

# “I was ashamed, and now I am proud as I finally know how to let go.” How Female Polers Perceive, Experience, and Give Meanings to Their Bodies—An Ethnographic Case Study

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.19.4.02>

## Keywords:

Pole Dance;  
Experiencing and  
Giving Meanings to  
the Body; Interacting  
with the Body;  
Critical Social Gaze;  
Empowerment

**Abstract:** Although the popularity of recreational pole dancing continues to gain momentum, its prevailing association with the erotic sphere and resulting stereotypes shape it as a borderline activity. Notably, the way pole dancing is approached and enacted elucidates how bodies, especially female embodiment, are socially constructed and controlled. Thus, to look at that issue from recreational female polers’ perspectives, this article sheds light on how their understandings of the body evolve with their engagement in the leisure activity at hand. That process is analyzed in the context of how women deal with tensions that arise while they navigate between the internalized societal expectations concerning desired femininity and personal agency. Drawing on ethnographic and interview data from pole dance studios in Poland, I discuss how polers’ perspectives on their bodies change from personal and interactional ‘limitations’ to embracing their bodies as interactional partners with whom to achieve their goals. In the process of learning by doing, women get to know their bodies and develop with them a relationship based on trust. Subsequently, growing to understand the bodies as their substantial selves that functionality allows them to achieve the ‘impossible’ as one empowers women. At the same time, I highlight how the process of espousing alternative perceptions of one’s body unfolds under the umbrella of an internalized frame of meanings concerning female embodiment that lures women to fit societal expectations. The interplay between the two sheds light on how female polers navigate toward reclaiming their self-confidence from the clutches of the critical social gaze while negotiating the notion of their bodies. Compelling in that regard is how relying on erotic associations with recreational pole dancing in terms of inciting empowerment through a sexual agency, as some studios do, plays out and factors into female pole dancers’ experiences concerning their leisure activity.

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The popularity of pole dancing as a recreational leisure activity has been growing since the 2000s (Holland 2010; Bahri 2012; Dimler, McFadden, and McHugh 2017; Kim et al. 2023). Still, it is often associated with a female erotic performance in front of a male audience and thus—conceptualized as carrying stigma (see, e.g., Holland 2010; Fennell 2022; Kim et al. 2023) due to objectifying and contributing to an existing “culture of sexism and hypersexualization” (Weaving 2020:525). The controversial status of pole dancing as a recreational activity lies in its origin and extension of exotic dancing rooted in strip clubs’ background, with a vertical metal pole as a prop around which to spin and do tricks. However, despite being embedded in a discourse of the culture of sexism and hypersexualization, the understanding of poling has been transitioning over the past twenty years toward a form of commercial aerobic-like exercise (Whitehead and Kurz 2009; Holland 2010; Donaghue, Kurz, and Whitehead 2011). In 2017, the Global Association of International Sports Federation recognized pole dancing as a professional sport by granting pole sports Observer Status, which brings the International Pole Sports Federation one step closer to becoming an Olympic sport (International Pole Sports Federation 2017; also see Weaving 2020; Fennell

2022). Its surge in popularity is, at least partially, due to “re-inventing” pole dancing as a form of recreational physical activity (fitness pole) and marketing it as such (Whitehead and Kurz 2009), as well as increasing media coverage (as in, for example, *Hustlers*, the movie [from 2019] featuring Jennifer Lopez as poling stripper<sup>1</sup>). At the same time, controversies surrounding the notion of pole dancing prevail and are encountered even among those involved in the activity who attempt to set clear-cut boundaries between the recreational activity they undertake and exotic dancing others perform (see, e.g., Whitehead and Kurz 2009), as in, for example, the use of the hashtag #notastripper.<sup>2</sup> Such ‘othering’ unveils how pole dancing is socially constructed as a deviant activity (see: Prus 1996; 1997; Prus and Grills 2003) and can be seen as an example of how female bodies and sexuality are socially controlled (see, e.g., Holland 2009; 2010; Wojciechowska 2015; Ślęzak 2016). In that sense, it constitutes an offshoot of exploitation dis-

<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Lopez used online video sharing and social media platforms (e.g., YouTube) to document and explain the hard work it takes to perform pole dance moves and to elucidate the physical and health-related benefits of the activity, which could have an impact on further popularization of pole dancing.

<sup>2</sup> Negotiating the notion of pole dancing among the poling community represents one of the arenas within the social world at hand and, as such, exceeds the scope of this article. Still, as some acknowledged polers come from a stripping background, and the community recognizes how the pole dance is rooted in the sex industry, for the most part, the hashtag is considered inappropriate and insulting.

course embracing women as victims of false consciousness (see: Rambo, Presley, and Mynatt 2006). On the one hand, women in Western cultures are ‘bombarded’ and faced with ideals that, for many, are unrealistic to attain, as well as expectations to conform to the sexy, “slim but shapely” body type (see, e.g., Grogan 2021). As Ariel J. Dimler, Kimberley McFadden, and Tara-Leigh F. McHugh (2017:340) argue, “unsurprisingly, when compared with men, women in Western cultures experience greater body dissatisfaction.” At the same time, when they engage in a recreational activity that some see as a manifestation of raunch culture (Levy 2005), they are depicted as passive agents who have been lured into objectifying themselves (Holland 2010). Internalizing such seemingly contradictory discourses to which they have been exposed may be one of the reasons why many new-to-pole participants in the study did not feel comfortable in their bodies, while others decided to keep poling a secret shared with trusted few. And yet, previous research has shown that women experience pole dancing as empowering, restorative of self-confidence, and allowing them to reclaim their bodies from critical social gaze (see, e.g., Holland 2010; Dimler et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2023)—all that thanks to, among others, female solidarity in class (Holland 2010). Findings from this study corroborate previous results. Additionally, the analysis elucidates how, in the process of learning by doing, female polers give meaning to their bodies as they engage in pole dancing as a recreational leisure activity.

This article aims to reflect on how female polers, who undertake pole classes as a recreational activity, negotiate the meanings they give to their bodies while interacting within internalized sociocultural influences exemplified by critical discourses concerning their embodiment and agency. To meet

that end, I will first elaborate on how one’s engagement in pole dancing is problematized concerning the hypersexualization of female bodies and women’s agency therein. Next, I will briefly reflect on the issue of how one’s embodied self-image can be impacted by critical and controlling social gaze, as well as discuss previous research on recreational pole dancing in terms of the impact it has on polers’ perceptions of themselves. I will then move on to the data and methods section, followed by the research results. Here, I will focus on ‘learning’ one’s body and moving from seeing it as often restricting and shame-inducing to embracing the body as an interactional partner who cooperates and guides. How many polers understand and experience their bodies (and through them) is indicative of the discourses they have internalized. Still, as they progress, they adopt alternative optics and strategies that allow them to negotiate the meaning of their bodies and reclaim their self-confidence from the clutches of the critical social gaze. Thus, engaging in recreational pole dancing will be addressed in terms of self-care strategy. I conclude with reflections on pole dancing body entanglement in stereotypical optics on the activity and how that issue translates into tensions between the internalized structural meaning frameworks and personal agency. The analytical paths I unfold are guided by the premises of the symbolic interactionist perspective.

## Literature Review

### **Borderline Activity & Female Agency: Between Liberation and False Consciousness**

One could suggest that when performed in class, pole dance is, to some extent, taken out of context and could be embraced by each poler how

they wish to make meaning of their activity.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, as Whitehead and Kurz (2009:229) observe, "it is still an act that is (arguably) inherently 'performative' in a way that certain other forms of exercise (such as lifting weights at a gym or jogging around the park) are not," and because of that—may be seen as objectifying the female body as a commodity to be consumed. In that sense, approaching pole dancing as a performative act connoting the sexual sphere can be seen as a manifestation of the cultural logic (see: Enfield 2000; Machtyl 2013) of interpretation, which relies on stereotypes, and the pole dance activity seems to be 'trapped' in a dialectic of meanings attributed to those who perform. An example would be marketing (and presumably teaching) the activity within the context of female sexuality and agency—based on the assumption that women would easily decode such messages and embrace prospective gains practicing pole dance can provide. That is reflected in Ngairé Donaghue and colleagues' (2011) study, which examined how 15 recreational pole dancing studios in Australia are promoted online. The analysis of the websites of said schools elucidated how some of them trade on erotic associations with the activity when promising empowerment through a sexual agency. As they argue (Donaghue et al. 2011:448), the "self-evident nature of the relationship between confidence/empowerment and sensuality suggests an expectation that women will easily recognize and identify with

<sup>3</sup> Recreational pole dance is not homogenous and can serve as an umbrella term for, for example, fitness pole, art pole, or exotic pole (in the case of the latter, which is associated with strip clubs background, polers usually dance in pleaser shoes and aim for more sensual expression compared to other forms of the activity). At the same time, most of the classes I took were diversified due to the difficulty level (beginner, intermediate, advanced), not by genre per se, and incorporated the elements characteristic for each. When performing a routine, it was up to the participants whether they wished to dance in pleaser shoes or barefoot.

the idea that insecurity about their 'sensuality' undermines their confidence." The underlying assumption is that having internalized societal ideals, they will recognize how performing desirable femininity can enhance their positive self-image. Additionally, those promotion strategies convey an inherent premise that women undertaking the activity would like, at some point, to orient their pole dancing skills toward an audience, for example, one's partner. A similar approach to teaching recreational pole dancing as liberating female sexuality is exemplified in Ariel J. Dimler and colleagues' (2017) study aimed at analyzing how exercising pole fitness has an impact on positive body image.

