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“I’m not a pony and I’m not a dog, I’m a dancer”:
An interview with a stripper

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When this assignment was first introduced, I had no inkling about what type of informant I wanted to interview. I tend to think of myself as an individual who has a broad range of interests and to whom not many things cause discomfort. However, the more I thought, the more I realized how many hobbies and professions there are that I have strong opinions about. One of those professions is female stripping. Currently I am a graduate student at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, WA. I have never been to a strip club, never been to a party with strippers, and I have never met or known a stripper. The closest I have come to this profession is knowing a friend who is a barista at a lingerie drive-through coffee stand. Prior to the interview I was very opinionated about women stripping for work. I viewed it as demeaning to women and in some ways it really disgusted me. I was raised in a conservative Christian home that labeled stripping as a sinful activity and for a long time I judged the activity because of my religion. I am no longer religious, but I still feel biased against the activity mostly because I think it thrives off the exploitation of women. Generally, I have had little to no contact with my informant's professional world and in most ways I am living a very different lifestyle than she is. I have however seen strippers or have heard references to them on television or in movies, but beyond media I have had no interaction with strippers. My views post-interview are later discussed in this essay.

The best way I knew how to go about finding a stripper, without having to pay one in a club, is by networking through people I know. I used an online social network to post a comment about looking for someone who strips for a living. Interestingly enough, a guy I used to go to high school with dated a stripper and kindly passed on her contact information to me. Her name is Faedra, and she was very friendly and willing to meet with me. She currently does not have a car, so I drove to the Sea-tac area where she lives and we met near her house at the

Cheesecake Factory by the mall. Faedra chose the environment exclaiming her love for cheesecake. The environment was a little on the noisy side but we gave the recorder a test run and decided it would work. Faedra is about 5'9", brunette, and is decorated with tattoos. She dressed casually in jeans, a t-shirt, and wore the hood on her zip-up sweatshirt up while we talked. Her body language was generally relaxed and consistent. We were seated in a booth and she sat across the table from me, her back against the side wall, and with her feet up on the seat. Her demeanor seemed very comfortable and casual. Her speech was generally calm and informal throughout the whole interview, unless she was laughing. She also did not refrain from using expletives to express her points or add to a story. There was one point in the interview where she became notably more serious, which was when she was commenting about having seen girls fall when dancing on the pole.

Prior to beginning the interview, I asked Faedra what she would prefer I call her and she told me to refer to her as a stripper. I realize now that I should have asked her that question on the recording, but at the time I thought I should clarify that detail prior to beginning my interview.

The themes I found throughout my interview were expressed through various responses offered by the informant. The attached semantic network displays some of the common themes through quotes that arose from the interview. I found Faedra's responses to be consistent with one of two general themes characterized by the following quote: "It can be fun, it can be hard". As Faedra talked about stripping it appeared to me that she was experiencing some form of an internal battle. The best representation of this struggle is exhibited in the last few minutes of the interview, after I asked my final question. The two themes are very strongly represented in that concluding response. Overall, she sounded very conflicted to me. In one moment she was

telling me how fun her job is, that she really likes it, and everyone should check it out.

However, in the next breath she would be telling me that her job is hard, that she is done with it, and wants to move onto anything other than stripping. By and large she shared significantly more negatives about the job than positives. There were very few things that she seemed to really enjoy about the job besides earning instant money, dancing, being naked, enjoying music, and enjoying drinking. The majority of the interview seemed to revolve around the theme that stripping is a hard job that it can make you angry and jaded. An example of this theme: "...but it changes you. It makes you grumpy. It makes you kinda angry". Additional supporting quotes are displayed in the attached semantic network.

Once the interview was complete, I spent time reviewing the recording and analyzing my questions and Faedra's responses. I thought about whether my opinions had changed with regards to stripping as a profession. Honestly, I don't think my opinion has changed about stripping, but I do feel like my opinions have changed about strippers. I continue to embrace my values, and I still think stripping exploits women and that it's connected to a lot of negativity. In my opinion this interview re-enforced the detrimental effects of high stress, judgments, drugs, sex, and alcohol. One quote Faedra made that supports this: "I mean you add alcohol and nudity, and hot chicks, and guys are just total assholes". However, this interview gave me a new insight into what a profession like stripping means to at least one girl. Getting to hear about her experiences and insights really allowed me to set my opinions and values aside and experience stripping for exactly what it means to her. She gave me insight into why women do choose this profession, and why some women quit and why some remain committed to it.

I used the attached table to organize and analyze my interview questions. By reviewing the interview and the questions many times, my interviewing tendencies became more apparent.

