



More than a dance: The production of sexual health risk in the exotic dance clubs in Baltimore, USA

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ABSTRACT

Women who exchange sex for money, drugs, or goods are disproportionately infected with HIV and have high rates of illicit drug use. A growing body of research has underscored the primacy of environmental factors in shaping individual behaviors. HIV/STI rates among sex workers are influenced by environmental factors such as the physical (e.g., brothel) and economic (e.g., increased pay for unsafe sex) context in which sex work occurs. Exotic dance clubs (EDCs) could be a risk environment that is epidemiologically significant to the transmission of HIV/STIs among vulnerable women, but it is a context that has received scant research attention. This study examines the nature of the physical, social, and economic risk environments in promoting drug and sexual risk behaviors. Structured observations and semi-structured qualitative interviews ($N = 40$) were conducted with club dancers, doormen, managers, and bartenders from May through August, 2009. Data were analyzed inductively using the constant comparative method common to grounded theory methods. *Atlas-ti* was used for data analysis. Dancers began working in exotic dance clubs primarily because of financial need and lack of employment opportunities, and to a lesser extent, the need to support illicit drug habits. The interviews illuminated the extent to which the EDCs' physical (e.g., secluded areas for lap dances), economic (e.g., high earnings from dancers selling sex), and social (e.g., prevailing social norms condoning sex work) environments facilitated dancers' engaging in sex work. Drug use and alcohol use were reported as coping mechanisms in response to these stressful working conditions and often escalated sexual risk behaviors. The study illuminated characteristics of the environment that should be targeted for interventions.

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Introduction

In the U.S., as throughout the world, HIV infection occurs most commonly in women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Farmer, Connors, & Simmons, 1996, p. 3; Gupta, Parkhurst, Ogden, Aggleton, & Mahal, 2008). Sex work is defined as the exchange of sex for money, drugs, or goods and is often fueled by economic need and characterized by economic deprivation (Elwood, Williams, Bell, & Richard, 1997; Exner, Dworkin, Hoffman, & Ehrhardt, 2003; Harcourt & Donovan, 2005). Female sex workers (FSWs) have been disproportionately infected with HIV and STIs compared to similarly aged populations throughout the world (Loza et al., 2010; Platt et al., 2007). Infectious diseases are often occupational hazards of sex work, facilitated by high rates of unprotected sex as well as multiple and high risk sex partners

(Inciardi, Surratt, & Kurtz, 2006; Sanders, 2004). In a range of contexts (e.g., brothels, street-based), sex work is characterized by a number of factors that inhibit FSWs' ability to protect themselves against HIV/STIs, including the illegal nature of sex work (Elwood et al., 1997; Inciardi et al., 2006; Shannon et al., 2009), the high prevalence of physical, verbal, and sexual abuse (Goodyear & Cusick, 2007), and high rates of illicit drug and alcohol use (Booth, Kwiatkowski, & Chitwood, 2000; Surratt, 2007).

Direct sex work is defined as when the main purpose of an interaction is the sale of sex. It occurs in a number of venues including brothels and on the street, both of which have been well characterized in terms of associated HIV and other risks (Harcourt & Donovan, 2005; Shannon et al., 2009; Trotter, 2007). Contexts that could be particularly relevant to the link between sex work and HIV, but less obvious, are those in which sex is indirectly sold, such as massage parlors and exotic dance clubs (EDCs) (Frank, 2002; Maticka-Tyndale, Lewis, Clark, Zubick, & Young, 1999; Nemoto, Iwamoto, Oh, Wong, & Nguyen, 2005). A dearth of research has examined EDCs' role in facilitating HIV risk, with the

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preponderance of published literature on EDCs stemming from anthropology and feminism, focusing on EDC culture, gendered power dynamics, and the relationships between clients and dancers (Chapkis, 1997; Eaves, 2002; Frank, 2002). There are an estimated 3000 EDCs in the U.S. and the industry is estimated to be a 15 billion dollar business annually (Frank, 2002; Hanna, 2005). EDCs range in size and exclusivity, and offer an array of services from stage dancing to sex work (Chapkis, 1997; Frank, 2002; Maticka-Tyndale et al., 1999). Parallel to sexual transactions sold in other venues (Harcourt & Donovan, 2005), sexual activities within EDCs range from exotic dancing without physical contact to oral and vaginal sex.

The preponderance of observational HIV research among FSWs is focused on the individual level, largely concentrating on factors associated with condom use with clients (Hansen, Lopez-Iftikhar, & Alegria, 2002; Vanwesenbeeck, 2001). Alternatively, there is a growing awareness of the role of exogenous, environmental factors in shaping HIV risk including those that are structural (e.g., poverty), social (e.g., peer norms, violence), and geospatial (e.g., where sex work is sold) in nature (Blankenship, Friedman, Dworkin, & Mantell, 2006; Fast, Small, Krusi, Wood, & Kerr, 2010; Hansen et al., 2002; Rhodes, 2009; Shannon et al., 2009; Strathdee et al., 2010; Trotter, 2007).

