female stripper. Hen parties are said to teach a much more overtly sexualised class, often incorporating teaching women how to perform a striptease or a lap dance as part of the class. The women in this study have differing ideas around what constitutes 'proper' pole dancing, including whether or not stripper shoes are appropriate footwear, whether holding classes in a bar, nightclub or lap dancing club degrades the image of these types of class in comparison to those held in a health and fitness club, and, as described in chapter four, whether or not drinking alcohol during classes was appropriate. Women also engaged in pole dancing through differing means, for example, some of the women that I interviewed engaged in online communications regularly on forums and on social networking sites and some did so less frequently. Some women entered competitions and some performed pole dancing at events. Some women had a pole at home on which to practice. Anna had taught herself to pole dance at home through the use of lessons which she had downloaded from the internet. Women described in different ways the friendships made through pole dancing and their involvement in this as a community. Women also described some negative aspects to pole dancing, for example in terms of conflict and power struggles within the community, in particular between pole dancing instructors, and also in terms of the attitudes or assumptions of those outside of the community. Thus, the experience of pole dancing is subjective, classes offer a range of experiences to women, and women participate and engage in this activity in differing ways. I met

a range of different women during the course of the research, every interview was different and all of the women that I interviewed had differing stories to tell and experiences to share. The female pole dancer and the pole dancing class cannot, therefore, be seen as one dimensional and there is clearly much more to pole dancing than the previous binary opposite views which argue that pole dancing is as simple as being either positive or negative, or empowering or degrading to women. I hope to have demonstrated in this thesis that pole dancing classes are in actuality much more complicated and problematic than these types of overly simplistic dichotomy.

The women that I have spoken to in this research, like those in Holland's (2010) research, similarly talked about fun, fitness, friendship and increased confidence and strength. In this thesis I have described the ways in which pole dancing can be a fitness or gymnastic exercise and pole dancing indeed requires considerable body strength and flexibility to perform many tricks and climbing moves. Women told me their stories of pole dancing being fun and how enjoyable classes were, providing an arena in which to make friends at the same time as enabling them to work the body and get fit. I participated in a number of classes as part of the fieldwork and I too noticed these feelings in myself – I had fun and enjoyed many of the classes I attended, and I met a number of friendly and interesting women in both classes and interviews with whom I felt I could potentially have been friends, had we met under different circumstances. I felt a real sense of achievement when I managed to perfect certain pole dancing spins, heightened by the support and encouragement I received from other women in classes. I was awed by the athletic skill of some of the women that I met through this research and admired their dedication to the 'fitness pole dancer ethic' – improving their ability at pole

dancing and achieving some quite risky moves. I could see that pole dancing, if I had continued to practice it regularly, would have considerably increased my body strength and overall physical fitness.

The women I interviewed regularly used the terms 'empowerment' and 'empowering' in their narratives. These terms also feature significantly in the advertising of pole dancing classes. As I described in chapter four, the term 'empowerment' is an interesting contextual term and feminist arguments have defined empowerment as the gaining in agency for oneself or for others, pointing towards a neo-liberal approach, suggesting that women must empower themselves and gain control of their own lives (Rowlands, 1995; Mosedale, 2005). In the pole dancing class the use of the term empowerment infers that women are exercising power through their freedom to make an individual choice to participate in pole dancing. Women spoke about attending classes in a discourse of choice and control, describing that they had made a choice to attend, and contrasting themselves with female strippers who were assumed to be disempowered and forced into work in the sex industry. The women in this research were middle class women who may already have some elements of power in their everyday lives, financially, academically and in employment. Women also described power in terms of independence and entitlement – 'why shouldn't I take these classes if I want to?' and in terms of physical power and strength, with women talking in length about muscles and bodily power, describing elements of empowerment as gained through the development of muscular strength. The women that I met throughout the course of this research showed an active engagement in pole dancing and signing up for classes, engaging with friends online on forums and attending or entering competitions are clearly not passive activities. In my