One tendency I had was that I would often evolve my questions into multiple choice options instead of letting the informant ask me for clarification or appropriately using silence. I should have been patient for an answer to my original question, but instead I found myself feeling impatient and I would rephrase or alter my questions. One example: “Have you ever run into somebody who has been a customer and you see them outside of the club?” I didn’t get an answer because I immediately changed it to “Or have you had people you know outside come in?” before she had time to answer me. However, I feel like the majority of the time I was appropriately patient and tolerated silence well. I also recognized a weakness with my ability to be able to summarize or paraphrase what was being said by my informant. It was difficult for me to clarify my informant’s language and ensure to her that I was actively listening. I know I was actively listening, but it was difficult for me to find ways to rephrase what she was saying without feeling like I was changing the meaning too much or responding in a biased fashion. This resulted my response repeatedly being “how interesting”.

When I listened to my interview I found myself wavering in and out of quality. One minute I offered a strong open-ended confident question. Then the next minute I presented a closed-ended question, found myself wandering off on a tangent, or was responding awkwardly to the informant’s answers. The best part of my interview was during the initial 2-3 questions, where I was prepared with open-ended grand tour questions. The worst part of my interview I think was continuously represented by many close-ended questions. There was one question that was closed-ended and I received a very simple “no” as a response. My question was “So is there anything about dancing that makes you feel uncomfortable?” I was fortunate however that my informant responded elaborately to all but one of my questions, even my close-ended questions.

Throughout the interview I found that it was also challenging for me to not engage in biased casual conversation. I felt like the informant and I connected well on a social level and I found it difficult to remain professional and emotionally and socially removed. Another difficulty I experienced was being able to manage my nerves. I felt that when my anxiety was high that I had a more challenging time listening clearly to her responses instead of formulating my next question. Having a pre-meditated list of questions was helpful but was also distracting for me because I found myself scanning the sheet for my next question. I think I was afraid of being unprepared and allowing too much silence, which I thought would be interpreted as unprofessional. One example of not actively listening and simply asking a question was when I asked “So what’s your favorite kind of music to dance to?” That question felt very out of place and did not flow well with the rest of the interview.

Asking closed-ended questions I think was my greatest weakness. The majority of my questions were closed-ended, which could have proved to be a major problem. I was fortunate that my informant elaborated really well on even closed-ended questions. I tended to lead into my questions with “can I ask you...,” and then I asked my question. This turns an open-ended question into a closed-ended question, which she could have responded to me by saying “no you can’t ask me”. I should have just asked my questions without prefacing each question with a request for permission to ask the question.

Despite my weaknesses I think I had several strengths that were well represented through my interview. One strength of the interview was that I made sure I asked questions that focused on both positives and negatives of her profession. I think I made my informant feel comfortable and non-judged, which was proven by her informal and seemingly comfortable style of speech.

In addition, I think I formulated and asked questions that elicited interesting and valuable responses.

Agar (1996) discusses ways to classify interview questions in his book titled *The Professional Stranger*. The categories he constructs include bait, distribution checks, folk estimates, contrast, and self and other. I don't think any of my questions would be classified as bait, folk estimates, contrast, or self and other. Some of them could be classified as distribution checks. Distribution checks are questions that are used as quantifiers. For example, I asked "How long do you think the average girl lasts?", or "Do a lot of the girls work out?" These were follow-up questions, the first was from a conversation about the harshness of the stripping industry and how it's a difficult world to survive in. The latter is a follow-up to a discussion about pressure to alter appearances in the stripping industry. I was attempting to quantify how long or how many.

Below are three questions I would ask Faedra if I could go back and ask her a few more in order to increase the depth of my analysis:

1. How do you think being a stripper has affected your life?
2. What are some of the feelings you experience when you think about men watching you dance?
3. What advice would you offer to a friend if they told you they were interested in becoming a stripper?

Ultimately I think the interview uncovered significant details about stripping and what it means to my informant. She expressed her enjoyment with stripping as well as how it can be burdensome. The interview is overflowing with insightful commentary that follows one of the two themes that were previously discussed. She shared challenges and expressed a desire for

change. She painted a picture for me of where she is now and why she wants to pursue something different for her future. She shared the pains and frustrations of being a “tattooed stripper” and the judgments that she faces from outsiders who don’t know her. In addition, she shared her enjoyment of being naked, her love for dancing, for drinking and having fun. Overall her responses were rather bipolar in the sense that she seemed to either exclaim her love for stripping or her hate.

References

Agar, M. H. (1996). *The professional stranger: An informal introduction to ethnography*. New York, NT: Academic Press.