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**Performing Gender in Recreational Pole Dancing:
Enabling and Constraining Factors**
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Performing Gender in Recreational Pole Dancing: Enabling and Constraining Factors

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ABSTRACT

Many people consider pole dancing to be a feminine leisure activity and a female dominated space, but it has recently gained observer status in the Global Association of International Sports Federation (GAISF), thus entering into the field of sport where hegemonic masculinity has historically prevailed. The strong connections between gender, body, and sport and the gender inequalities that permeate the sports culture make it interesting to explore the enabling and constraining factors of performing gender in recreational (i.e., nonoccupational) pole dancing, which is the aim of this article. The methodical approach is qualitative and inspired by ethnography. The article is based on a field study done in Copenhagen, Denmark, including observation, participation, and interviews. The theoretical perspective takes its point of departure in Judith Butler's theory in *Gender Trouble*. First, the authors found that the body ideal in pole dance includes both feminine and masculine qualities. The analysis also shows that the different styles of pole dancing (i.e., "sportified" or "sexualized") and the context in which pole dancing is practiced (i.e., women only or mixed sex) makes a difference regarding what enables and constrains men and women when it comes to performing gender. Inspired by Butler, the authors also discuss which possibilities pole dancing holds for performing gender in new ways, thus challenging oppressive gender norms. Finally, the authors discuss the implications of pole dance becoming a sport in relation to the possibilities of performing gender.

Key Words: pole dance, performing gender, sport, gender inequality

Word count: 10683

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Performing Gender in Recreational Pole Dancing: Enabling and Constraining Factors

Pole dancing as a form of exercise and leisure activity has become popular around the world in the past decades, even obtaining observer status in the Global Association of International Sports Federation (GAISF) in 2017 (IPSF n.d.a). However, many people still associate pole dancing with strip clubs and thus with women and sexuality. Previous research on pole dance has discussed the experienced stigma and whether it is empowering or oppressive (Griffiths 2016; Holland 2010). The aim of this article is to broaden the understanding of pole dancing by examining the role of body and gender in different styles of recreational pole dance. We do this by discussing gender in a relational manner—focusing not only on women but also on masculinity and femininity and how the understanding of these concepts enable and constrain the performance of gender in pole dance.

In line with the theme of this special issue on emerging sports, we frame pole dance in the realm of sport. We take our point of departure in a Scandinavian culture, where the understanding of sport is broad, and we find it useful to draw on and discuss with literature concerning sport because it deals with activities where the body is front and center. Even though pole has now gained observer status in GAISF and is thus by many considered a sport, it was not at the time when this study was conducted, and some pole dancers did or do not consider it to be. Whether or not pole can be classified as a sport also depends on how it is practiced. The first author has previously discussed whether pole can be considered sport, circus, fitness, or dance (Jensen 2015a). There are similarities and differences within these activities that make it hard to place pole in just one category, which is also discussed by Fennell (2018). In this article, pole is studied as a form of recreational and leisure activity, but we do frame it as a sport for the purpose of discussion.

Sport has been criticized for being a space where traditional (and often toxic) masculinity is maintained (Connell 1995; Maguire et al. 2002; Markula and Pringle 2006;

Messner 2002), and “women as well as men who participate in non-masculine activities or exhibit non-masculine characteristics or mannerisms” (Bemiller 2005:205) are marginalized and devalued (Maguire et al. 2002). Simone de Beauvoir ([1949] 1997) wrote that the woman was “The Second Sex,” which has especially been true in the world of sport, where the male body has been considered the ideal (Hall 1996) and the female body a “lesser” copy (Larsson 2004). Sporting activities have been designed based on the male body (Lorber and Martin 2013; Maguire et al. 2002), and women have been measured against male performances.

Sport tends to “reinforce sexual difference through rigid definitions of masculinity and femininity” (Priyadharshini and Pressland 2016:1234), and the dichotomous perception of gender affects people’s choices regarding and attitudes towards sport. Several studies show that there are clear notions of what sports are feminine and “most suitable” for women and what sport are masculine and acceptable for men, though some are also categorized as gender neutral (Klomsten, Marsh, and Skaalvik 2005; Koivula 2001; Larsson 2004; Pfister 2010). Priyadharshini and Pressland (2016:1236) suggest that the “gender status” of a sport “has different ramifications for the femininities or masculinities that its participants might be encouraged to display.” They refer to several studies, which show that “participants are engaged in a double battle – battling prejudices related to the gender status of their chosen sport as well as their right to display their preferred masculinities and femininities within this sport” (Priyadharshini and Pressland 2016:1237). Pole dance is not only considered to be a feminine activity but is also perceived as being sexual in its expression, which adds to the complexity in terms of the potentials of gender performance. As a reaction to this perception, different styles of recreational pole dance have developed—some leaning in to the sexual expression and some distancing themselves from it (Jensen 2015b). In this article, we aim to highlight some of the differences between these styles, nuancing the understanding of pole dance.

But while sport on the one hand is considered a space where traditional gender norms are maintained, it is at the same time also a space where these norms can be challenged (Lindner 2012; Maguire et al. 2002; Thing and Jensen 2016). Pole dance is an emerging sport, and, as opposed to many “classic” sports, it formed with the female body as its point of departure. In pole dance, men are “the second sex”—to such an extent that they are in some cases excluded—which is why it is particularly interesting to explore how gender performance is enabled and constrained in this setting.