interview with Jessica she described empowerment as being about giving women the (temporary) freedom to act out a particular sexualised identity, and certainly in Hannah's class women were encouraged to act out at being a professional pole dancer in a lap dancing club, with Hannah describing this as being about allowing women an opportunity to play with their identity for the evening. Women also described the friendships they had made and the mutual support network amongst women as offering a form of collective empowerment via the support and encouragement of one another and a mutual understanding amongst pole dancers. Women were also able to negotiate some hierarchical positions of power within the pole dancing community itself via the taking of risks, the performance of skilled and advanced moves and the entering of competitions. Whilst I do not wish to glamorise pole dancing as something entirely liberating and empowering for women, at the same time the women that take these classes should also not be viewed as entirely objectified. I cannot deny that there is capacity in these classes for women to develop some feelings of power, positivity, female solidarity and agency. The upbeat and positive message of pole dancing classes is fantastic – offering empowerment, liberation, choice, entitlement, fun, fitness and friendship. These were terms used in the advertising of pole classes which had encouraged women to sign up for classes in the first instance. Women have made a choice to participate, and do gain some feelings of agency during classes, and through their engagement in other pole dancing related activities. We should not ignore women's feelings of empowerment and agency which they claim to gain through attending these classes and as a feminist I would encourage and support any activity which clearly gives women so much enjoyment. I would argue, however, that the extent to which pole dancing actually provides women with empowerment in terms of other aspects of their lives is limited. I feel that the pole dancing class

is more complex than this, and it would be naïve of me to take these women's claims of empowerment at face value.

In chapter two I highlighted and examined contemporary arguments around the state of contemporary feminism, in particular debates around post feminism and whether or not we live in a society where feminism is no longer relevant to young women (Stuart, 1990; Aapola et al., 2004; Rich, 2005), in which feminism is actually viewed negatively and as binaristic to femininity (Brunsdon, 2000; Hinds and Stacey, 2001) and that there has been a media induced backlash against feminism (Faludi, 1991). The women in my research were familiar with the language of feminism because it has been promoted to them in the media and when these women were growing up the message of power and agency was promoted through the Spice Girls' message of girl power, for example, as something all women should adopt. Women spoke in interviews in a language of feminism and their objectives were, I would argue, similar to the (very broad) objectives of the feminist movement – they expressed a desire to achieve liberation, empowerment and choice, and these terms were used over and over by many of my respondents in interviews. However the women I interviewed, with the exception of just two out of 24 women, viewed the word feminism negatively and did not wish to be identified with the label 'feminist'. Women wished to disassociate with a feminist identity, talking of feminism as if it were a dirty word and seeing feminism as associated with quite radical views, as being against women having any fun and against women being sexual at all, often associated with hating men and potentially being lesbian, which in turn was associated with being unfeminine. I have described the ways in which feminism is a concept treated with some ambiguity and confusion, and I outlined in chapter three my

own confused understandings of feminism as a woman growing up in the wake of the second wave movement. The women that I interviewed appear to adopt a neo-liberal approach, describing themselves as in control of their own lives, however without wishing to explicitly describe themselves as feminist. In chapter four I demonstrated the ways in which women attempted to present themselves as middle class and 'respectable' in a similar way to the women in Skeggs' (1997) research, showing concern with appearing respectable and distinguishing themselves from women who were perceived as less respectable using the methods of impression management and presentation of the self (Goffman, 1959, 1963). The desired identity for the women in this study involved disassociation with both women who are feminist and with women who work as lap dancers, both of whom were seen to embody an identity which conflicted with a desired feminine image and were seen as incompatible with femininity. Lap dancers were described as overly promiscuous as well as sexually objectified and disempowered, whilst feminists were seen as prudish and anti-sex. Women acknowledged that there may be a stigma associated with pole dancing relating to a view of female lap dancers and the continued performance of pole dancing within lap dancing clubs, and they thus felt that they needed to distance themselves from this type of image. Women's narratives thus described that they did not wish to be stigmatised as overly sexual and promiscuous, but they also did not wish to be seen as feminist as this would denote them as being anti-sex and against women having any fun, and these two types of identity can be described as being positioned at either end of a continuum for the women in this study. Women felt a pressure to position and balance themselves, manage impressions of themselves, and work hard at their identity in order to position themselves on the 'respectable' part of this continuum, somewhere in the middle, this being

regarded as the most appropriately feminine identity and in line with cultural expectations of femininity.

