

# MANAGING AGING IN YOUNG ADULTHOOD: The "Aging" Table Dancer

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**ABSTRACT:** *Using the case of the "table-dancer," a kind of strip-tease dancer, the process of aging is examined as "managed utility." Challenging typical aging theories that assume old age is a status conferred on individuals at the end of a life course, table-dancers grow old as a managed contingency of self and setting. The aging dancer may leave the occupation, often to return to it later, or carves out a niche for herself in the business, virtually eclipsing retirement. Each solution requires the table-dancer to manage her worklife through the choice of setting and particular roles played in it.*

According to several strip bar owners and other bar personnel in a large metropolitan area in the Southwest where this study was conducted, strip tease dancers are getting old at a younger age. Studies conducted well over a decade ago (Boles and Garbin 1974a, 1974b, 1974c; Carey, Petersen, and Sharpe 1974; Gonos 1976; McCaghy and Skipper 1969, 1972; Salutin 1971; Skipper and McCaghy 1970, 1971, 1978) report a median age of 23. Those interviewed for this study consider the average age to be 19 or 20. An explanation is succinctly offered by Santino,<sup>1</sup> a respondent and bar owner:

It used to be that dancers catered to older customers, but now, younger and younger customers are coming into the bar all the time. When customers are forty to fifty years old, it's okay for a dancer to be thirty years old, but when the customers are in their twenties, they are interested in younger dancers, not older ones.

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Asked why he thinks younger customers are going to strip bars, Santino explains:

These guys come here instead of going to a singles bar. Girls in singles bars are too much trouble for them; they're difficult to start talking to, stuck-up, and you don't get to see them undressed. Here, it's their [the dancers] job to talk to you. Plus, these guys think there is a better chance of taking out one of these women, than a woman you meet in a regular bar.

This article considers the social and personal consequences of an aging process experienced in the late teens and early twenties by strip-teasers known as "table dancers." While occupational identity is tied to biological aging, it is also social construction. If one traces the career routes and occupational transitions of the table dancer, one can readily see that she has the ability to manage the definitions of age and usefulness assigned to her. Based on the table dancer's experience in exotic dance bars, I contend that since most of the aging literature and its theoretical formulations are limited to the later end of the life course, namely, old age, the experience of aging as a descriptive category of earlier years is ignored, in particular as this applies to the meanings assigned to age at various times and in various contexts of life. In relation to gerontology, this perspective is a way of arguing that aging is neither a clear matter of final disengagement nor a particular activity level, but something used, situated, and managed (Holstein 1990).

The concept "managed utility" is introduced to convey how dancers manipulate the definitions assigned them regarding age-appropriateness for their occupation (Neugarten and Hagestad 1976). For dancers the definition of old is both bodily and socially contingent, the dancer herself being active and reactive in her ability to control the contexts and conditions contributing to definitions of her age. It is my hope that separation of aging from old age, a distinction often conflated in gerontology, will add an important dimension to formulating a general processual approach to aging as an experience across the life course.

### **TABLE DANCING AND AGING**

In exotic dance bars, "dance" refers to a staged stripping routine as well as a one-on-one individualized "turn-on." Appearing in full costume on stage, the stripper gradually removes her clothing while dancing. Depending on local ordinances, the stripper disrobes until she is clothed in a full bikini top and bottom, pasties and t-back panties, or nothing. Between acts, strippers stroll the floor and fraternize with customers. In some bars, strippers make money when customers buy them drinks, but the main source of income is table dancing.

Table dances are "sold" in a complicated negotiation process, the aim of which is to convince the individual customer that he is "turned on" to her and/or that she is "turned on" to him, that is, being sexually attracted. The table dancer controls the situation so that she is not caught disobeying "house" or bar rules, many of which spill over the edge of what local authorities would consider illegal. For example, at two of the bars studied, "charging" for a table dance is considered soliciting. Like the "word games" used by the masseuse to bypass direct solicitation (Rasmussen and Kuhn 1976),

dancers regularly “suggest” a donation, called a “contribution,” usually an amount ranging from five to twenty dollars a dance, depending on what is locally customary.

Persuaded to buy a dance, the customer is led to a dark secluded area of the bar designated for table dancing. Depending on the dancer’s interpretation of local ordinances, she leans over her seated patron, her legs inside his, and sways suggestively to the rhythm of the music playing in the bar. Customers are allowed to touch the hips, waist, back, and outsides of a dancer’s legs. Many men try and some succeed in gaining greater advantage. Customers attempt to touch dancers’ bodies by inserting fingers into briefs or foundling breasts. In practice, the range of sexual activity in the bar includes infrequent “hand jobs” (the dancer masturbating the customer), oral sex, and, less frequently, sexual intercourse. Commonly, the dancer and customer engage in body-to-penis fiction, a form of which is humorously called “talented knees” by participants in the stripbars.