BACKGROUND

Pole Dance as a Leisure Activity and Sport

This study deals with pole dance as a recreational activity (as opposed to a profession).¹ Pole dance started as a leisure activity in the 1990s (especially in North America) and has since the 2000s spread around the world attracting especially women (Felien 2015; Fennell 2018; Griffiths 2016). Social science research on pole dancing as a leisure activity started in the late 2000s, and since then there has been published around 15 to 20 peer-reviewed articles in English, a few in other languages, and four PhD dissertations. There is also a lot of grey literature available online (i.e., nonpeer-reviewed articles, conference papers and abstracts, and bachelor and master’s theses). The literature spans North America (United States; Canada), South America (Brazil), Europe (United Kingdom; Denmark; Poland),² Asia (Singapore; Japan; China; South Korea), and Australia. Pole dance

1 While some pole studio owners and pole dancers in the study were paid to teach and sometimes paid to perform, we did not explore pole dance as it is practiced as a profession in strip clubs.

2 When including grey literature, there is also Finland, Croatia, and Czech Republic. There is also some literature from Russia, but it does not have English abstracts.

is often viewed in a feminist perspective and in the context of a sexualized culture (Allen 2011; Bahri 2012; Donaghue, Kurz, and Whitehead 2011; Griffiths 2016; Holland and Attwood 2009; Just and Muhr 2020; Whitehead and Kurz 2009), often with reference to terms like “raunch culture” (Levy 2005) and “striptease culture” (McNair 2002).

Pole dance as a form of exercise usually takes place in small, privately owned pole studios, which in most cases are run by women (and often for women) (Dale 2013; Holland 2010; Owen 2012). There are many styles of pole dancing, and much debate about what to call it. Therefore, inspired by others (e.g., Holland 2010; Kim and Kwon 2021) and the terminology commonly used within the pole dancing community, we will from here forward refer to it as “pole” and the people who do it as “polers.” While pole draws inspiration from many sources (e.g., burlesque, yoga, different genres of dance, and other aerial arts) and has some similarities to Indian “Mallakhamb” and Chinese circus pole, most researchers agree that the form of pole that is popular today evolved from the striptease culture (Felien 2015; Griffiths 2016; Holland and Attwood 2009). This results in pole being subject to much stigma (Griffiths 2016; Holland 2010; Holland and Attwood 2009), but in many places it has become more and more commonly accepted as a form of leisure (Dale 2013; Holland 2010). The different styles of recreational pole sometimes cause conflicts and power struggles within the pole community, like concerning what pole is and how it should be done (Allen 2011; Bahri 2012; Griffiths 2016). In some cases, the pole studios have had a hard time cooperating (Holland 2010; Jensen 2015a). However, an International Pole Sports Federation (IPSF) was founded in 2009. They have 31 national federations endorsed (IPSF n.d.b), and in 2017 they gained observer status in GAISF (IPSF n.d.a).

Themes in the Social Science Research Literature on Pole

A very prevalent theme in the research is the stigma pole faces, due to its roots in the strip clubs, and how this stigma is managed, which is discussed or mentioned in much of the

literature (see for example Fennell 2022; Griffiths 2016; Holland 2010; Kim and Kwon 2019). Another very common theme, which is in line with this, is the discussion of whether pole is empowering or oppressive (Anstock, Grant, and Mukherji 2016; Bahri 2012; Chow 2017; Donaghue et al. 2011; Just and Muhr 2020; Weaving 2020; Whitehead and Kurz 2009). Several researchers however point out that this binary is too simplistic because the matter is very complicated (Griffiths 2016; Just and Muhr 2020). There are several reasons why the discussion is problematic. First, there are “contradictions between theorists within a given perspective, as well as . . . similarities between theorists in opposing perspectives” (Hamilton 2009:145). Second, there are different understandings of the terms, especially regarding personal versus political empowerment, and finally it is pointed out that this empowerment may be limited to certain bodies (Allen 2011; Bahri 2012; Hamilton 2009). While these themes (stigma and the empowerment versus oppression debate) are very interesting, they have been covered in previous research and are not the central to the focus of this article.

A theme that is however very relevant for this study is the different styles of pole. Early research described a binary model of pole being either more “sexualized” (closer to the strip culture “roots”) or fitness, sport, or exercise based, but it has been pointed out—also by the authors who suggested this binary (Gómez-Ramírez 2007; Holland 2010)—that this model is too simplistic (Allen 2011; Bahri 2012; Jensen 2015b). As pole has become more organized or “sportified,” many refer to the categories in competitions to describe the different styles—such as “Pole Fit,” “Pole Art,” and “Exotic Pole Dance” (e.g., Dale 2013; Kim and Kwon 2021; Weaving 2020).

Most studies have focused on women that pole. Only one study has male polers as its main focus (Kim and Kwon 2021). Kim and Kwon (2021) interviewed men who practice Exotic Pole Dance (EPD) and explored how they express their gender identity. Both Fennell

(2018) and Kim and Kwon (2021) called for further research into the potential pole has for gender expression. Our research contributes to the research on pole by addressing this topic. Taking as a point of departure Judith Butler's theory of gender performance (1999), we aim to explore both the enabling and constraining factors of gender expression in pole.

Pole in Denmark. The research on pole in a Scandinavian context is very sparse. One article based on an empirical study, carried out around the time of the first national Danish championship in pole dance, which took place in 2010 (Odense Internationale Musikteater 2010), explored the “tensions between empowering feminine sexuality and the taint of sexualized labour” (Just and Muhr 2020:6).