On the one hand, and consistent with the lived experiences of recreational polers (see, e.g., Holland 2010; Dimler et al. 2017; Kim and Kwon 2019; Kim et al. 2023), pole dancing is approached as an outlet of possibilities from which to choose that allow women to resist gendered and embodied expectations and gain a sense of empowerment when having fun (Holland 2010). Interestingly, empowerment seems to be a catch cry of raunch culture (also termed porno chic and striptease culture [McNair 2002]), where women's subjectification relies on their free will and agency concerning embodiment and sexuality, and their power can be seen as the ability to incite desire (Gill 2007; Bahri 2012). Thus, they can agentically choose to follow the path of objectifying themselves to achieve expected outcomes. In that sense, they are "presented as not seeking men's approval but as pleasing themselves, and, in so doing, they 'just happen' to win men's admiration" (Gill 2008:42 as cited in Donaghue et al. 2011:447). As Ngairé Donaghue and colleagues (2011) observe, engaging in recreational pole dancing seems to fit that logic—women choose the activity for their pleasure, yet can also use acquired skills to win (potential) power over

men. Although the pool of choices offered to women by raunch culture seems to challenge the previous dichotomous alternative of embracing agentic sexuality or social respectability (Wojciechowska 2015), their liberation comes across as illusory. First, their free and liberating choices aimed at reclaiming their bodies from the clutches of patriarchal society seem to maintain oppression and practices that secure subordination. Second, for those practices to work, women need to internalize a self-policing (male) gaze. Angela McRobbie's (2009) notion of double entanglement aptly theorizes the issue at hand.

On the other hand, as Jacenta Bahri (2012) observes, viewing recreational pole fitness as empowering is problematic as engaging in such an activity can contribute to the stigmatization of those who pole dance for a living. As Bahri argues, while women who are not strippers are praised for their strength and fitness, those who are—have no choice and are exploited and objectified. Thus, the empowerment of some women comes at the expense of others. Furthermore, recreational polers' achievements can be seen as becoming without becoming. Taking pole dance activity out of its context allows those women to learn (and later use) skills valued in raunch culture that exotic dancers and strippers possess. Still, in the case of the former, they do so behind the closed doors of safe dance studios—without becoming a stripper or exotic dancer (Bahri 2012).

How some discourses problematizing female agency and embodiment approach women's involvement in pole dance activities unveils giving primacy to critical interpretation over voicing the experiences of those under the scrutinizing gaze. Such an approach seems to marginalize their situation by picturing them as passive victims of oppressive culture who often have no other choice than to go with the flow

(as in pole dancing for some instrumental goal, be it earning money or admiration). Carol Rambo and colleagues (2006:217) discuss that problem when addressing how academic discourses frame strippers and exotic dancers according to the competing logic of deviantization and victimization, which reduces them to the socio-semiotic field of their bodies.

In some radical feminist discourses, exotic dancers are passive sex objects who lack agency and unwittingly reinforce traditional patriarchal values with their participation in striptease dancing...If a dancer claims she is not exploited or oppressed, if she expresses job satisfaction or enjoyment, resists oppression, or feels like an exploiter or powerful herself, then she is characterized as a victim of false consciousness—a passive agent and cultural dupe who has internalized her oppression.

The above discussion highlights how pole dancing as a recreational activity can be viewed as a symbol with a context-dependent perspective of meaning, which allows seeing it as a mechanism of cultural memory.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, and foremost, it aims to examine how the potential readings of the activity that fit diverse social discourses are managed and disseminated, as the discourses at hand have an impact on how women undertaking pole dancing give meanings to their activity, bodies, and choices.

### **Female Body & the Social Gaze**

In the previous section, I highlighted how academic, predominantly feminist discourses embrace the

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<sup>4</sup> Kim and Kwon (2019) argue that due to the absence of strip clubs in Korea, the perspective on pole dancing and its link with the discourse of objectification differs from that set by Western media and literature. That conception is known in Korea, but it did not preclude absorbing the notion of pole dancing primarily as a recreational activity.

issue of the female body and agency therein. As argued, although the notions of personal choice and empowerment seem to navigate some of those approaches, it appears that women's bodies as individual projects are encouraged to be developed along the lines of predefined and, in that sense, 'correct' choices one should make to display oneself to the best (visual) effect (see, e.g., McRobbie 2009). That resonates with how women are taught from an early age about the salience of being physically attractive (Walter 2010)—a message widely spread in the mainstream media. Interestingly, how women are lured into aspiring for the best-embodied versions of themselves has been embraced by some brands who explicitly market their products and brand philosophy as women-friendly by encouraging their clientele to embrace their "real beauty" (e.g., in the case of Dove campaigns). At the same time, the underlying message that *physical beauty is important* stays unaltered. In that sense, bodies are presented as arenas for ongoing improvement—a project that should be carried on, following societal advice about how to create the perfect body (or at least the best physical version of oneself) (McRobbie 2009; Walter 2010). As women are constantly looked at, evaluated, and encouraged to compete concerning their physical appearance, they subsequently learn to internalize that critical social gaze, which can result in constant consciousness of their bodies that should look and act a certain way (see: Dimler et al. 2017).

Expectations and imageries concerning a poling body also make up for a pool of meanings associated with the activity regardless of context. Those demarcate who could/should perform and for whom. One example is *America's Got Talent* TV show, which featured several contestants who presented their pole dance acts. In 2011, Steven Retchless auditioned with a pole dance routine to Katy Perry's song, and

although the audience and fellow judges appreciated his performance, one of the judges, Piers Morgan, buzzed him. The judge's brief comment was: "We all got bodies like that, but the decent thing is to hide them with clothes, you see. I didn't get it."<sup>5</sup> Although Morgan buzzed every act he performed, Retchless proceeded to the Semifinals. During the Quarterfinals, Morgan commented on the routine again: "I have tried to appreciate this act. There's a reason there are no male pole dancing clubs in America. There's a reason."<sup>6</sup> Another contestant, Roslyn Mays, who performed on the same TV show with her routine in 2015, was fat-shamed by one of the judges. As Mays explained, "Howard Stern told me that I was too fat to be in this industry and that nobody should ever hire me because I am too big" (Whitehouse 2015). As discussed, that is yet another example of how bodies are observed, evaluated, and socially controlled, also due to objectification and shaming, which should keep them in line (see: McRobbie 2009).

Laura Mulvey (1975) illuminated the concept of gaze in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" when identifying how women are stereotyped in movies where the audience is cast in the role of a heterosexual man. As Samantha Holland (2010) argues, participants in her study of recreational pole dance were not subject to the male gaze as the classes were predominantly all-female, which was the case for many of the projects I refer to in this article. Still, as other studies posit, the concept of gaze surpasses the notion of one person being looked at by another (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009). While one may not be

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.metatube.com/en/videos/64143/Americas-Got-Talent-Steve-Retchless-Pole-Dancer/> (4:03). Retrieved June 28, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYq13IQgoK4> (3:42). Retrieved June 28, 2023.

observed in the technical sense, they nonetheless have internalized the perspective and expectations of the other (see, e.g., Blumer 1969; Goffman 1986; Strauss 1993), who, in that sense, becomes their interactional partner and may impose self-policing (Goffman 1986). It seems problematic in that acting within the self-policing context can contribute to anxiety and shame (Slater and Tiggemann 2002 as cited in Dimler et al. 2017). At the same time, the up-to-date research on recreational pole dancing found that women who pole for leisure purposes embody the activity in terms of the positive impact it has on their self-esteem, also related to their bodies. Additionally, some of those research explicitly focused on how pole dancing classes contributed to polers' positive body image (see, e.g., Holland 2010; Dimler et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2023).