Staged stripping routines and individual table dances put considerable emphasis on physical attraction, but more importantly, sexual appeal. First impressions are derived from the dancer’s appearance, in particular, the appearance of her body. Loss of physical attractiveness risks loss of credibility and influence. Unlike the aging athlete, where physical performance is declining, aging for the dancer means that she is no longer persuasive sexually (Salutin 1971). While she still may be an adept dancer, her body loses appeal as a sexual object. Sustaining the resources she formerly possessed—youth and beauty—becomes strained and in the eyes of customers has diminished sexual utility, that is, a form of aging.

How does a dancer know she is too old to dance and what does a dancer do when she is showing her age? Popular theories of aging such as the disengagement (Cumming et al. 1960) or activity theory (Cavan et al. 1949) lack in explanation. They take aging and retirement to be marked events that happen towards the latter part of the life course. Aging is presumed to happen in old age. Even symbolic interactionists, who commonly treat life events as contextual and definitional matters, presume the existence of an inevitable “life courses” with regular age-related markers (Marshall 1979). Accordingly, the aim is to predict or understand the factors that produce or enter into aging in old age.

The gerontological conception of aging seems to have ignored the variety of situations and structures—besides chronological age—that engage participants in the *experience* of aging. A dancer’s activities, for one, are informed by her own and others underlying conceptions about aging in particular contexts. What is more, aging research has been too focused on conventional contexts (Stephens 1976). The strip tease literature, on its own, has not subjected its data to the analysis of “normal” experience, thus eclipsing questions of aging, role transformations, and the like. The literature portrays stripping as a *deviant* activity, focusing on contingencies of a deviant career (Skipper and McCaghy 1970), deviant patterns in early life (McCaghy and Skipper 1972), and structural factors facilitating lesbian and other deviant behavior (McCaghy and Skipper 1969; Salutin 1971).

## PROCEDURE

Consideration of the aging table dancer’s experience as “normal” evolved from reflections on data gathered in a field study of interaction strategies among strip tease

artists (Rambo 1987; Ronai and Ellis 1989; Ronai 1992). For eight years, I have had insider access to the table dancing scene in the region where the study was conducted. Access began as part of dancing for employment. Opportunistically using an available social setting (Riemer 1977), I became a "complete-member-researcher" (Adler and Adler 1987) and undertook a field study of the dancers everyday world. I subsequently left the occupation, but over the years maintained contacts in the field by occasionally re-entering it as a participant.

A growing interest in body image and self-conception led to consideration of the place of an aging process in the table dancers' self-acceptance and acceptance by others. "Aging" table dancers were interviewed and asked about the process of getting old in the occupation. The first three dancers approached were offended by the question, and, in turn, asked me questions like "Why are you asking *me* this?" and "What are you *really* saying?" The third dancer was so offended that she terminated the interview with "I haven't got time for this bullshit." In time, however, by talking casually with younger and older dancers, informing each of other dancers I had spoken with, and by asking what kinds of options they generally thought older dancers in the bar setting had, I was able to avoid what could have been an insurmountable barrier to data collection.

With a few exceptions, most of the dancers were unwilling to discuss their thoughts and feelings about their own aging. They were willing, though, to tell stories about other dancers whom they felt had "gotten old." Together with field observations, these and other stories form the data base of this study. The stories suggest how serious the consequences of aging are for the dancer's acceptance, and how active the dancer can be in managing the process. Stories, other accounts, and observations were recorded in the form of field notes, as close as possible to their actual expression. Altogether, over thirty dancers, fifteen customers, three bartenders, four managers, and four bar owners were interviewed and their stories obtained.

### **AGING AS MANAGED UTILITY**

A dancer manages the definitions assigned the physical consequences of aging by shifting her resources to either leave the occupation or continue working in the bar setting. Leaving the occupation or "getting out" is a clear exit. It is rare and usually needs planning. Remaining in the setting requires a dancer to carve out a niche that either does not rely on attractiveness or depends on a rearrangement of attractiveness as the priority of a new role.