There is also an article based on another part of the present study. The focus of this article was on the different ways pole was practiced in Copenhagen, suggesting an analytical model containing three styles of pole: “classic/sexy,” “fitness/sport,” and “art/dance.” Another point in this article was also the difference between a focus on *dance* and a focus on *tricks* in the practice of pole,³ which to some extent ties into the other styles: There is a tendency towards a focus on tricks in the more sportified style of pole, and a focus on dance in the other two styles. There is also a tendency towards more studios being women only in the “classic/sexy” style of pole (Jensen 2015b).⁴

In 2017, Denmark formed a national pole sport federation, “Dansk Pole Sports Forening” (DPSF 2021), which is also a member of the IPSF (IPSF n.d.b).

3 As also touched upon by others (e.g., Holland 2010; Kim and Kwon 2019).

4 In the study, pole studios A and B leaned mostly toward the sportified style of pole, while studios C, D, and F considered themselves more art/dance based. Studio E was somewhere between the sportified and sexualized styles (Jensen 2015b). This is presented here because these studios are the subject of analysis in this article as well.

METHODS

The Role of the Researcher

This study takes its point of departure in the philosophical hermeneutic tradition (Gadamer [1960] 2004), in which meaning is created between the researcher and the object of research, which is why the researcher plays an active role in the interpretation process. The researcher's preunderstanding plays a part in the choices made in every step of the process (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995; Spradley and McCurdy 1972) and is therefore briefly presented.

The first author had dabbled in recreational pole (i.e., training in different pole studios sporadically using online deals) in Copenhagen prior to this study. She has spent most of her life doing gymnastics and has tried out many different dance styles as well. Her experience of pole was definitely not that it was a "sexy" activity. It was closer to Holland's (2010) description of sweaty, red-faced women swearing and grunting from exertion, or Fennell's (2018:1966) very accurate description of twisting one's "body into a gravity-defying pretzel, and then sliding to the ground in a heap and sigh of exhaustion." In many ways, it was similar to gymnastic practice—trying to master a trick, being in awkward positions and ending up sprawled out on the floor, pains and aches, details and difficult techniques, bruises and burns, sweat and swearing, clapping and cheering, and a sense of achievement when succeeding in mastering something new.

Some point out that there may be challenges when studying a culture in which you are already involved (Ronglan 2013; Spradley 1979). The second author, however, provided the outsider perspective in all discussions at all stages of the study. The second author had a supervisor role in the project, played a key part in deciding on the theoretical perspective on gender, and helped the first author maintain a distance to the empirical field. Other researchers suggest that having firsthand experience in the field can have advantages, such as

easier access to the field and a better foundation for understanding the participants (Ronglan 2013; Vedeler 2000). In a context of movement activities, it is especially beneficial, as having shared bodily experiences with the informants gives a good point of departure for interpreting actions and statements (Ronglan 2013). In this study, the researcher's role was a big asset in terms of "fitting in" with the participants by being a young, white, cisgender, heterosexual woman. Certain social roles give access to certain information (Kristiansen and Krogstrup 1999), and the first author's bodily presence coupled with pole dancing experience created trust and rapport with the informants and also allowed access to "limited" spaces, such as the changing room.

Ethnography: A Field Study

The method in this study was ethnographic and particularly inspired by—but did not strictly follow—the method suggested by James P. Spradley (1979, 1980). A field study was carried out in Copenhagen, the capitol of Denmark, for six months during 2014.

Observations, interviews, and informal conversations were conducted in six pole studios to get at perspective on different ways of practicing pole.⁵ The names of the pole studios have been substituted with letters (A–F), and further descriptions of them can be found in a previous article based on another part of this study (Jensen 2015b).

The observations were carried out by the first author, who participated in and observed a variety of classes in the different studios, employing varying levels of participation ranging from *passive* over *active* to *complete participation* (Spradley 1980). The first author was a passive participant (i.e., observing without participating or interacting) in

⁵ When the study began, there were eight pole studios in Copenhagen. However, two of them (one used in the study) closed during the study while a new one opened. Since then, another one of the studios from the study has closed, and a few new studios have opened.

classes that were above or below her level. Due to her level, it was also possible to be an active participant in many classes by observing while participating and interacting on equal terms as others in the class. Finally, she was a complete participant when observing at studios where she was already a member. The observations served as inspiration and background information for the interviews.

Five out of the six pole studio owners participated in semi-structured interviews, lasting about an hour. They were all women aged 29 to 36 and still active polers or instructors. Fourteen polers from four of the studios—a few of whom turned out to also be instructors—participated in shorter interviews lasting typically 15 to 25 minutes. The polers were very representative of the members of the studios in the study: Their ages ranged from 21 to 41, all but one were women, and their experience with pole ranged from three weeks to five years. All interviews took place in the pole studios and were recorded and transcribed in full. All interviewees have been given pseudonyms. All quotes have been translated to English by the first author, and some have been edited to make them more understandable (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009).

Coding was used to analyze the empirical material (Saldaña 2013). One of the main themes was “gender and body,” which in interplay with the theoretical perspective informed the theme of this article. Two other themes (i.e., “comparing pole studios” and “dealing with prejudice against pole”) have been presented in a previous article (Jensen 2015b).

Interview quotes have been given a lot of space in the presentation of the findings because this is how the informants’ voices are heard (Creswell 2013). Some quotes are chosen because they are the most representative or concise, while others represent an extreme point of view (Christensen, Nielsen, and Schmidt 2011). While only a few field notes are presented in the findings section, the observations have informed the interpretations in the analysis.

THEORY: PERFORMING GENDER

The theoretical perspective takes its point of departure in Judith Butler's theory in *Gender Trouble*. Butler (1999:33) considers gender to be performative: "Gender is always doing."