How people are involved in recreational pole dancing concerning their approach to their bodies and the impact it has on their self-image was a prevalent concern of much previous qualitative research on the activity. The seminal study by Samantha Holland (2010) embraces poling in terms of loading one's anxieties around a metal prop. Leisure activities, especially the many forms of dancing, appear as arenas wherein people can express themselves through notions of creativity, agility, strength, and gracefulness. Holland presents pole dancing classes as encapsulating those possibilities and allowing women to develop a sense of empowerment through restoring self-confidence brought about issues from building physical strength to female solidarity and camaraderie. Interestingly, and due to the latter, Holland highlighted how poling turned out to be the first positive experience in doing sports for many participants. Her findings are corroborated by conclusions offered by Ariel J. Dimler and colleagues (2017), who illuminated how pole dancing

fostered body acceptance and appreciation through physical skill development, as well as by insights offered by Jasmyn Kim and colleagues (2023), whose research proved the gravity of female bonding and a sense of belonging in fostering body appreciation and self-acceptance among the study participants. In that vein, Kim and colleagues argue for incorporating physical activities such as pole dancing in health interventions for women for the positive impact it has on their everyday functioning. The present research also undertakes the problem of embodiment and experiencing one's body. Still, although it encapsulates the previously mentioned themes, its goal sways toward how those practicing recreational pole dance give meaning to and interact with their bodies as those change throughout the practice. The said process is negotiated and navigated through internalized narrations concerning their bodies and the activities they undertake. To grasp the participants' notions of *whatness* and *howness* (see an interview with Robert Prus in Kleinknecht 2007), it has been assumed that their actions are embedded in specific situational and interactional contexts and, as such, result from their interpretation of certain phenomena, events, situations, and interactional partners' actions (Blumer 1969; Strauss 1993; Prus 1996; 1997).

## Methodological Note

In 2017, a friend asked me whether I would like to join her and two other female peers for a beginner pole dancing course offered in a relatively small studio of four poles, and that is how my adventure with that recreational activity began. During my journey, pole dance became my serious leisure activity (see: Stebbins 1982), and many of those who also poled entered my close interactional circle. I practiced at least two to four times a week, taking

various classes, from those more oriented toward fitness to ones aimed at developing dancing skills. I took part in three pole dancing camps with participants and instructors from Europe, attended six pole classes in the UK, and witnessed a national pole dancing contest. During that time, the studio where I practiced changed location and size, which allowed for a flow of new pole dancing enthusiasts (predominantly female) with whom I shared and exchanged experiences concerning our activity. As a typical one-hour class allows for chatting and assisting peer polers in performing tricks demanding more strength or skills, we cheered one another in our progress. Still, it was not till 2019 that I decided to approach pole dancing as a research problem, inspired by many conversations we had concerning the activity. From the beginning, I informed fellow participants and instructors about my idea, and they welcomed it enthusiastically, encouraging me to share my findings.

Although the researcher’s insider status may raise concerns about shared positionalities, and thus, one’s reflexivity about the interplay between empathy and analysis, not to mention ethical issues (Thurairajah 2019), I attempted to overcome that problem by adopting two research strategies. First, when taking notes following pole classes, I critically approached and examined my analytical concepts through the lens of *emic* and *ethic* notions<sup>7</sup> (Silver-

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<sup>7</sup> The *emic* approach focuses on local meanings inherent to a studied community, while the *ethic* view relates to analyzing those from an external perspective—independently of local context—to grasp the significance of locally embedded actions that transcend the boundaries of a specific community (Schütz 1976). An example would be a local use of the phrase “pics, or it didn’t happen” to acknowledge and appreciate a fellow poler’s achievements. Instructors initiated that to humorously encourage students to repeat (and thus—master) their success. With time, the expression gained another dimension and function—mocking people who called polers “attention whores” in social media. Thus, acknowledging fellow polers’ achievements in

man 2015). Second, I shared my research results with the participants to see whether my analysis accurately reflected their experiences (Charmaz 2006; also see Dimler et al. 2017). Additionally, being aware of how my experiences and location, as well as interacting with particular, relatively homogeneous groups of participants frequenting one pole dance studio, can have an impact on the data collection and analysis, I also recruited polers from other pole dance schools in the area. Although the poling community has close ties, interviewing women with whom I did not practice before offered some insights into the analytical process. At the same time, my insider status allowed me a better grip on the issues concerning embodied knowledge and experiences (see, e.g., Byczkowska 2009; 2012; Kacperczyk 2012; Konecki 2018). Still, as I did not analyze my poling experiences other than when problematizing how my insider knowledge could have reflected in collecting and interpreting the data obtained during observations and interviews, I refrain in this article from discussing personal views and experiences. My presence in the empirical sections of the paper is visible when I refer to specific situations I observed or, seldom, when I state that my and the research participants’ experiences are alike (e.g., when I explain what it requires to hold on to the pole in an inverted position).

Analytical insights presented in this article are primarily based on my ethnographic study of recreational pole dancing classes in a studio located in central Poland. I collected most of the data between

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that way can be seen as a bonding and boundary-setting strategy. Additionally, encouraging others to document and share their achievements seems to be part of a trend of impression management concerning one’s digital self (see, e.g., Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013). Also, posting photographs/films of one’s achievements usually involves an indication (e.g., in the form of a hashtag) of where those were taken, which is one way of advertising a particular studio.



2019 and 2020.<sup>8</sup> During that time, I have been frequenting diverse classes (fitness and exotic pole) at least twice a week (sometimes more than one class a day) and was explicit about the dual nature of my presence and participation. Additionally, I have been partaking in “open classes” where polers were allowed to practice on their own (an instructor was in the room to help and guide upon request). Due to one person per pole policy, only eight people at once could participate in a given class, and since partaking in each class required prior registration, the composition of groups was not fixed. Still, people who attended were mostly regulars. The majority of polers were female, with only one male participant who practiced regularly, but seldom attended classes I frequented (as he was more advanced than I was). They were between 20 and 50 years of age, although most of them were in their early- to mid-20s. During each class I observed, I had casual conversations with fellow students and instructors (all female) that I approached as conversational interviews (see: Konecki 2000). At the same time, although my perspective shifted from class participant to researcher in class, my involvement in the activity did not differ from that before the research,

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<sup>8</sup> Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdown, I stopped attending pole dancing classes in early 2020 and only conducted interviews via Teams till late 2020. In 2021, many pole dance studios in my proximity experienced economic hardships, including crippling business rates, and many closed down. Thus, although I stayed in touch with fellow polers and instructors, we communicated on a personal basis. Another dreadful event for the poling industry in Poland and other European countries was the attack on Ukraine in 2022—as many of those involved in the industry, both recreational and professional polers, are of Ukrainian descent. Those situational circumstances, along with the fact that the studio where I used to practice had to change location that same year (in 2022), had an impact on my withdrawal from the field. Still, as my initial aim—that I wish to achieve—was to analyze the social world of pole dancing, I resumed the research in mid-2022. As the data I collected thus far in the past months did not reveal new proprieties to the issue of experiencing their bodies by recreational polers, in this article, I mostly rely on the material gathered in the first phase of my field research.

and I did not notice such a change in other polers’ actions or when interacting with me. One thing that changed, though, and was observable once I informed them about my venture, was that peer polers wished to know how the research was unfolding and when I would share my insights, which proved a handful later when I sought to discuss the findings considering their representativeness of participants’ experiences. Following a class, on my way home, or when I was back, I took notes that I later analyzed. In sum, my field notes cover 56 pole dance classes. When referring in this article to data collected during observations, I describe specific situations and interactions I had with fellow polers (e.g., conversational interviews). During such instances, the research participants knew I was collecting data as part of a research project we discussed.