Women appear to adhere strongly to messages that are fed to them in the advertising of pole dancing classes and media messages around idealised images and expectations, and can be seen to construct themselves, and to be helping others to construct themselves, in line with idealised images and women's perceptions of the gaze. I have explored pole dancing classes as having grown as part of the wider sexualised consumer 'raunch culture' (Levy, 2005) or 'striptease culture' (McNair, 2002) in which images of sex and sexuality proliferate and women are increasingly targeted as sexual consumers. I described in chapter two feminist research on women's magazines and television makeover style programmes which are argued to teach women a particular type of femininity in line with what are promoted as the correct ways of looking and being (Winship, 1987; Wolf, 1991; Kay, 1999; McRobbie, 2009). In a similar way, the advertising of pole dancing classes presents these classes as desirable to women through the promise of the creation of an ideal feminine body, particularly in line with images of 'perfect' female celebrities who are said to participate in classes, and alongside a culture in which the media seems to present the female body as a project, promoting that women should desire to work their bodies and construct themselves in a particular feminine and sexualised way and critiquing women who do not do this. Pole dancing instructors described helping women to construct the most appropriate type of self and teaching others to become better selves. Instructors showed themselves as having independence and agency, presenting themselves as 'enterprising selves' via becoming self employed, promoting and advertising their classes in local and national media, and gaining financial



success from teaching pole classes. This goes some way to explaining claims for agency and power amongst pole instructors. Yet ultimately this is constructed around instructors capitalising upon consumer culture and the media messages around the ideal body which are fed to women. Teaching other women how to construct a very specific kind of feminine, heterosexual identity and advertising classes as a form of self-help therefore seems to be to some extent reinforcing the structures and pressures placed upon women to see themselves as a project in need of improvement. In chapter six I showed the ways in which classes are advertised as being about girl power and female solidarity. Indeed, I showed the ways in which women make friends and develop a sense of community in classes, a sense of being 'one of the girls', providing women with feelings of independence from men and a mutual support network with other women. Yet I challenged the description of this as offering collective empowerment as for many women these friendships are constructed around women helping one another to create an idealised body and become attractive to men and female solidarity is based around the creation of a feminine self, and not about providing any real challenge to traditional masculinised views of the ideal female body.

In chapter five I described what I termed as the 'fitness pole dancer ethic' – a message promoted by women that they need to self manage, work hard and push themselves to improve at pole dancing, working through pain, bruises and taking some risks in order to succeed. This was epitomised in Claire's interview where she urged other women to 'just do it'. I showed the ways in which pole dancing was described as a method of working the body in line with an idealised view of beauty and a 'Barbie doll' image, yet I showed that some women displayed real satisfaction in developing strength and muscle, aspects which are traditionally

seen as contradicting femininity, and some women indeed showed a desire to challenge some aspects of conventional femininity in the display of strength and showing off their muscles to others. Women also displayed some satisfaction in taking risks and persisted in participating in pole dancing through pain, bruising and injury, showing elements of a masculinised approach to risk. However, limits were placed upon the amount of body muscle acceptable for women, suggesting that there is a 'glass ceiling' on the acceptable amounts of strength and muscle permissible for women without damaging a feminine and heterosexual identity, and women showed a complicated approach to bruises, covering them on occasions. Women seem to be fed a message that they must desire to look like a pole dancer, as in, that they must aspire to a Barbie doll type image, they should want to tone up and lose weight, and these are promoted as positive aspects that women must work towards. Indeed, in interviews respondents spoke about this as an image that they expected that I too should wish to aspire. Ultimately the desired image that women are seen to aspire to is that which concurs with what is seen as desirable and sexy to men, and success for women was often deemed as coming from the validation of men. I showed in chapter five the ways in which women could be seen to work their bodies in line with a perceived gaze. I demonstrated that this was more complicated than simply the popular image of a woman being physically observed by a man, for in Hannah's interview she described pressure from other women to construct her body and appearance in a particular way, and women can be seen to criticise others who do not shape up, and also I described that whilst no men are present in pole classes, this does not mean that women are not constructing themselves to appeal to men, for they described an imagined and internalised gaze, the 'male in the head' (Janet Holland et al., 1998). Thus women's choice to participate appears to be

constructed somewhat by the media, the marketing of these classes and the persisting expectations placed upon women in our society. Instead of resisting these pressures, the women I interviewed appear to accept the lifestyles and ideal images that are presented to them and work to help one another to achieve quite a rigid feminine identity.