The characteristics that are associated with femininity and masculinity are very connected to the body. They are acquired and involve the way you talk, move, and act; and they are culturally and historically contingent (Markula and Pringle 2006; McNair 2002). Butler (1999:43) wrote, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame." The frame Butler referred to comprises the norms society establishes, and this social order is difficult to change because it creates a sense of stability. The performance of gender is limited by the general rules of social life, cultural expectations, and workplace norms (Lorber 2000). Even though gender norms comprise a dominant structure in society because they are repeated and sustained every day, both Lorber and Butler agree that there are possibilities for resistance—Lorber (2000) referring to Butler's theory of "gender trouble-makers." Butler is optimistic about the possibilities to change the otherwise seemingly fixed system of gender. Butler's (1999:143) arguments are based on her view of gender as "doing"—a constant repeated action and not a static cultural signifier. The opportunities for change thus lie in the arbitrary relation between these actions and in the opportunity to not repeat them. "'Agency,' then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition" (Butler 1999:185). The cultural "rules" do not just constrain; they also enable: "Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency" (Butler 1999:187). And you cannot choose not to repeat. The task is to find out how to repeat and what opportunities there are to "displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself" (Butler 1999:189).

FINDINGS

Gendered Body Ideals in Pole

The idea that some activities are better suited for certain gendered bodies is based on general stereotypes about men and women (Klomsten, Marsh, and Skaalvik 2005) that encompass assumptions about differences in the bodily competencies. We present three bodily competencies that are considered the ideal in pole and have strong connotations to gender. The two most important prerequisites for pole are *strength* and *flexibility*, which are associated with masculinity and femininity, respectively. Strength is required for climbing the pole as well as lifting and holding the body up. Flexibility is required for many of the moves, such as splits and backbends. A third central quality of pole concerns a certain bodily expression of *grace and effortlessness*.

Strength. Strength and large muscles have always had a strong connection to masculinity and the male body (Andreasson and Johansson 2014; Larsson 2004), which is interesting when it is one of the most important elements of pole that is otherwise considered a “women’s activity.” In the interviews and observations of this study, some polers express that men have an advantage in pole, as they on average tend to have more upper body strength than women. However, the understanding of strength being something primarily masculine is problematic because it amplifies the perception of women as the being “the weaker sex.” In the pole community, there is, however, also a tendency towards women redefining strength into something feminine:

A lot of it is about strength, and that is surely just as masculine as it is feminine, but we just do it in a dance-like manner, so it’s not about big muscles and you must have washboard abs and stuff like that. It’s more about the strength within yourself. (Andrea, 24, Studio D)

Just like Andrea, Amy (36, owner, Studio F) suggests a broader definition of strength, which

encompasses an inner strength that is connected to the physical strength: “[T]he strength of getting physically stronger also leaves traces in your inner self.”

The traditional gender ideals, however, tend to come into play and “tyrannize” (Butler 1998)—in that the women want to be strong, but only to a certain limit, so it does not affect other people’s perception of them as feminine:

Jessica: I actually quit last time because I had gotten so large “wings” [slang for latissimus dorsi] that I didn’t feel it looked nice anymore. And I thought, okay it’s time to stop for a bit, take a break.

Researcher: So it wasn’t feminine enough?

Jessica: No, it was too much actually. (Jessica, 23, Studio C)

Jessica expresses that there is a limit to how strong she feels she can be without jeopardizing her femininity. Maria (22, Studio E) also feels that it is unfeminine to be strong and have broad shoulders:

Researcher: What is it, then, that is unfeminine about it?

Maria: That you get giant “guns.” I am at least 2 cm wider over the shoulders, and I can’t find any dresses with sleeves that won’t just tear if I flex.

A few of the women in this study are worried about not being seen as feminine if they get too strong, but none of them imply that strong women are considered more likely to be homosexual, which is often the case for men if they do an activity considered to be feminine such as dance or cheerleading (Burt 2007; Craig 2014; Fisher and Shay 2009; Hanna 2010; Risner 2007).

Flexibility. Flexibility is generally considered a feminine quality in the world of sport (Klomsten, Marsh, and Skaalvik 2005). The polers in this study also connect it to the female body. Jennifer’s (22, Studio A) quote shows how the female body and its abilities in terms of flexibility are the ideal:

The male body is a little more stiff, where—and they don't have as many curves, like he is very slender, so it looks a bit more awkward, even if he does the exact same—but it's maybe also because I'm not used to seeing—but it looks pretty funny . . . I don't know—I like the feminine about the women's.

The flexible female body is thus the ideal in pole, as opposed to many other sports in which the male body is the ideal (Hall 1996; Larsson 2004). This also means that inflexible people must work extra hard to succeed: “[A]nd that may be why many men don't do it, because they feel, they are a little too stiff in the body to actually want to struggle to develop it” (Daniel, 23, Studio E).

Grace and effortlessness. Apart from strength and flexibility, pole also requires grace. Like in other aerial art disciplines known from the circus, you must make it look effortless. This gracefulness makes people experience pole as feminine:

Researcher: And what is it that makes it feminine to you?

Anna: The movements. Like you try to do it very elegantly. It's probably that it has to be elegant and sexy, but—like men can be sexy, but this is elegant at the same time. I think.

Researcher: What do you mean, when you say elegant?

Anna: I mean remembering to point your toes and having the arm out and having pretty wrists. (Anna, 24, Studio D)

This quote expresses how the “elegant” movements with pointed toes and “pretty wrists” do not conform to the classic understanding of masculinity, which is supported by Olivia (22, Studio D):

I think there are many like—the way you have to have your hands and feet. It's not manly after all to point your feet and that you have to have like straight legs,

you can only use your knees. Men would probably be like: “We just need to have a good grip.”