Semi-structured interviews were the second data collection technique. In sum, I conducted 27 interviews with 15 women who practiced pole dancing for at least a year. The participants I approached via snowball sampling were between 23 and 36 years of age. The interviews lasted from one to two hours, and all involved showing me photographs or short films of the participants’ practice (it was the participants’ choice to share that content as I did not ask them to do so<sup>9</sup>). On the one hand, that illustrates

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<sup>9</sup> Sharing photographs and films is part of the community’s culture. Outside the interview context, it is done to, for example, acknowledge others with a new trick, spin, transition from one figure to the next, or show how to perform a specific combo. It is also typical that students share a photograph or a film of somebody else they found on social media with their instructors to learn new tricks during class. Additionally, many polers post their performances on social media, including their failures (as in the case of content on @Polelols). They do so to document and share their progress. At the same time, they are not shy to show others that their journey is wobbly, and their actions motivate fellow polers not to give up. I believe that one of the reasons I was spontaneously entrusted with that content during the interviews was due to my insider status, as sharing photographs and films is what we used to do within the class context. Although during observations, I collected visual ma-

how difficult it may be to discuss embodied practice (see: Byczkowska 2009; Konecki 2015), but it can also be viewed as an exemplification of pride due to having perfected a particular trick, a phenomenon many polers are familiar with. I conducted the interviews at the participants' homes, coffee shops, and, occasionally, in pole dance studios. During the COVID-19 lockdown, I conducted follow-up interviews via Teams with 12 women I recruited earlier to see how they were dealing with the situation in the context of their involvement in pole dancing activity.<sup>10</sup> In each case, the cameras were on, and our encounters were not interfered with. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.<sup>11</sup> All participants were given pseudonyms to be anonymized (and data that could have potentially disclosed them, like names or specific locations of the studios they attended, were concealed).

The findings offered in this article are part of a larger project aimed at analyzing the social world of pole dancing in Poland. All data thus far gathered (and presented in this article) have been analyzed according to grounded theory methodology procedures (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Konecki 2000; Charmaz 2006), which entailed, among others, coding, theoretical sampling and constant comparative method, memoing, diagramming, sorting memos

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materials in the form of photographs or films (with the consent of the research participants), those did not grasp the interactional exchanges or phenomena discussed in this article and thus are not included here. Also, I did not analyze the materials shown during the interviews other than problematizing how such exchanges are part of the polers' culture.

<sup>10</sup> Experiences related to practicing pole dancing during COVID-19, especially the lockdown period, exceed the scope of the article. Still, it is worth noting that half of the women interviewed back then bought a pole to carry on with their leisure activity at home. They exercised by themselves or with some of their fellow polers and instructors (via Teams or other online collaboration platforms).

<sup>11</sup> The interviews were carried out in Polish. For the purpose of this article, I translated the cited utterances into English.

and diagrams toward integration of categories. Following theoretical sampling and constant comparative method, I have been deciding on what data to collect next and where to find them to understand the various dimensions of the studied phenomenon. As the project is ongoing, my findings are not final. At the same time, thus far, data gathered in the past few months have not sparked new proprieties concerning how female recreational pole dancers experience their bodies. Thus, for now, I consider the findings concerning that issue sufficient to share in this paper.<sup>12</sup> For that, the results of my explorations concerning one of the analytical categories—experiencing and negotiating the sense of female recreational pole dancers' embodiment—underpin my discussion and are presented in the subsequent sections of the paper.

## Body as an Issue

In the studio where I was practicing, one class followed the next, so partaking in a class that was not the first on the schedule meant entering the main fitness room where the previous class was still on to proceed to the changing room. Once in sportswear, one could stay in the changing room or wait for the next class to start in the main fitness room, where one wall had floor-to-ceiling mirrors. Thus, those exercising were able to watch themselves and those in the fitness room waiting for their class to commence. What I observed on many occasions when waiting in one corner of the fitness room for my class to begin was that several women, especially new to pole dancing, would diminish the number of attempts of performing a trick or spin, or refrain

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<sup>12</sup> Ian Dey (1999) challenged the notion of "theoretical saturation" on the count of the term's imprecision and legitimacy. Instead, he opted for "theoretical sufficiency." Similar concerns have been raised by Kathy Charmaz (2006).

from that activity, once they became aware of my or somebody else's presence in the room. Assuming they did not feel comfortable when exposed to gaze, I would return to the changing room to await my class. Such behavior could be interpreted in many ways. Thus, I raised my insight with those same fellow pole dancers to be informed that others' presence in the room intimidated them at first due to how they perceived the performance of their bodies compared to others' skills. One woman explicitly stated she feared being judged. Such perception was also verbalized during interviews. For example, when referring to the beginning of her practice, Anna (26-year-old, poling for 4 years) observed: "I didn't want to come off as some lamer, so I pushed myself. I pushed so hard that I could hardly move my arms the following day." Another participant, 23-year-old Alex, recounts her experiences when re-engaging in the activity following a one-year break from poling:

I tried to be focused on myself, but seeing others doing tricks I've been doing with such ease some months back and looking back at myself struggling to hold on to the pole and being so... clumsy in the worst meaning of the word, I felt simply bad...and I remembered chatting with that gal before the class, telling her what tricks I wanted to do, and I thought, "God, you must look like some phony." [laughs]

When addressing the positive impact of recreational pole dancing on one's self-image, Ariel J. Dimler and colleagues (2017) observed how exercising in front of floor-to-ceiling mirrors allows for noticing the diversity of body sizes and shapes, which can contribute to refocusing one's perception on the body. At the same time, such mirrors could also be viewed as a constant reminder of being watched and, in that sense, constitute an incentive to give

off an impression (Goffman 1959; 1986) aimed at controlling the situation and the anticipated assessment of the other. That suggests women could have internalized the social gaze, and based on the interaction with that 'partner,' they anticipate and attempt to manage judgment. In that case, comparing the functionality of their and fellow polers' bodies made them tangibly aware of the bodies they attempted to control to fit in. One of the participants elaborated on the sociocultural context of that issue.

**Alice:** I don't know why that is so. I mean... We're used to competing, to be cognizant of our scores. Like, in school, where you're constantly evaluated, and where you know you are compared to others. Yes, I believe that is part of the problem that we fear being judged because we're so used to being judged at all times. My body is like, okay, it is what it is, but the bigger issue was how I had no control over it. It was like a limp bulk. I couldn't control it, it was living its own life, and that was frustrating. So, yes, I mean...

**I:** You didn't want to be judged?

**Alice:** Nobody wants that, I guess. [laughs]

**I:** Did you feel judged in the class [when pole dancing]?

**Alice:** No, but that's not the point. It's in our heads, like, I didn't want to do the exotic [pole] because other girls were so sexy, and I was not.

**I:** What do you mean by "sexy?"

**Alice:** They were moving like wild cats, and I was like a sperm whale.

[32-year-old, poling for a year]

What surfaces here is the issue of experiencing one's body as a 'substance' somehow independent of one's will that requires working with it (and not through it) to fit in observed standards of others' performance through their bodies, which allow for specific embodied expression. In that sense, al-

though referring to one's body in terms of it being "what it is" may be seen as coming to terms with its form rather than accepting and appreciating it; the body's image is foremost relativized to its functionality or the lack thereof. That suggests continuous practice and one's successes in that regard could contribute to 'learning' the body and its possibilities, and thus, empowerment (see, e.g., Holland 2010; Dimler et al. 2017; Kim and Kwon 2019; Kim et al. 2023). Another analytical insight is how the internalized social gaze is an offshoot of acting within the sociocultural context where one is lured into competing with others (Giddens 1991; see also Bauman 2007). Interestingly, although being "used to be judged at all times" has an impact on how one makes meaning of diverse interactional encounters, Samantha Holland (2010) argued how women in her study appreciated pole dancing for its lack of the competitiveness context and the omnipresent ambient of camaraderie giving way to embracing the embodied self on ones' pace (see also Dimler et al. 2017). My findings corroborate Holland's conclusions as women in this study were supportive of one another, but also cognizant of fellow polers' experiences. In that sense, assuming the intersubjectivity of meanings, they approached their peers' situation based on how they would like to be treated and how they interpreted the other's positionality based on their experiences and anxieties. One such example is drawn from how instructors approach new students. Having experience working predominantly with women (and their anxieties) and knowing how their optics on the body when exposed to gaze can hold their progress when poling, many instructors running classes in diverse pole dance studios in the area explicitly revealed that when encountering a new beginner group they take notice of not revealing too much of their muscular and fit bodies, as well as to not push-

ing the student to undress more.<sup>13</sup> As I was told, they act so to not intimidate or discourage women from poling, which, when interacting with the pole, often accentuates bodily features people may feel insecure about. Conscious of how bodily tissue can look when holding on and pressed against the pole, as in, for example, Scorpio<sup>14</sup> or other inverts, some would intentionally comment on it being natural when the skin rolls once holding on to the pole. On the one hand, their focus on the aesthetic aspect of the poling body may be viewed as yet another exemplification of the controlling social gaze. At the same time, their primary interest is bound to safety issues. As it was explained to me, and what I know from my experience, when inverted on the pole, we hold on to it as long as we have a solid grip and our bodies closely adhere to the prop. If one would slightly release that hold to make the body tissue look a certain way, they might fall (something many instructors have encountered in the class and which is exemplified in comments such as: "Is there any way to make my tummy look good?" "Hold on with that pic, I need to look good first"<sup>15</sup>). The same safety concern underlies instructions to point one's toes when on the

<sup>13</sup> As skin sticks better to the pole than cotton fabric (and thus secures a better grip on the pole), exercising in "skimpy" sportswear is safer and allows for performing more advanced tricks.