At no point can it be confidently said the dancer has quit, or retired, even though there are gradual transitions or situated "disengagements." A dancer's career path is dynamic in character, highly responsive to definitions of utility negotiated or managed in the context of her particular experience. "Retirement" is more a matter of what roles evolve from her situation than a matter of leaving, departure, or final exit.

### **Getting Out**

A popular way out of the dance world is to find a so-called "sugar daddy," which is an older, wealthy man willing to take care of a woman in exchange for companionship and/or sexual favors. As one dancer observed of two friends:

It was like one minute they weren't interested in settling down and the next, boom! They started dating lots of older guys instead of the young ones they used to. It was really gross. But maybe it'll be different when I get older. Anyway, they both got married to these guys like 20 years older than them. One is divorced now and she is out at Mammy Larry's [a strip bar] datin' round for another one.

According to Santino, a bar owner, "shopping" for a sugar daddy can start for some as young as twenty one years of age, adding:

They look for someone old enough to always consider them young so they won't be abandoned later for a younger woman. Also, the guy has to have money and he has to treat her "well."

Santino relayed a story of a woman who found a sugar daddy at twenty-three and quit stripping. After ten years, she divorced and started dancing again at thirty-three, in search of another man. According to Santino, she was open about her mission and often joked with him, "I'm going to blow this joint as soon as I find myself a man." She subsequently left the bar a second time after moving in with another man.

Some dancers attempt to save money to buy a business or support themselves while attending school. Few are successful. According to most stories, even if a dancer manages to get out, she usually returns to the stripping business. One dancer who returned worked a hot dog cart that she and her boyfriend bought together. She was only earning \$50.00 a day. As she commented:

I worked my ass off out there in that hot sun. I spent more time with that fuckin' cart than I would spend dancing in a cool air-conditioned bar where I could earn a couple hundred dollars. I can even drink—its part of the job—if I want.

She left her boyfriend, a bar manager trying to get her out of the business and stuck him with the hog dog cart. Referring to another dancer who tried to leave the trade, a young woman who had recently received her state board cosmetology license, Mae, an older dancer, explained to the young woman while changing in a dressing room:

Don't worry, you'll be back. Mark my words. They all come back some time. You won't make enough money, especially when you're used to this. You're spoiled on that money. You'll see.

### **No One Just Quits**

Many contextual factors keep dancers dancing. Aging in the stripper's world is more a matter of leaving and returning than retirement per se. When asked if he knew anyone who quit the business, Santino remarked:

This business spoils you—male, female alike. No one just quits dancing or any other job around it. There is too much money to be made. I know of a bar manager right now trying to buy this bar. I've hired lots of guys as bouncers that have gone on to manage at other clubs. I started out with a B.A. in business, managed this bar

for a while and a religious bookstore I inherited. I sold the bookstore and used the proceeds to buy this bar. There is just too much money here to get out of it. I'm trying to get out now, before I get in too deep. Talk to me in a year. We'll see.

"No one just quits" is a common phrase among dancers, customers, and bar workers. Money is said to be the primary inducement to strip, in addition to easy hours, easy work (no responsibility), and gifts (Skipper and McCaghy 1970). Many dancers are supporting a husband, a boyfriend, children, or a combination of the three. One woman danced to support a bisexual girlfriend who acted as a housekeeper and nanny for her child, and a boyfriend who was a part-time bouncer at the bar where she worked as well as being the cook at home. The need for easy money to support such lifestyles keeps them "in the life" (Salutin 1971). Other than attractive bodies and performance routines, most dancers have limited skills. Few have sufficient training or education to make as much money in other occupations as they do now (Carey, et al. 1974; Skipper and McCaghy 1971).

Dancers are typically aware of the public's negative conception of the trade (Salutin 1971). The stigma of a deviant identity drives them closer together in defense against outsiders negative conceptions. The longer a dancer stays in the trade, the more likely she will be entangled by its associations, activities, and relationships. Relatedly, in a discussion of prostitutes, Prus and Vassilakopoulous (1979) state:

With each overlapping set of interests—namely, financial, friendship, and intimacy—the involved persons are not only likely to find that contact with "straight society" becomes less important, but that disengagement "from the life" even when so desired, becomes more difficult and costly.