Olivia’s quote suggests that aesthetics are considered feminine, and it is considered more masculine to focus on the functionality alone. This pattern is well known, and, especially in the sporting world, there has been an expectation that women live up to a certain aesthetic, as Koivula (2001:378) described, “The component of beauty as an element of the sport seems to be an important aspect of the perceived femininity of a sport.” Koivula (2001) further wrote that this likely has to do with beauty being an important aspect in the general notion of femininity. The feminine aesthetic ideal requires the practice of hard physical work to look effortless. Women are expected to hide concentration and exertion and instead perform ease and grace—something that is usually not expected from men (Lenskyj 1986). This ideal also involves smiling: “‘Smile through the pain,’ is what I usually say, when they are hanging in their thighs on the pole” (Lisa, 34, owner, Studio D). This ideal is the same in like activities such as cheerleading, gymnastics, ice skating, synchronized swimming, and dancing. The aesthetic ideal means that pole would be considered an “appropriate” sport for women, as it allows women to “remain true to the stereotyped expectations of femininity (such as being graceful)” (Koivula 2001:378).

Performing gendered ideals. There are large requirements in pole—the polers need to be strong and flexible and at the same time hide that it is hard work. The qualities that are valued highly are both feminine and masculine, and they affect what is experienced as acceptable for men and women, respectively, in pole.

The gendered body ideals in pole are in many ways enabling for women, as they allow for a performance of a balance between femininity and masculinity. Pole can, however, be constraining for the women that do not live up to the (classically) feminine ideal of being flexible and graceful or that do not want to live up to this ideal. It seems to be most

acceptable for women to perform masculinity if they, at the same time, also perform femininity—as is the case in bodybuilding, where the women have extremely muscular bodies but are expected to conform to traditional femininity in competitions (Lorber and Martin 2013; Maguire et al. 2002). If they only perform masculinity, they risk putting the ontological safety of their biological sex at stake, which may cause an identity problem, like this exchange with Amy (36, owner, Studio F) illustrates:

Amy: There are also plenty of female [pole] dancers that are not at all feminine, also at a high level. There are quite a lot, actually quite a lot, that are not feminine at all. . . .

Researcher: How are they “not feminine”?

Amy: Well, femininity is actually many things. Like where it’s just more mannish in some way or another, like where it is really beautiful technical performances, completely exceptional strength-wise and so on, but where you’re not thinking like: “Oh yeah, that’s a woman who will also just arrange a bouquet of flowers at home. It’s probably not. Or bake a cake. Or give birth to a child. That’s probably not it,” (laughs) but eminent handstands and such.

Amy is probably not the only one with this opinion, and the fear of being viewed as being “less of a woman” keeps some female polers from living out their maximum physical potential, as was the case with the women that stopped training because they felt that they became too muscular. They are thus limited by the feeling of having to live up to a heterosexual norm.

Strength as a body ideal in pole can enable men to practice pole and perform masculinity at the same time, but it can also be constraining for men that are not strong. If a man is flexible and graceful, he can gain great recognition in the pole community where these feminine qualities are the ideal. The demands for flexibility and gracefulness can be

constraining for men since the performance of femininity, for some, is associated with homosexuality, and male polers risk being stigmatized the same way other dancing men are (Burt 2007; Craig 2014; Fisher and Shay 2009; Hanna 2010; Risner 2007).

Performing Gender in Different Styles of Pole

In the following analysis, we use the distinction between “dance” and “tricks” and “sexualized” and “sportified” pole (see Jensen 2015b). Ruthellen Josselson (2011:232) warns about this kind of dichotomization: “Categories that are too separate are artificial. Human life is multilayered, contradictory, and multivalent, to be sure, but the strands are always interconnected.” We agree that these binaries are problematic. The world is much more complex; pole is practiced on a spectrum between these extremes. However, for analytical purposes, these divisions are helpful in order to understand the differences and the significance of the setting in which pole is practiced.

Pole dance versus tricks. There are two main elements in pole: *dancing* and *tricks*. As discussed in the background section, the emphasis on the two differs in different styles of pole, with a tendency towards a focus on tricks in the more sportified style of pole and a focus on dance in the sexualized style (see Jensen 2015b). These elements are experienced as gendered and connected to femininity and masculinity, respectively, as Jessica (23, Studio C) described:

Well, if you are in the pole *dance* classes, then there might be some maybe a little sexual or some feminine movements, but when you are doing *tricks* then it is actually very masculine, because it is really strength, and you show what your muscles can do. So it really depends on what type of pole you are doing, whether it is pole dance or pole tricks, where pole dance is much more feminine than pole tricks.

While dance is associated with femininity and the female body, not all women are

good at dancing or enjoy it for that matter. Lisa (34, owner, Studio D) points out that there are different types of women, some preferring the more feminine movements and dancing, and others wanting to be “beaten up by the pole” (i.e., doing tricks that require great strength and bruise the body). Some women are inflexible or do not feel like they can or want to live up to the ideal of being graceful:

For me—well I just think it is so cool to be strong, so that’s what I focus on, and I’m just not good at “fiddling about” and practicing that it has to look nice. For example this Friday we had Nina, and she was like: “Don’t make a frog face,” and “try to do it so it looks more elegant,” and stuff like that. (Jennifer, 22, Studio A)

The women in this study that do wild tricks that result in bruises are not afraid of having their femininity questioned: “It doesn’t look so nice, you know, it’s not so feminine. But I don’t care, they can just ask why I have the bruises, and then I will tell them” (Ashley, 21, Studio A). Pole thus enables women to perform both femininity in the form of dance and masculinity in the form of tricks, and it is not considered problematic not living up to the feminine ideals of flexibility and grace.