<sup>14</sup> In Scorpio, one holds to the pole with the outer part of the calf, the inner part on the thigh, waist, and armpit.

<sup>15</sup> "Pics, or it didn't happen" is a humorous phrase one often hears during a pole dancing class, whose intent is to motivate participants to document (and share) their achievements. Analytically, it can be viewed as an impression management strategy aimed at fostering one's positive self-image thanks to receiving positive social reactions (e.g., in the form of likes). At the same time, as sometimes it takes a group effort to make such a photo (including helping a fellow poler to get on the pole), the strategy at hand is reflective of how specific actions are entangled in the social gaze aimed at controlling an individual. Interestingly, more experienced polers rarely post photographs, focusing instead on sharing short movie formats.

pole as such movement tensions calf muscles and thus secures a better grip.

As illustrated in this section, when embarking on their journey with recreational pole dancing, participants (mostly regardless of their previous involvement in other sports leisure activities) tended to see their bodies in terms of an issue. As they lacked physical practice and awareness, and thus, had difficulties expressing themselves through their bodies, they regarded them as somehow independent of their will and, in that sense—a substance they had to fight with to achieve their end (“I looked in the mirror again and said, ‘You’re going to listen to me! You’re about to start doing what I want to do!’” [Liz-zie, 34-years-old, poling for 3 years]). Having internalized a critical social gaze, many of them leaned toward a disapproving assessment of the functionality of their bodies compared to more experienced fellow polers’ performances and—anticipating shame (Scheff 2003) associated with complying with such an image in the eyes of the other—they attempted to manage impression as an interactional strategy (Goffman 1959; 1986). What surfaces here is that although the internalized social gaze entails the surveillance of how one looks and acts, participants, even if they wished for their bodies to “look good,” did not worry much about being “judged” concerning their physical appearance but rather their physical performance—they did not wish to be deemed incompetent compared to what fellow polers were able to achieve through their bodies. The above finding suggests how the positive assessment of one’s bodily functionality can expand to one’s self-image and is consistent with what Jasmyn Kim and colleagues (2023) discovered among Korean recreational pole dancers. It is also corroborated by Ariel J. Dimler and colleagues (2017:348), who argued that “positive body image programs should

consider the inclusion of activities that focus on the functionality of women’s bodies rather than their appearance.”

In the next section, I will address how becoming more aware of their bodies allowed participants to embrace them as interactional partners cooperating toward achieving their (mutual) end and how they reclaim them from the critical social gaze.

### Body as a Resource

Contrary to what may be expected of a pole dancing class (be it more fitness or exotic-oriented), for the most part, it is far from glamorous and sensually enticing. Instead, there are tears, sweat, bruises, and broken skin. Perhaps that is something that can be said about any physical training. Still, the specificity of pole dancing lies in the diversity of skills required to not only hold on to the pole but also transition from one trick to another when performing a routine at least five feet upside down on a metal prop. Thus, those who practice work toward developing a firm grip, muscle strength, flexibility, endurance (in the beginning, also in terms of pain tolerance), and most importantly, the ability to trust themselves. Why do people choose a leisure activity that not only is dangerous but also potentially carries a social stigma? For all whom I interviewed and encountered when poling, pole dancing allowed them to learn more about themselves, which had a positive impact on their self-image and translated to a sense of empowerment (also see Holland 2010; Dimler et al. 2017; Kim and Kwon 2019; Kim et al. 2023).

**Mary:** When I look back at it, it was like black magic, you know. I had that thought, like, “How come, how can that be possible, how can she hold on, how

does she know she won't fall?" [laughs], and so on. It was like a massive "Wow!" Later, when I started doing some basic inverts, it didn't come easy for me, and I was very disappointed. I lacked the strength and agility to hold on to the pole, and sometimes it required many people to help me get there. It was tough, but, as with everything in life, it passed... So, now, when my gals ask me how I can transition from, for example, Gemini to Brass Monkey without doing an Extended Butterfly, I don't even know what to tell them as it just seems so natural. I mean, I don't think about it anymore. I see a trick, deconstruct it in my head, and just do it, and it makes me so proud! [laughs]

**I:** How do you know you'll be able to do it?

**Mary:** I don't [laughs]. I mean... Nice! Good question [laughs]. I think... I think it's partially due to experience, you know. After all, I've been doing that for over four years now. But, at the end of the day, it's about knowing your body, I mean... It's hard to put that into words, but... Okay, last week, like last week, I've been at the gym with my kids, and there was this box you jump on... So the kids wanted me to jump, and I did, although it was fairly high. But, again, I know my body, and I knew I'd do that with ease.

[28-year-old, poling for 4 years]

Although Mary's utterance smoothly passes from struggling to knowing one's body, what happens in between is a process when polers dedicate much time to achieving what they know they have difficulties doing. As I witnessed and experienced, for many, it is a process of setting milestones in terms of tricks they would like to do, and one of their strategies to achieve those goals is getting involved in instrumental physical activities, for example, attending a gym, aimed at building strength needed to meet their end. Interestingly, some participants explicitly illuminated during the conversations we

had how such a strategic and small-steps approach they undertook, which allowed them to achieve their goals, prompted them to extend that strategy to other spheres of their everyday lives, making them more systematic and resilient. For example, on one occasion, when I was waiting with a group of fellow polers for our class to begin, that issue was brought up to a great extent. One of the women, a university student who was to take an exam considered a "killer," recounted some humorous stories about her peers' strategies to pass. When asked about her strategy, she immediately replied that her journey with pole dancing, which she started once enrolled at the University, taught her to take a systematic small-step approach and related long-term planning. Thus, at that time, she was already prepared to take the exam. Her observation prompted other polers to share a similar approach they developed due to practicing pole dancing. How she appreciated and instilled skills she learned in class beyond recreational context is reflected in Alice's utterance addressing why she valued pole dancing.

The very thing that it [pole dancing] is so extremely difficult makes you learn, I mean, GENUINELY learn what it takes to achieve your goals. But, you also learn HOW to do that... Like, for me, poling... it made me so much more patient in diverse spheres [of life]. Like, I think that I finally got what it means to take small steps. I mean, you may be achieving things slower, but you get there, and you know it was thanks to your hard work, and you know you did that, that is the result of your hard work. It definitely goes for sports, but it also goes for life, for work, for relationships, you name it. [32-year-old, poling for a year]

In that sense, recreational pole dancing can be viewed as surpassing the notions of hobby and exercise regime to become a tool allowing women to

manage diverse areas of their lives with confidence that they are capable of achieving their goals (also see Holland 2010; Dimler et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2023). Additionally, such a perceived quality of pole dancing may constitute one of the factors behind valuing bodily functionality—as a result of one’s observable progress achieved due to “hard work” and thus eliciting pride and enhancing the sense of potency (see, e.g., Zimbardo and Leippe 1991).

Being able to carry one’s body weight in the air and witnessing one’s strength, as well as being seen as capable of achieving one’s goals, become a source of pride but also, more importantly, of trust toward one’s body (“It’s funny how I used to think of it [my body] as my enemy. Now I can see how my body and I are one, and how it can guide me if I listen” [Lena, 35-year-old, poling for 4 years]). Interestingly, some participants alluded to getting to know one’s body better once they exercised by themselves. That observation points to how supportive the poling community is in holding up its members, but also suggests that relying on fellow polers’ aid can slow down one’s progress and have an impact on negotiating the sense of one’s body. Accepting or seeking other polers’ assistance often allows one to perform a trick (and document one’s achievement). At the same time, taking a shortcut may inhibit embracing one’s relationship with the body, allowing for developing only façade skills, as Amanda’s utterance suggests.