### **Carving Out a Niche**

One response to bodily aging or uselessness is to seek a promotion to a role not as dependent on physical attractiveness. Take Marge in this regard. Coy about her age, Marge was a night manager estimated to be in her late forties. An ex-dancer who was fond of such items of the trade as whips, paddles, blonde wigs, and evening gowns, she went on stage once a night and danced, much to the delight of other dancers and the customers. She sat and drank with customers and occasionally did table dances. Regarding her situation, she once noted:

I've been in this business in one shape or form for a long time. I was a dancer when this bar was located at the corner of Fifth and Main. I started waitressing after a while, you know, a couple days a week, and dance a couple days. I've tended bar, waited tables, even been on the door [as a bouncer]. Finally, it seemed like all the girls would listen to me any way. So they just went ahead and made me night manager. It's easy for me now. I can dance if I want to, but I don't gotta do anything if I don't feel like it. One thing about this business—if you prove yourself, they take care of their own.

At first blush, this might suggest that Marge and the bar's owner mutually contributed to an inevitable disengagement from dancing. Marge gradually withdrew from her role

as a dancer, but it was not an automatic, nor inevitable process. She carved out a niche for herself in the bar setting. She was free to dance if she chose, while being able to literally shape her environment to do as she pleased. She disengaged from dancing by trading the role of sex object for a managerial role. The reconstructed role with its related age identity did not produce a genuine or final disengagement from the bar scene or her dancer role, but, locally redesigned her circumstance and the consequent meaning of usefulness.

Some dancers are recognized alcoholics. They carve out their niche by drinking with customers. At several bars, dancers were required to “sell,” that is, have a customer pay for a certain number of drinks. If dancers fell below their quota, they were required to pay for the drinks themselves. If they sold over the requirement, they earned a dollar for every drink sold. In this scheme of things, it was relatively easy to become habituated to alcohol. Besides, as some women put it, “You can handle the bullshit better with a buzz on.”

As this type of dancer gets older, she usually gets heavier and becomes less active on stage because of her fear of falling while drunk. She gradually cuts back on table dances. But she can carve out a niche at the bar, waiting for customers to offer her a drink as a way of having someone in turn, sit and talk. Eddie, a heavy drinker, said of Nancy, an aging dancer:

I like her. I take care of her; she takes care of me. She ain't nothing to look at but she's good people, good company. We have a good time. She's got moxie. She likes to bet with me on stuff. She'll say like, "I'll bet you ten bucks that broad will stand on her head on stage." She's great!

It was said that Nancy drank so much that the management put her on a limit of five half-shots of liquor per hour, thus curtailing her particular form of adaptation.

Some dancers have impressive social skills, used to cultivate regular customers. Women who carve out their niche in this way tend to be in their thirties and forties. The dancer interacts with the customer in a manner to make him feel as if some type of involved, long-term relationship were taking place. This is called “getting them going.” Mae was well known for her ability in this regard. One evening Mae was given a mink coat by a customer, but she returned it to him. Asked why she returned the coat, Mae answered, “I couldn't hock it for very much, and I won't use it here in Florida. I'd rather get money.” Asked how, then, she would earn money, she explained, “I'll get more money from him by being the type of person who gives this stuff back than if I keep it. I have lots of customers who give me stuff nicer than that mink.” As a bouncer/drinker who knew Mae explained further, “It's true, Mae can really get them going.” Referring to one of Mae's more impressive gifts, he remarked, “That necklace was a grand, easy.”

As the dancer grows older and her appearance becomes less desirable, attractiveness as a component in self-management takes on a lower priority. She may make up for declining visual sex appeal with wholesale sexual activity. There are many stories about the older dancer who “does tricks” to get by, something most younger dancers need only leave to customers' imaginations. Younger and more attractive strippers are not as compelled to perform sexual favors to make money. Trina was exemplary in this

regard. She was considered pretty but “rough around the edges,” being about ten pounds over what was considered desirable and having a few extra lines on her face. Regarding aging and sexual favors, she noted:

The longer you dance, the more bullshit you'll have to put up with. You'll gradually start to let them get away with stuff. You know, for the money. When you get older you have to work on getting them [the customer] into it.

That older dancers typically recast their situation into a compromise of necessity, was tacitly understood by regular customers. As one customer cryptically put it, “Guys sometimes prefer older dancers because they work hard for you.” I once spoke with a dancer named Maxine about this. She was “near 50” and only sat with “certain customers.”