Pole with a main focus on tricks enables men to perform masculinity, and heterosexual, cisgender men can thus maintain a cohesive gender identity. Daniel (23, Studio E) recounted how the strength-based tricks can open men’s eyes to the opportunities for them in pole:

People think it’s a sport for girls, it’s kinda’ like, it’s still that thing where it’s something you find at a strip club and stuff like that. But as soon as they become aware of it, then they can see that there are some possibilities strength-wise. I know many gymnasts, as soon as they become aware of it, and parkour boys, then

they can see that you can use a pole like you can use other equipment like they do in gymnastics.

In relation to the dancing style of pole, things are more complex. Linda (30, owner, Studio A) says that pole is what you make of it, and suggests that men can avoid the feminine movements and thus perform masculinity while they dance. Amy (36, owner, Studio F) agrees that men can combine dance and masculinity, but she considers this to be difficult: “There are a few men internationally who succeed in making it ‘palatable,’ meaning heterosexual, where it’s very masculine. But it’s not an easy task.” Another possibility for men is combining the masculine and feminine expression in dance, as Sarah (29, owner, Studio C) described:

In terms of expression, I don’t think there is a big difference. The men I know and have seen pole dance, they all aspire to making it look like when the women do it. Like it’s not my impression that they try to do it differently or—they’ll put in a little twist so it becomes a little masculine like . . . but again it’s something where they can use their strength to make it manly, because they all have some elements of some aesthetic and some ballet-like and some, well, yeah. They could all also have become ballet dancers or ice skaters.

As these quotes suggest, many people (men and women alike) take for granted that men wish to and should perform masculinity—even when they are dancing. Men who are very talented dancers, however, have a greater chance of being accepted—at least within some parts of the pole community—when doing a more feminine gender expression, like this quote from Emily (32, owner, Studio B) indicates:

I LOVE the men’s [performances]! Now—luckily the men that join [the competitions] also have some dance background, so they do the whole modern dance style and with the very pointed toes. And they are just so fierce, and they

have so much strength. They can do insanely cool tricks because they have more brute strength.

Sexualized pole. Women who practice the sexualized style of pole risk being stigmatized—both by people outside the pole community and by some within the community who distance themselves from the roots of pole. The sexualized style of pole also risks portraying a slightly stereotypical and limited notion of being a woman or feminine, which is solely about flowers, high heels, and the color pink. This style of pole risks reinforcing the ideal of being sexy as only encompassing heterosexuality and the expectation that men and women should be heterosexually attractive (Lorber and Martin 2013). This can be excluding for nonheterosexual people and be problematic for heterosexual, cisgender men who want to pole, as the feminine sexual expression that this type of pole entails does not correspond to their attempts to live up to society's accepted norms of masculinity, which people as a rule tend to try to do (Lorber and Martin 2013).

Sportified pole. In the sportified style of pole, there is an attitude that everyone can train on equal terms, as Jennifer's (22, Studio A) statement suggests: "He is there just as much for the sake of the practice as I am." In this style of pole, there is a tendency to assume that men and women, in principle, are the same and thus of equal worth, which means that the differences between polers are considered to be individual differences between people rather than gender differences.

There are also some polers in the sportified style of pole who voice their concern that the capabilities of the male body, especially concerning strength and wild tricks, become the ideal, as is the case in many other sports, resulting in problems with inequality and lesser value ascribed to the female body (Larsson 2004; Maguire et al. 2002). However, the qualities considered feminine, like flexibility and grace, seem to be so inherent in pole that the balance is sustained.

Between the analytical extremes. In the pole studios that operate somewhere between the two analytically defined extremes of either sexualized (often women only) or sportified (often open to all) pole, where men are allowed to train but there is still focus on sexuality, special opportunities arise for men who wish to perform femininity and thus be “gender trouble-makers” (Butler 1999). These studios grant the opportunity for men to pole in high heels and thus not just perform femininity but also carry a typical marker of feminine heterosexuality and be accepted at the same time, as this observation at Studio E shows:

“Have you seen Daniel in heels? He’s better than me,” says the instructor to one of the women, “and his legs are so good looking. He is better than everyone in heels.” Daniel comes out wearing heels. He does the trick the instructor has shown, and it looks so easy; he lands light as a feather. The women stop to look at him. “Isn’t it crazy?” says the instructor, “and we wear heels almost every weekend, and still he’s better.”

Again, the fact that Daniel is considered to be very good plays a part in the acceptance of his performance of femininity.

Performing Gender in Different Contexts

There are certain expectations in western society pertaining to sex and gender (Butler 1999), and these play a part in how gender is performed in women-only and mixed-sex spaces, respectively. While there is a trend towards pole studios more often being women only in the sexualized style of pole and mixed sex in the sportified style (see Jensen 2015b), this is not always the case. Thus, in this analysis, we address the issue of sex segregation separately from the differences between styles.