I would argue, therefore, that pole dancing can be described as neither entirely empowering nor entirely constricting for the women that practice it. To describe pole dancing classes as either empowering or not simplifies the experience of attending classes and assumes that they are experienced in the same way by all women, and that all women view their participation in the same way. The stories shared by the women in this research show pole dancing classes to be complex and contradictory, experienced in differing ways, and thus these classes can be seen as much more complicated and problematic in ways that previous feminist positions on these types of class have not recognised. Where women's experiences show commonality, is that the women described themselves as gaining great enjoyment, physical fitness and friendships from their participation in pole dancing, and as exercising some elements of agency and power through their participation. The research has also shown, however, that pole dancing as a form of fitness can be seen to reinforce, rather than offer any real challenge, to normative ideas of gender and heterosexuality. Whilst classes may take very different formats and are experienced differently by women, and there is variation in terms of the development of some muscle and strength, the taking of some element of risk and the display of bruises, pole dancing does, however, appear to produce a very particular kind of gendered and sexualised subject. Ultimately women seemed to work hard to balance and negotiate some challenge to

traditional ideas around the active female body with a persisting desire to be seen as feminine, heterosexual and attractive to men. These women's 'choice' to pole dance is constructed by the society in which we live, which offers and promotes pole dancing fitness classes as a desirable lifestyle choice to women in the first place, as something which women should aspire towards in a quest for an idealised form of self, and as the correct choice for women. The ways in which women worked hard to present themselves in what they deemed to be the most appropriate and respectable way were often by describing themselves in terms of what they are not – as not becoming 'too muscular', as not being a stripper, and as not being a feminist, for example, elements deemed as being 'poles apart' from femininity. This demonstrates the perpetuation of idealised images of femininity and heterosexuality, reinforcing a message that women have a range of choices, yet they need to make the right ones, and they will be labelled or outcast if they do not. We should therefore view women's participation in pole dancing in terms of the diversity of experiences which they inhabit, in terms of their active engagement and enjoyment of these classes, and in terms of the structures which continue to shape their lives.

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## **Appendix One**

### **Interviewee Consent to Participate Letter**

Kerry Allen  
Postgraduate Research Student  
Room A14  
School of Sociology and Social Policy  
University Park  
University of Nottingham  
Nottingham  
NG7 2RD

Dear Pole Dancer

I am a student at the University of Nottingham undertaking doctoral research in the School of Sociology and Social Policy.

My research is examining the current vogue for pole dancing as a popular exercise activity for women. Using data collected from interviews with pole dancing instructors and class participants, I will be exploring what this type of dance means for the women who practice it and I anticipate that the results of my research will be useful in contributing to existing feminist and media debates around pole dancing.

This research project is funded by the School of Sociology and Social Policy, for which I have been provided with funding for three years. I hope to share my results once the research is completed by publishing them in sociological and feminist journals and speaking at academic conferences.

Interviews will last approximately 45 minutes to an hour, possibly longer, and will be held at a place and time which is convenient to you. Please note that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time and do not have to give a reason for doing so. Interviews are completely anonymous and confidential.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, you may contact me on 07814 460 082 or email [lgxka3@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:lgxka3@nottingham.ac.uk)

Yours Sincerely

Kerry Allen  
Postgraduate Research Student

### Consent to Participate

In signing this consent form, I agree to volunteer as an interviewee in the doctoral research project being conducted by Kerry Allen.

I understand that the research being conducted relates to the experiences of participants in pole dancing fitness classes and I have read the attached information letter which outlines the research project.

I understand that excerpts from my recorded verbal communications with the researcher will be studied and may be quoted in a doctoral thesis and in future papers, journal articles, conference papers and books that will be written by the researcher.