You finally get that if you lack the strength, you won’t be able to do it, you won’t reach, you won’t pull yourself up, it won’t happen for you, end of story... There are no helping hands assisting you in wrapping around [the pole]. And that’s when you get the drift of how much you know your body, how much communication you can have with it. That’s when

“Oh, help me please, ‘cause I HAVE to do that” ends. No, you don’t have to do anything, but you can start working to be capable. And that’s the hardest part because it requires listening [to] and understanding [your body]. [35-year-old, poling for 4 years]

When ‘learning’ their bodies in the process of a small-steps approach, participants become cognizant of the gravity of listening to their embodiment. One such example is when I was told how, based on understanding their bodily experiences, polers were able to tell what their bodies “needed” (e.g., to push more or refrain [see: Byczkowska 2012; Konecki 2015]). In that sense, in the process of engaging in recreational pole dancing, polers became more aware of their bodies as their interactional partners who guided them toward their goals. Additionally, they also learn to appreciate their partners for what they can do instead of how they look (also see Holland 2020; Dimler et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2023).

Extensive training aimed at developing muscle strength changes how the body looks, especially its upper part, making it visually less compliant with the omnipresent ideal type of a ‘feminine’ woman. I remember having multiple conversations with fellow polers whose photos posted on social media got negative comments due to featuring a fit yet too muscular body for a woman whose shape should resemble a Coca-Cola bottle and not a reversed triangle. That, again, brings us back to the issue of the controlling social gaze. Despite developing a new relationship with their bodies (from experiencing those as a ‘substance’ independent of their will toward a more holistic perception of oneself with bodies as interactional partners), women in the study were not only aware of societal ideals concerning their bodies but they also were reminded of those (see: Donaghue et al. 2011; Dimler et al. 2017). Since

the participants were engaging in discussions concerning how others were perceiving their 'non-ideal' bodies, regardless of pole dancers' opinions on the subject, that exemplifies the effectiveness of social control via critical social gaze (McRobbie 2009; Walter 2010). Together with their anxieties and related beliefs concerning their looks in the eyes of the other, as was also voiced by Alice, who did not find herself "sexy" enough to partake in exotic pole class, that reveals tensions that arise between structure and personal agency when one slightly deviates from what is considered desirable (see: Goffman 1986). In that sense, when negotiating their relationship with their bodies that were changing in the course of their recreational leisure activity, women were navigating within different social discourses (e.g., that of beauty ideals and agency) to fit in. Still, when making meaning of their bodies, the polers in this study prioritized their functionality over their shape, which corroborates the findings presented by Jasmyn Kim and colleagues (2023). Although they did not welcome the change with particular joy, polers embraced their shifting embodiment with a sense of humor, stating that new clothes are easily accessible, whereas skills are something one does not buy but earn. In that sense, although their verbal reaction can be interpreted as underpinned by being aware of 'traditional' female beauty ideals, at the same time, it shows how polers 'chose' to refocus when giving meaning to their bodies from being anxious about their social reception to seeing those as personal resources exemplifying one's hard work, and thus, one's source of pride based on bodily functionality (Dimler et al. 2017).

Perhaps that comes with age, but I don't care so much anymore about my figure. It used to be important to me, but now I think it's of secondary importance. What matters more is that I'm healthy and capable,

yes, capable. Okay, my shoulders are muscular for a woman, and I still get some stinging comments about that, but that's just so silly. Why do you care about my looks? Perhaps you should focus on yourself instead. Can you lift yourself in the air? Can you handle your body weight? I don't think so! I can do that with incredible ease, and the feeling that gives me is something I won't trade for some frail shoulders. What can I say? [laughs] My body—my choice. [Nina, 29-year-old, poling for 5 years]

Nina's utterance captures the tension between societal structure and personal agency and highlights how the latter becomes a matter of choice. The persistence of controlling social gaze, which manifests in the form of "stingy comments," is not neutral for her, as is visible in her narration. At the same time, bodily functionality that she achieved due to personal effort is prioritized over a socially desirable 'feminine' body, as her body—and what *they* can do together—empowers her.<sup>16</sup> Another surfacing insight is how critical social gaze also becomes criticized in terms of rationalizing one's decision to not fit the expected social 'ideal.' That exemplifies how women negotiate the meanings of their bodies when navigating within critical discourses by imposing their interpretative frame, which can be seen as a way of shielding oneself against critical social gaze (Turner and Stets 2005).

I used to think a lot about my body, its imperfections, and how others see them. But, with pole dancing, it somehow changed. People are judgmental, but I be-

<sup>16</sup> Appreciation of their efforts, as well as their sense of belonging to a community that shares a common view on the body, is also exemplified by the community's verbal strategy to embrace multiple bruises they get during practice in terms of "pole kisses." Getting "kisses" from the pole allows polers to approach the prop with affection reflective of their efforts, not the prop's resistance (see also Kim and Kwon 2019).



lieve that is because they feel bad about themselves and wish to drag others down...What changed is that I have learned how to appreciate my body for what it is and what it can do. I do amazing things, something I would never think I would be able to achieve, and yet, here I am [laughs]. I was ashamed, and now I am proud as I finally know how to let go. It's like, I don't think much anymore about how I should dress or behave, I just am. [Kate, 36-year-old, poling for 2 years]

As in the case of Nina, Kate's verbalized experience illuminates how confidence underpinned by perceived bodily functionality gave way to refocusing one's optics on the embodiment, which contributed to reclaiming one's body from the clutches of critical social gaze (McRobbie 2009). In that sense, engaging in recreational pole dancing can be viewed as rewarding in terms of representing a self-care strategy accessible through one's involvement in physical activity that allows for personal growth and achievement, which, in turn, contributes to the arousal of pride (Scheff 1994; also see Dimler et al. 2017). As a result, less focus on how one can be seen may give way to becoming less self-policing and controlling concerning the body, as one knows "how to let go," which, I argue, represents a source of empowerment.

As presented in this section, interacting with the body aimed at pushing past one's physical boundaries gives way to 'learning' its possibilities and 'listening' to its needs, which leads to embracing the body not as a foe but as a partner with whom to meet one's end. The process at hand, when one moves from setting specific goals, through working toward achieving them, to "just" doing, can be approached from the perspective of the conscious competence learning model (from unconscious incompetence, following conscious incompetence, through con-

scious competence, to unconscious competence). One's visible progress underpinned by hard work and the shifting relation with the body can contribute to developing a sense of being both agentic and effective and be an incentive to extend specific strategies of meeting one's end to social contexts other than physical activity. Jasmyn Kim and colleagues (2023) employ Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow to elaborate on body positivity through creative immersion among recreational pole dancers. As they observe (Kim et al. 2023:775), and what is reflected in this study, "Csikszentmihalyi...alludes to 'the joy of working ahead of any extrinsic reward' as the essence of self-discovery through creative expression and emphasizes that engaging in activities that generate a sense of flow has the potential to enhance subjective well-being and mediate personal growth and development." At the same time, focusing on the functionality of the body and taking pride in what one can achieve through it gives way to building self-confidence based on one's relationship with the body. Although polers remain aware of societal ideals and expectations concerning the body, when they praise and opt for bodily functionality over its looks, they (choose to) challenge those in terms of not fitting in. When doing so, they adopt a perspective shared with fellow polers and advocate their choices in terms of exercising agency. At the same time, they highlight pragmatic reasons behind the decisions they make. Acting so exemplifies how they navigate between the societal structure and realizing agency when reclaiming their bodies from the scrutinizing social gaze, which can be seen as self-care.

In the next section, I will reflect on how stereotypical discursive approaches to pole dancing can have an impact on those who engage in poling as a recreational leisure activity.