Women-only pole. In some pole studios, they do not allow men to train. This is based on the argument that the absence of men creates a sense of security for the women. Studio D was the only pole studio in this study that did not allow men. The decision to exclude men

builds on an assumption that the way men look at women is inherently sexual. This assumption can play a part in throwing suspicion on all men—something that affects the men who train in pole studios that allow men. A male poler recounted that he was worried that the girls would think he was there to gawk at them:

But it's a little special to start doing pole "as a hetero-guy especially . . . it's a female profession," he says, and he was a bit worried that the girls would think he was "a creep that was only there to look at their butts." (Observation, Studio B)

Another argument for making pole a female space is that it can be a space where women can escape the heterosexual norm they feel a constant pressure to live up to—a space where they can experience a freedom to express sexuality without having to live up to a certain notion of femininity:

The biggest element in it is to test like my own sensuality and sexuality in a closed forum, where there are no men, where it doesn't have anything to do with men, it only has something to do with me. . . . It definitely also has something to do with daring to look myself in the mirror and daring to be something and daring to be sexy, but only for me, and not for anyone else. (Laura, 41, Studio D)

It can be considered paradoxical that the sexuality they do express conforms to a hegemonic heterosexual ideal that sustains the heterosexual norm, which, according to Butler (1999), creates inequality between men and women.

Mixed-sex pole. Five out of six pole studios in this study allow men, but they have very few male members. Several participants and studio owners described how women change their behavior when there are men present at the practice:

We've had men who are hetero, and then everyone works hard on the poles. That's for sure. Both him and the girls. That's for sure. Yes, then we can do

everything today (laughs), and we don't whine. So that's pretty funny. (Amy, 36, owner, Studio F)

There seems to be two arguments for this. One argument is that the women want to prove that they are as good or better than the men, as Emily (32, owner, Studio B) explained, "Often it makes the girls put in extra effort, if there is a strong guy, that can do a trick." The other argument is that the women are trying to look good when there are men present in an attempt to live up to the heterosexual norm (Lorber and Martin 2013). Olivia (22, Studio D) suggests that you would want to "look a little less clumsy if there are guys, than if it's just girls, then it's more like 'aw, it's just the girls.'"

Sarah (29, owner, Studio C) also points out that pole enables men to perform femininity without having other men present to judge them and that, even though they do not necessarily have talent, they find freedom in not having to live up to masculine ideals:

They have found that niche where they can be special, and where they feel they are capable, and it looks like—uh—shit (researcher laughs) what they are doing, but because they are "nursed", because they are the men, who if there had been ten other men, they would have been the bad one of the bunch, but now they have entered a space, where they are just "the apple among the pears," so they are not compared. So in that way, I think they fell really, really fine there, because they are something special there.

DISCUSSION: POLE AND THE POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE?

Societal norms constrain the performance of gender (Lorber 2000; Lorber and Martin 2013), but Butler is optimistic about the opportunities for resistance. The cultural "rules" do not just constrain, according to Butler (1999:187), they also constitute "the necessary scene of agency." In the following, we discuss how different contexts and styles of pole shape

different scenes of agency in terms of enabling and constraining gender performance and potentials for challenging the dominant gender norms.

Different Ways of Performing Gender in Pole: Challenging the Gender Norms?

Muscular women and men in high heels. This study found that some styles of pole create spaces for “doing” gender differently than societal norms prescribe. Pole contributes to the tendency of women aiming for a strong and muscular ideal, something which was considered progressive only a few decades ago (Butler 1998), but through the rise of popularity in fitness has since become more common (Andreasson and Johansson 2014). Even though some may question the very strong women’s femininity, many also idolize them. The link between physical strength and inner (i.e., mental) strength seems significant, and, by reconstructing strength to be a feminine quality, the polers contribute to changing the old narrative of women as the “weaker sex.”

Pole also enables men to perform femininity by idealizing flexibility and grace and providing spaces for dancing in high heels in pink neon light. Daniel (23, Studio E) is an example of a “gender trouble-maker” (Butler 1999), because he performs something different than expected. It is, however, maybe a bit optimistic to think that anyone can just do this. Daniel is very skilled, which makes it easier for him to gain approval for his feminine performance than a lesser skilled man. Nevertheless, the fact that pole creates spaces where some men are enabled to perform gender in new ways and gain acceptance is a step toward equality, which will benefit everyone.

Context matters. Another important point is that the cultural context—with all that it entails—in which pole is performed holds great significance. In this article, we have described different contexts of pole (i.e., women only or mixed sex). One studio owner described what happened when she taught all male bachelor parties. The men tended to have the intention of “taking the piss” on the groom. However, once they got going, they got

competitive, focused on improving their skills, and suddenly the movements otherwise considered to be inherently feminine and sexual were no longer a laughing matter. The argument that the movements themselves are innately gendered and sexual is problematic, and the focus in pole is very much on mastering new skills—as opposed to a focus on shaping the body a certain way (Fennell 2018; Holland and Attwood 2009; Jensen 2015a). This can be seen as enabling—especially if the framing of the skills is done without reference to a binary and deterministic understanding of gender.

It makes a difference whether pole is practiced sex segregated or integrated, and there can be enabling and constraining factors of both, but the different contexts shape different scenes of agency through both the discursive construction of gender and the ways the polers are encouraged to “do” gender. We argue that focusing less on gender differences and more on individual differences, problematizing the binary understanding of gender, and discursively “ungendering” skills, movements, and qualities (e.g., strength, flexibility, and grace) may be fruitful for greater equality and more opportunities for everyone.

Our findings are in line with others’ research on the expression of gender in dance and sports considered to be feminine—Christofidou (2018:953) for example, who found that “possibilities for renegotiating gender and sexuality are, at least partially, affected by the contexts we act in and the norms that characterize these.” Previous research suggests that doing sport in a mixed-sex setting may have “progressive influence on the gender narratives and performances of both male and female participants” (Priyadharshini and Pressland 2016:1234). And while mixed-sex sporting activities in and of themselves do not rectify gender stereotypes and inequalities, there is hope that they may help challenge traditional ideas of male superiority (Priyadharshini and Pressland 2016). Christofidou (2018:943), drawing on several other authors, also wrote that “feminised, female-concentrated and female-dominated spheres can provide men with increased opportunities to . . . renegotiate

dominant gender notions.” Many factors thus play a part in enabling and constraining the performance of gender in pole as well as other sporting activities.