I grant authorization for the use of the above information with the full understanding that my anonymity and confidentiality will be preserved at all times. I understand that my name or other identifying information will never be disclosed or referenced in any way in any written or verbal context.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from participating in this study at any time and I do not have to give a reason for doing so.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix Two

### Interviewee Details

Name *	Age	Ethnicity	Living Situation	Marital Status	Children	Qualifications	Employment	My Notes / Comments
Amy	21-24	White British	Rented Home	Living with Partner		Currently Studying BSc Food and Nutrition	Part Time Catering Assistant (whilst studying)	Would like to work in public health – food advisory
Anna	30-34	White British	Own Home	Married		Currently Studying MSc in Management	Office Manager	Husband has just qualified as a Doctor
April	20 or younger	White British	Living with Parents	Single		Currently Studying Degree in Equine Management	Stable Owner and Horse and Riding Instructor	Hopes to expand her business
Charlotte	30-34	White British	Own Home	Living with Partner	Currently 2 months pregnant	Degree in Acting for TV, Radio and Film	Pole Dance Instructor	Runs Pole Dancing Instructor Training Courses. Previously entered pole dancing competitions
Claire	21-24	White British	Rented Home	Single		Currently Studying Degree in Clinical Psychology	Care Worker and Part Time Pole Dance Instructor (whilst studying)	Hopes to study a Masters next year, wants to work in the prison system as a researcher

Fran	25-29	White British	Own Home	Married		GSCEs	Personal Assistant	
Gemma	30-34	White British	Rented Home	Single	Two sons, aged 9 and 6	NVQs	Marketing Officer	
Hannah	20 or younger	White British	Student Halls	In a relationship, living apart		Currently Studying Degree in Veterinary Science	Part Time Pole Dance Instructor (whilst studying)	Teaches classes in local lap dancing club
Hayley	30-34	Mixed White and Asian	Rented Home	Single		GCSEs	Pole Dance Instructor	
Helen	25-29	White British	Rented Home	In a relationship, living apart		Currently Studying PhD in Human Communications and Psychology		Friends with Sophie. Entered a Pole Dancing Competition recently
Jane	25-29	White British	Own Home	Widowed		Currently Studying Degree in Law	Administrative Assistant at University	Husband died in a car accident in which she was also injured
Jessica	40 or older	White British	Own Home	Divorced	Daughter aged 14, son aged 10	BA Human Communications	Partner in Ladies Gym and Spa, Pole Dance Instructor	Also works for a scheme to encourage female entrepreneurs

Jodie	25-29	White British	Own Home	Married		Degree in History	Administrator	Recently graduated, considering what career path to follow
Julie	20 or younger	White British	Student House	In a relationship, living apart		Currently Studying Degree in Neuroscience		Writes an online blog about pole dancing
Karen	25-29	White British	Own Home	Living with partner, engaged		Degree in Communications	Business Planning and Strategy Officer in Police Force	
Kate	30-34	White British	Own Home	Married	Son, aged 10	Degree in Immunology	Pole Dance Instructor	Pole Dancing Performer and has previously entered competitions
Lucy	20 or younger	White British	Rented Home	Living with partner		A Levels and currently studying for Certificate in Veterinary Nursing	Veterinary Nurse	
Maria	21-24	White British	Partner's Home	Living with partner		Currently Studying Degree in Veterinary Science		Hopes to go travelling when finished her degree

Mei	21-24	White British	Own Home	Single		Degree in Business Studies	Recruitment Consultant	
Natalie	25-29	White British	Living with Parents	Single	Son, aged 4	Degree in Business and Finance	Pole Dance Instructor	Worked as a Finance Officer until had her son
Nicky	25-29	White British	Rented Home	Single		A Levels	Pole Dance Instructor	Previously worked as a Lap Dancer
Sarah	25-29	White British	Own Home	Living with Partner		Degree in Metalwork and Jewellery	Fitness Instructor and Pole Dance Instructor	Since interview has bought her own studio
Sophie	25-29	White British	Rented Home	In a relationship, living apart		Currently Studying PhD in Human Communications	Part Time Lecturer	Friends with Helen
Theresa	35-39	White British	Own Home	Married		NVQs	Pole Dance Instructor. Owns Gym and Pole Dance Studio with Husband	