One framework that has been used to examine how the relationship between individuals and environments impact both the “production and reduction of risk” is that of the “risk environment” (Rhodes, 2009, p. 193; Rhodes, Singer, Bourgois, Friedman, & Strathdee, 2005). Rhodes (2009) defined the risk environment as “the space, either social or physical, in which factors increase the risk of harm occurring”(p. 193). The framework emphasizes the primacy of context and shifts the focus for risk and therefore responsibility for behavior change from individuals to the social situations and structures in which risk behaviors occur. Socially situated risk provides an opportunity for us to understand how the environment generates risk as well as how individuals within a given environment experience risk. The risk environment framework is comprised of two key dimensions: the type and level of environmental influence (Rhodes et al., 2005). The four types of environments are physical, economic, social, and policy. These operate at the micro-level of interpersonal relationships, meso-level of social interactions (i.e., group norms) or institutions, and macro-level of social structures such as laws and social inequities. The risk environment is dynamic, in that it is a product of the interplay of the three levels that produce environmental conditions that can generate risk. The risk environment was developed to describe that of injection drug users (Rhodes, 2009; Rhodes et al., 2005) with a nascent body of literature examining that of sex work (Shannon et al., 2009; Trotter, 2007).

The current study aims to explore the physical, social, and economic environments of exotic dance clubs that function as HIV risk micro-environments for female exotic dancers in Baltimore, MD. We posit that the complex HIV vulnerabilities of exotic dancers are rooted and spawned by the social and spatial context of the EDCs in which they work.

Data and methods

From May through August 2009, an ethnographic study was conducted on the Block, a one and a half block strip of adult entertainment establishments in downtown Baltimore, MD. The qualitative study followed a 13-month quantitative that examined the prevalence of sex work and illicit drug use among dancers on the Block (Reuben, Serio, Matens, & Sherman, 2011; Sherman, Reuben, Chapman, & Lillseton, 2011). The Block is a historic red light district comprised of approximately 20 EDCs. This study

was comprised of structured observations ($N = 10$) and in-depth interviews with exotic dancers ($n = 25$) and staff ($n = 15$), including doormen, managers, and bartenders who worked in nine EDCs.

Over a two-month period, a total of ten observations were conducted by three researchers for a two-to-three hour period. To help ensure accuracy, observations were recorded on a structured form during or immediately after fieldwork. Information was collected on the clubs' layout, lighting, presence of video cameras, and relevant signage as well as details regarding the numbers, demographics, and interactions between dancers, staff, and clients. Observations provided the study team with an opportunity to normalize our presence in the clubs, which helped with future access to the study population (Sanders, 2006). Participants were purposively sampled in the EDCs and on the street for in-depth interviews to attain representation from different EDCs, length of time working on the Block, ethnicity (to ensure representation of African American dancers as the majority were White), and profession (for non-dancer staff). Recruitment efforts aimed to vary these domains as much as possible, given the constraints of the relatively small study population. Potential participants were recruited in two ways. First, they were approached individually by one of the three study interviewers and were informed about the study. Second, staff of the Baltimore City Needle Exchange Program (NEP), which provides services on the Block one night per week, informed their clients about the study, and if interested, referred them to study staff. Potential participants were screened and if eligible, provided informed consent. Inclusion criteria for this study consisted of being 18 years of age or older, currently or formerly employed on the Block, and ability and willingness to talk.

Interviews were conducted in cars, a restaurant, private areas in the EDCs, and the NEP van by interviewers trained by the study's first author. Interviews were semi-structured and facilitated through the use of an interview guide that explored the physical and social environment within the EDC, participants' history of exotic dancing, the range of services provided in EDCs, personal drug use, and drug use within EDCs. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 min and were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy. Participants were compensated \$25 for their time. The three study interviewers were women in their mid to late 20s, two of whom were White and one of whom was South Asian Indian. The study was approved by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Institutional Review Board.

The study's three authors analyzed the data thematically in a multi-step process using the constant comparative method that is central to grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After reading several interviews, three interviews were chosen for open coding, a process of reading small segments of text at a time and making notations in the margins regarding content or analytical thought, without being constrained by existing theoretical explanations. The labels or codes applied in this process were then synthesized into a list to remove redundancy. The resulting list was used to code the next three interviews, after which the code list was finalized and used to code all remaining interviews. Analytical memos were written throughout the coding process to reflect on themes within and across interviews. Data were entered into *Atlas.ti* version 5.0 (Scientific Software Development, Berlin, Germany), a qualitative data management program, to organize project coding and memos across interviews and participants. Data were analyzed for recurring themes. The current analysis focuses on the physical, social and economic environments of the micro (interpersonal) and meso (institution of the EDC) levels that facilitate and reduce HIV risk among exotic dancers.

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