Reservations concerning the potential for change. Butler (1999) pointed out that the culturally constructed gender constraints should be considered political structures, and she questioned the actual possibilities of individual choice regarding gender performance, but she ended up arguing that it is possible to change the dominant norms by performing gender in new ways. This discussion parallels the discussion in the research on pole about personal versus political empowerment. It is argued (e.g., Allen 2011) that, while female polers might feel personally empowered, it is not likely that they are empowered at a political level or in any other contexts than pole,⁶ and the same might be the case here. While pole in some cases creates a space for some people to perform gender in nonconforming ways, the acceptance of this practice does not necessarily have a spillover to other domains of their lives. In the following, we discuss the role of the pole organizations regarding constraining and enabling the performance of gender.

The sportification of pole. Pole is in the process of becoming a sport, but what will it mean for pole to enter into a field where traditional (and often toxic) masculinity is maintained (Connell 1995; Maguire et al. 2002; Markula and Pringle 2006; Messner 2002)? We find it likely that pole will still be practiced in many different ways even though some shape it into a more rigid “sports mold,” and hopefully there will still be spaces that enable different gender performances. Hern (2010) argued in an article about roller derby—an activity that actively addresses gender performance—that, in the process of becoming a sport, the activity risks losing some of its gender nonconforming aspects as well as becoming more

⁶ Bahri (2012:2,8) also pointed out that the empowerment is limited, as some styles of pole “exclude non white and/or non heterosexual women” and “contribute to the stigma of sex workers.”

excluding of novices due to more competitiveness. Hern also suggested that, in the process of sportification, the power may likely shift from the women running the grassroots movement to men being in charge of governing bodies. These may be points worth considering for the pole dance community while pole works towards becoming a sport.

A central part of becoming a sport is bureaucratization and central governing bodies. Anderson (2005) showed how the organization, governance, and structure of cheerleading significantly influences the norms of masculinity in the sport. It will be interesting to see how the IPSF deals with the issue of gender norms. We have argued that sport has the potential to challenge gender norms (Lindner 2012; Maguire et al. 2002; Thing and Jensen 2016), but often it seems these changes are more “bottom up” than “top down,” starting with individual athletes or teams more often than with a decree from an organization. Gender inequality and devaluation of gender expressions that fall outside a certain norm are problems that permeate all of society, and whether or not sport or pole dance can contribute to changing this is worth discussing. We hope the national and international pole sports organizations will consider how the culture they shape can enable and constrain gender performance, and maybe the sportification of pole can even normalize and help destigmatize gender performances outside of the dominant norm. Further research is needed to explore the implications of becoming a sport for the possibilities and limitations of gender performance in pole dance.

CONCLUSION

Some elements of pole have strong connotation to femininity and masculinity, respectively, but this study shows that men and women without too much issue can perform a combination of masculinity and femininity—women more so than men. It is only when they predominantly perform the “opposite” gender of their ascribed sex that others disapprove.

Pole enables women to perform femininity in several ways. The bodily ideals of flexibility and gracefulness live up to classic expectations of femininity, and, as described, women have taken ownership of strength and transformed it into something that is compatible with femininity. There are no consequences for women who do not live up to these ideals. There are, however, limits. Venturing too far in either direction—too strong or too sexy—can be considered problematic. Men are more limited: A masculine performance is expected, and a performance of femininity is more accepted if it is coupled with masculinity and a high skill level.

The analysis also showed that the context has great significance in terms of what enabling and constraining factors of gender performance there are for men and women, respectively. Pole dance and tricks have strong connotations to femininity and masculinity, respectively. Women-only pole is obviously constraining for men that are not allowed to participate. It enables women who feel they do not have to live up to a heteronormative ideal, but paradoxically it can be argued that they still conform to a hegemonic heterosexual ideal, especially in the sexualized style of pole. In mixed-sex pole, the interaction between the sexes alone may cause an expectation that both parties live up to the heterosexual norm. But men may also get the opportunity to perform femininity without other men present to judge them. In the sportified style of pole, there is an attitude that everyone can train on equal terms and a tendency to assume that men and women in principle are the same and thus of equal worth. But there is also a risk that the capabilities of the male body, especially concerning strength and wild tricks, become the ideal. However, the qualities considered feminine like flexibility and grace seem to be so inherent in pole that the balance is sustained.

The matter is complex, and some styles of pole allow for small steps to be made in the direction of gender equality and challenging gender norms. It is worth considering that the context pole is practiced in plays a role in enabling and constraining gender performance, and

we argue that, in the process of sportification, the pole organizations should be aware of and work towards changing the aspects of the culture that reinforce problematic ideas of gender.

Like any study, this one also has its limitations. One we choose to address is that the field study took place in 2014. While there has likely been some developments in the pole community in Copenhagen since then that our article does not cover, we argue that our findings still contribute to the research field by discussing enabling and constraining factors of gender performance in pole—a theme which has not been addressed in previous research.

Another limitation worth highlighting is the lack of intersectionality. The participants in this study were mainly white, (apparently) cisgender, able-bodied, middle-class women aged 20 to 40—similar to many of the polers studied in previous research and very representative of the polers in Denmark. The enabling and constraining factors of performing gender in pole are very likely different for other polers around the world, as the norms of femininity and masculinity in this study are defined by contemporary western society. Thus, this article ends with a call for further research taking intersectionality into account.

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