## Body Entangled in Stereotypes

One of the subjects fellow polers often discussed when we were in the studio was how many people from their immediate surroundings associated pole dancing with the erotic sphere. Such a perspective manifested itself, for example, in a stereotypical (predominantly male) belief that a female pole dancer must be physically alluring and 'sexually liberated'—as in the case of a study participant whose partner was congratulated by a male associate once he revealed his girlfriend attended pole dancing classes. He was regarded to be "lucky" as his partner must have been "super hot" and "good in bed." Interestingly, and in line with what Ariel Levy (2005) and Angela McRobbie (2009) observed concerning the Madonna/Whore dichotomy, although some men appreciated pole dancers' (presumable) skills, they, nonetheless, did not wish for women they dated to engage in such an activity—as was the experience of one study participant. Of course, men were not alone in sharing and transmitting stereotypical views on pole dancing, as some of the study participants were told by female acquaintances that it was not a suitable activity for a mother. At the same time, several fellow polers discussed instances when they were asked by female peers how practicing pole dancing contributed to their seduction skills, sexiness, or sexual empowerment, to name a few. Thus, corroborating Ngaire Donaghue and colleagues' findings (2011), the participants' experiences highlight how pole dancing is commonly associated with the erotic sphere and desirable female sexuality. Given how those stereotypes convey beliefs concerning expected looks, attitudes, and behaviors, they can be seen as yet another example of a scrutinizing social gaze aimed at controlling female

bodies and sexuality.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, based on those same clichés, women seem to be lured into decoding pole dancing in terms of activity that can benefit them with particular skills (e.g., seductive), tools (e.g., sexiness), and qualities (e.g., [sexual] confidence) with which to navigate toward empowerment (see: Whitehead and Kurz 2009; Donaghue et al. 2011).

Mindful of how pole dance may be seen, some participants did not disclose their engagement in that recreational activity in some interactional and situational contexts. To keep it secret, they would, for example, not post any information concerning pole dancing or their involvement therein on social media.<sup>18</sup> Other women, guided by internalized societal ideals and stereotypes, as well as anticipating critical gaze, restricted (at least initially) their recreational engagement in pole dancing to 'purely' fitness style, believing they lacked some qualities, such as grace, femininity, or the sense of rhythm to progress in other genres. That is what Anna, a 26-year-old pole dancer practicing for 4 years, narrated when addressing her anxieties concerning taking pole dancing class aimed at practicing dance routines.

**Anna:** I think I'd like to try that [exotic pole], especially since I love watching all those performances [on

<sup>17</sup> Notably, some verbal actions of recreational pole dancers also displayed the internalized stereotypical ways of thinking about the body. One example would be humorous comments by female polers who expressed their 'dissatisfaction' with witnessing how a male poler proved more apt than they did in performing an exotic pole routine ("Great, a guy moves more gracefully than I do," "Not only is he stronger, he also has so much grace, that's just unfair!"). That highlights how pole dancing can be viewed as a dialectic and borderline activity entangled in stereotypical approaches to the (gendered) body (see: Whitehead and Kurz 2009; Holland 2010; Donaghue et al. 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Such a decision was made, among others, by primary and high school teachers who wanted to avoid assessments of their leisure activity (and the consequences of such) within their professional context.

YouTube], but perhaps that's not my time yet. So, perhaps a bit later... [laughs]

**I:** How will you know that the time is right?

**Anna:** I don't know... The truth is that, well, I don't think I'll ever be good at it. First, I have, like, no sense of rhythm, nor such inner femininity that some women fill the room with... Like, I would be like a bull in a china shop.

In line with Anna's narration, another research participant, who had a pole installed at home, told me how she once tried to put together an exotic act, but refrained after a couple of attempts as she felt embarrassed about her performance compared to what she had seen online. Her 'failure' in that regard prompted her to take an exotic pole class for beginners.

Based on their experiences, the surfacing insight is to what extent the stereotypical imageries shape recreational pole dancers' actions. On the one hand, that highlights how having internalized the scrutinizing social gaze and desired 'femininity' may have an impact on personal assessment and intentional withdrawal from certain activities to avoid shame (Goffman 1986; Sheff 2003; Turner and Stets 2005)—the underpinning of which lies in constantly making comparisons, as Alice, one of the quoted study participants observed. Since Anna would like to try another pole dance genre, that, again, reveals the tension between the structure and personal agency. At the same time, although also displeased with how her performance played out compared to her expectations, the latter study participant undertook a different strategy for dealing with tension. Thus, regardless of what could have underpinned how the women acted under the internalized social gaze, the social imageries seem to play a salient role in how they navigate between structure and exer-

cising personal agency. In that light, one could ask how, if in any way, social scripts concerning recreational pole dancing translate to how the activity is embraced by pole dance studios.

**Natalie:** Actually, my first experience with poling wasn't good, so I wouldn't say it was love at first sight [laughs].

**I:** Can you tell me more about that?

**Natalie:** Sure. So, the first class I took, it was like five, probably five years back in X [name of the studio]. So, I was a novice to pole, and I didn't really know what to expect, but [there] it was all about, like, forcing you to be sexy, and... more sexy and seductive, as if you were to make a career of it. So... I really don't like stuff like "use your booty, show more booty," et cetera. Like, okay, for example, we were supposed to touch the pole like a guy. That just sounds... Well, it was totally fake. 'Cause, okay, it's your first time, so you don't know how to stick to that [pole], and now you're expected to put on a show. I mean, I do exotic now, but that thing just wasn't for me.

**I:** Was it an exotic class?

**Natalie:** No, it was a regular basic-level class, so... [24-year-old, poling for 3 years]

An issue surfacing from Natalie's utterance concerns how imposing a particular meaning frame on pole dancing classes can have an impact on the students' perspective and involvement in the activity.<sup>19</sup> A similar approach to teaching recreational pole dancing is exemplified in Ariel J. Dimler and colleagues'

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<sup>19</sup> Notably, Natalie was not the only participant in the study who was reluctant to exhibit sexually loaded behaviors within the pole dancing class context. Some other women, although held high esteem for skills needed to perform the exotic pole, admitted they did not wish to participate in classes aimed at impression management (see: Goffman 1959), which Natalie referred to as "faking." Of course, due to the character of the genre, the issue at hand is more complex and, as such, exceeds the scope of this article.

(2017) study aimed at analyzing how exercising pole fitness has an impact on positive body image. Here, partaking in a brief performance in front of fellow polers is exemplified as a way to promote and develop self-confidence.

Each pole fitness class culminates in a mandatory "community pole" whereby every participant gets up in front of their peers and shows off what she learned during that class. The women are encouraged to be sexual and sensual in their movements, with one rule of community pole being that you have to "sexy strut" to and from the pole. Many participants discussed how this is often awkward and uncomfortable at first, but it actually helps women develop confidence. Anastasia described the process of learning to be confident in herself and her body, and highlighted that sometimes you have to "fake it till you make it." [Dimler et al. 2017:345]

The above examples of framing recreational pole dancing as erotic loaded can be viewed as reflective of an inherent assumption that prospective polers will be able to culturally deconstruct the pole dancing activity as underpinned by the sexual sphere. At the same time, they are expected to acknowledge that the way they express themselves (be it sensual, emotional, or artistic forms of expression) can be used strategically to meet certain ends (see: Donaghue et al. 2011). The performative dimension of that activity seems problematic for three reasons. First, instantaneously faking sexual bodily expressions may entail the projection of one's imagery of what may be seen as such, which further exposes one to the critical social gaze. Second, confidence built on the appreciation of the other can make one more prone to conformity and social influence (see: Zimbardo and Leippe 1991). Third, it not only legitimizes the critical social gaze but can also re-

strain one from seeking a form of expressing oneself in the spur of the moment, reaching instead for already performed and socially approved frames, which contributes to the perpetuation of the mechanisms of social control, for example, in the context of promoting socially desirable femininity. For that reason, it is worth focusing here on one of the classes (exotic pole) offered in the studio I frequented in terms of how the understanding of the activity was mediated via the way of teaching.

Compared to the fitness pole, which mostly entails a combination of tricks and moves requiring physical strength and flexibility, the exotic pole style is more musical and focused on performing dance routines encompassing aerial tricks, spins, and floor work, including splits or shoulder rolls. Due to quick, dynamic, and smooth moves building up for a routine, many participants discussed how that pole style resembles a cardio workout. At the same time, while the fitness pole allows a variety of ways of transitioning to a specific trick, in the exotic style, any 'shortcomings' or incorrect positioning of the body are immediately visible.

A typical exotic pole class would involve practicing and mastering an original routine that instructors choreographed, which usually lasted some weeks. When showing a routine and its sequence or guiding students to perform a specific move or trick, the pole instructors referred to issues such as the fluidity of movement or maintaining the correct body line. Thus, instead of instructing them how to do something within a narrative framework of their choice, the students were instead factually guided concerning what should be performed in the music. One example of allowing an interpretation of dance moves was encouraging the students to think of an animal and imitate its moves (what

can be seen as a referral to animal flow). As I discussed with fellow polers, such an approach was illuminating in the sense that it allowed for embracing pole dancing in its exotic form as an arena for experimenting with the bodies and seeing how others could interpret and give meaning to their bodily expressions. That is reflected in Carol's view on how the variety of exotic pole dancing moves and the way one choreographs and enacts those reveal the wide spectrum of meanings that surpass those of displaying sexuality.