- CR: I noticed that you don't sit with too many customers. Is that intentional?  
 Maxine: You bet. You can't be too careful with some of the jokers that come in here. I don't put up with any shit, you know what I'm saying here. No shit. You never know who could be a cop. I only sit with guys I know, guys I've known for years.  
 CR: I don't want you to get offended....  
 Maxine: Then don't say nothing you might regret.  
 CR: How can you make any money if you don't meet new people?  
 Maxine: [Laughing] Oh that. Well, you see, I got my regulars. I got their phone numbers. When I go to a new bar, they follow me. I give 'em a call. When you start out, well, you're young, you know what I mean. You can handle their crap. Out of all those guys you meet you find a few you treat “special” and they stay with you. You saw me with that one guy yesterday? [I nod agreement] Well he gave me five hundred dollars. Now later today I'm expecting Sam in. He's usually good for a hundred or two between his Friday and Saturday visits. Even if I don't see another customer all week, I'm set for a while. You follow this? [I nod].

I later observed some of Maxine's “special” treatment. During a table dance, she allowed Sam to make oral contact with her breasts while his hands roamed her body. By catering only to regulars, Maxine protected herself from potential arrest from undercover agents while making a great deal of money from the few men who visited her in the bar, even though she was “elderly.”

The constant onslaught of propositions, paired with an increased performance of sexual favors, tempts some older dancers into prostitution. Salutin (1971) implies that the general population regard them as prostitutes anyway; so there is nothing to lose in terms of status. Yet those who turn occasional “tricks” insist they are not like full time “whores” or “street walkers.” They claim to engage in sexual activity only when they need the money. Still, older dancers can make a satisfactory, relatively safe living by using the bar as a place of contact for prostitution (Prus and Irini 1980). A schedule of “regulars,” whom the older dancer “tricks for” outside the bar, provides security and predictability. She need not worry about where her money is coming from or being arrested.

When a stripper ages, she may find herself fired from a bar where she has worked for a long time, or forced to quit because she no longer makes money at the location.

Aging dancers who cannot create a niche for themselves in bars where they are currently employed wind up in lower status clubs (Salutin 1971). Bars have reputations in this regard. A bar may be known for its "celluloid queens," where every physique in the house is perfect because all the dancers have had plastic surgery to enhance bodily attractiveness such as liposuction or breast and buttocks implants. Some bars are known to have beautiful "stuck up" girls, others for their friendly average-looking girls, and still others for "sleazy" women with whom anything is said to go.

Accordingly, the "demotion" of aging dancers who can't carve a niche goes from beautiful to friendly to, finally, sleazy. Related stories form a kind of social control in their own right. Santino, for one, often took misbehaving dancers on "the circuit," visiting other bars in descending order of status for an "attitude adjustment." He stated that dancers usually were sobered by the experience and "straightened up their act."

The status of a bar and physical attractiveness work in tandem to define aging. A dancer may be too young, or too attractive to work a particular bar. A "elderly" twenty-five-year-old dancer in the company of nineteen-year-olds may find herself broke. But if she moves to a lower status bar, she may regain her youth and rejuvenate her earning potential, until she has aged there as well. Managers also work the age angle. A manager or owner of a "dive" will hire on older, attractive dancer who is younger than his other dancers in hopes of luring clientele and other attractive dancers. Other dancers may become angry because the younger, more attractive dancer monopolizes the business in the bar. Management may become wary if many dancers in their bars become "rough around the edges." Too many unattractive women working a higher status bar will bring down that bar's public standing. Bar owners have been known to ask young attractive dancers if they have young attractive friends who would like to dance. They solicit help with stories typically beginning "If this bar gets a bad reputation for old ugly dancers, you stop making money because the customers will stop coming." What managers fail to mention is that young attractive dancers can move on to better bars.

### **SEPARATING AGE FROM AGING**

Aging is a process both physical and social. Experientially, there is not set definition for what or who is old, even while there seems to be general agreement among gerontologists that old age occurs in the later years. The aging experience is socially constructed by individuals and through contexts that assign meaning to the physical body.

Meanings change over time because contexts change, something eminently social. The bar's physical setting may be the same, the people employed in the bar and those who patronize it may be the same, but the dancer starts to exhibit external signs of unattractiveness. As chronologically young as she may be, she can be old. Her body is not as supple and her dance not as animated as it once was. Her gestures towards customers are construed to be abrupt, demanding, nagging, less patient than before. A dancer's sexual utility and the sincerity of her presentation come into question. Appearing and acting like an old dancer breaks the tacit rule that women who sell their bodies in one form or another should be selling young, attractive, and cooperative commodities.

Popular theories of aging fail to account for the processes examined here. Dancers' and others' stories and accounts suggest that aging is an experience not necessarily just

of later life, nor socially automatic or inevitable. In separating age from aging, and making visible the management of an aging experience, we learn the life course contingencies of being old.

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## NOTE

1. The names of persons and places have been fictionalized.

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