**Carol:** I'm thinking, for example, about Andy's act, which was amazing! And the way she performed it was pure perfection! I mean, that was one hundred percent my aesthetics. Like, I adore watching Agnes' routines, and I think she's flawless. But, at the same time, you kind of know what to expect. Whereas in this case [Andy's performance], it obviously was sensual, but you didn't have the feeling it was about that. For me, I felt like she took you to her world, and that was great. And, in fact, what we talked about, here [in the studio], you have the opportunity to learn the moves, but we don't dance the same way. We simply don't, and that's great as we can also learn from one another.

**I:** Why do you think it's so that we don't dance the same way?

**Carol:** There're many factors, for sure, including skills and the so-called stage confidence, but I also think, concerning those gals I know better, that we also kind of choose the vibe.

**I:** Do you think that vibe is constant?

**Carol:** No, and that's the beauty! [laughs]

[28-year-old, poling for 2 years]

Thus, although performing the same routine, the way people enact embodied expressions could be a factor having an impact on the interpretation (in-

ternal and external) and reception of the act. Realizing that, I argue, can allow for embracing pole dancing in its variety.

As I was told by a pole dancing instructor who also worked in a strip club, exotic dancing, most often equated with exotic pole dancing, can but does not have to be about being "sexy," and if it is about that, then one should be mindful of its whole spectrum. Based on the conversation we had, I highlighted in this section how loading any activity with ready-made meaning, self-evident for those who frame it a certain way, may prove problematic. One of the reasons for that is that recreational pole dancing can be embraced by polers in various ways, and luring them into predefined optics reflective of stereotypes and controlling social gaze may not only hold off giving meaning based on their experiences but also discourage some from undertaking that activity. Indeed, while promoting socially desirable femininity and sexual agency (see, e.g., Donaghue et al. 2011) may be enticing for some, for others, it may prove limiting, for example, in terms of perpetuating stereotypical scripts they wish to avoid. Additionally, narrowing recreational pole dancing down to the erotic sphere and enacting female sexuality seem to rely on the premises similar to those that—via controlling social gaze—lure women into aspiring for the best-embodied versions of themselves and, as shown in this article, underpin their anxieties. In that light, one can ask whether a *fake it till you make it* strategy aimed at allowing one to fit societal expectations and ideals is to be seen as the best way to empower women.

## Concluding Remarks

Drawing on ethnographic and interview data, my goal in this article was to shed light on how women

involved in recreational pole dancing perceive, negotiate, and make meaning of their bodies. How they espoused their embodiment throughout that journey was analyzed within the frame of body entanglement in many social discourses, including desired femininity. In a society where female physical attractiveness is emphasized and promoted, practicing recreational pole dancing proved an outlet that allowed women to refocus their relationship with their bodies and empowered them to cultivate a positive self-image based on appreciation for what they can achieve and experience through their bodies. Previous research on pole dancing as a leisure recreational activity argued for beneficial implications of that form of physical exercising, including how participants grow to appreciate the functionality of their bodies over their physical appearance (see, e.g., Holland 2010; Dimler et al. 2017; Kim and Kwon 2019; Kim et al. 2023). This study confirmed that perspective elicited through one’s immersion in pole dancing while cooperating with one’s closest interactional partner—the body. In that sense, the power of pole dancing may lie in allowing the reintegration of the aspects of the self and shift through that mind-body connection the focus of physical esthetics toward self-acceptance and self-appreciation (Dimler et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2023). Additionally, this study offers insights into how becoming self-conscious of one’s embodiment may allow the state of “letting go,” which can translate into lesser engagement in self-policing practices. In that context, progressing in recreational pole dancing may be viewed as a self-care practice (also see Dimler et al. 2017). At the same time, I believe that the same positive effect can be brought about by engaging in other sports activities. Ariel J. Dimler and colleagues (2017) advocated incorporating specific contexts of pole dancing classes into programs to foster positive body image.

Such a potential for pole dancing has been noticed and put into practice by Sheila Kelley, who built a chain of S Factor pole dancing studios. As is indicated on the S Factor official webpage (<https://sfactor.com/>), “Our mission is to create a space where any woman can safely and confidently unfold the story of her own body.” The Netflix documentary, *Strip Down, Rise Up*, features the philosophy and method applied in S Factor studios. The documentary shows the journey of a group of women who face their fears and traumas and embrace themselves anew by espousing their embodied selves. Although the pole dance community finds it problematic, for example, for not undertaking the issue of sex workers’ role in the popularization of the activity at hand, as well as for dancing not for oneself but for Netflix subscribers, which is reflective of the performative character of the activity, the documentary, nonetheless, illuminates how one’s engagement in recreational physical activity can have an impact on one’s self-image. One could question whether a group therapy-like approach adopted in the S Factor method would prove beneficial in the long run. At the same time, the documentary features a variety of how pole dancing studios structure classes and frame the notion of the activity. Based on my research, I argue that allowing students to create and negotiate their interpretation of pole dancing and the meaning of their involvement therein gives way to experimenting not only with the notions of the body but also with and through the body. Whereas framing that activity with ready-made scripts reflective of critical social gaze and luring students into unquestioningly embracing such optics can discourage them from practicing pole dancing.

My findings in this article corroborate conclusions offered in research undertaking a similar subject

of the female body within the pole dancing class context. At the same time, adopting a symbolic interactionist perspective allowed me to grasp how research participants give meaning to the recreational activity they undertake and their actions therein. Based on SI premises, I highlighted how the understanding of their bodies changes over time from 'substance' independent of their will to interactional partners. Part of that process is that being mindful of what they can achieve through their bodies made women in this study reflective of how they were able to meet their goals, which allowed them to utilize those strategies beyond the class context. Acting so gave way to form an even stronger bond with the substantial aspect of self as it made them more cognizant of their abilities and thus—empowered them based on recognizing their achievements. Additionally, when analyzing the process of giving meaning to one's embodiment, my goal was to capture the intervening conditions in the form of the internalized social gaze. That allowed for highlighting how women navigate and deal with tensions between the structure and enacting personal agency, including their agential choice of bodily functionality over its socially desired looks, as well as picturing recreational pole dancing as a boundary activity. Finally, when drawing on the latter, I advocated how framing recreational pole dancing in a way reflective of stereotypes and scrutinizing social gaze—as some pole dance studios do—may prove counterproductive. My intention was also to suggest that building one's self-confidence based on the performative dimension of undertaken activity to fit societal ideals and expectations may have more in common with social conformity than (genuine) empowerment.

At the same time, my findings are limited to the more fitness approach to pole dancing, and the

research was primarily focused on female participants' experiences. Thus, to illustrate the wide variety and complexity of the social world of pole dancing, as well as its entanglement in many social discourses, future research should consider more nuanced analytical paths. It should undertake the issue of male participants' perspectives and diverse contexts of pole dancing, including its inherent performative dimension.

In sum, this research has extended the literature on how undertaking recreational physical activity can have a positive impact on one's self-image. Specifically, insights shared by participants elucidated how pole dancing is a context whereby women in this study experienced and espoused their bodies as interactional partners with whom to achieve the 'impossible.' Throughout that journey of 'learning' their bodies, women refocused their perspective on the body, which gave way to appreciating its functionality and being proud of what it can achieve. Finally, how they gave meaning to their bodies allowed them to begin reclaiming that part of their selves from the clutches of the controlling social gaze while navigating between the structural framework of social scripts and personal agency.

## Acknowledgments

I thank the research participants who dedicated time to share their experiences with me and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on the first version of this article. Special thanks to Jakub Niedbalski, the executive editor of *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej* (a twin journal of *Qualitative Sociology Review*), who carried out and supervised the double-blind review process of this article.

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## Citation

Wojciechowska, Magdalena. 2023. “I was ashamed, and now I am proud as I finally know how to let go.’ How Female Polers Perceive, Experience, and Give Meanings to Their Bodies—An Ethnographic Case Study.” *Qualitative Sociology Review* 19(4):26-51. Retrieved Month, Year ([http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive\\_eng.php](http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php)). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.19.4.02>