

OBJECT

Challenging Objectification

The impact of lap dancing on relationships – ‘Jessica’ *

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* Please note that ‘Jessica’ is a pseudonym

“A year ago, lapdancing and strip clubs weren’t on my radar. If a colleague in work told me about a visit they had paid to one, I would respond with curiosity and detachment. They weren't something that had had an impact on my life.

In February 2008, my immediate family and my ex-boyfriend were in Australia for my brother’s wedding and, two days before, my brother had a second stag night (he had already had a weekend away of surfing and drinking). The possibility of the men going to a strip club on the night out had crossed my mind but none of the ‘stags’ had seemed keen on going to one when discussing their plans in the days leading up to the stag night.

As these were intelligent, university educated, articulate men in their thirties, I had – subconsciously, I think – judged them incapable of enjoying a strip club, wrongly as it turned out. If they did go, I thought it would be a short token visit so that they would feel they had done something out of the ‘ordinary’ for my brother.

It came as a huge shock to find out later that night that the group had ended up in two strip clubs for few hours.

My initial reaction was anger quickly followed by confusion. All the other wives/girlfriends (my Mum included, although my Dad, luckily, had stayed in that night) seemed fine with the visit and, of course, the men (other than my Dad, whom I didn't discuss it with) couldn't see why I was upset.

From my then boyfriend, M. (the incident contributed towards our break up months later), there was an element of secrecy and a desire to protect the other men involved. Male colleagues had told me about what they had got up to in strip clubs and, when M. wouldn't tell me what they had or had not paid for, my instinct was to imagine the worst.

I felt as if M. had been unfaithful to me. It felt like a gross betrayal to think that he could have paid a naked girl to gyrate on his lap and been sat there enjoying the view whilst a succession of young women stripped off for the group. I found out via another source later that no completely private dances had taken place. Instead, the six men, at the instigation of the best man, had paid a girl still in her teens to dance completely naked for them in a room for 20 minutes or so, ostensibly with the idea of embarrassing the stag. Finding this out made me feel physically sick. This is not something they would do in their front room on a Saturday night but it was acceptable to them because it was in a club.

M. told me that I had no right to be upset and that I was only jealous because I just “couldn’t handle the fact that other women had better bodies than me”. Like most women, I accepted from a young age that other women had far better bodies than me, in ways real or imagined, but I did not accept that men should feel entitled to pay to see these ‘better bodies’ in a club whenever they felt like it. I was also told that he could separate the fantasy of some good looking women to being with me – which I think was meant to be reassuring but which felt like a huge insult!

M. also told me that I should just accept that there are certain aspects of men’s sexuality that I will find abhorrent. The gist of my own mother’s reaction was, “it’s just what men do. Leave them alone.” My sister-in-law has even been to a strip club with my brother and she told me not to make a fuss.

Needless to say, trying to deal with these feelings marred what should have been a beautiful and happy occasion: my brother’s wedding overlooking the banks of the Parramatta river in Sydney on a summer afternoon in the bright sunshine. Whilst my brother was saying his vows and looking lovingly at his wife, my thoughts were, ‘48 hours ago, you were looking at someone else’s breasts close up!’ Sadly, I think I will now always associate that occasion with the time when I had to confront the painful existence of strip clubs.

In the weeks after the wedding, my confusion continued. I started to think that perhaps the problem was with me. Was I not good enough for M. and for other men? If women were “good enough”, our men wouldn’t want to pay other women to take their clothes off, surely? I thought that perhaps I should make more of an effort, shed some of my 8^{1/2} stone, have some things ‘fixed’ by cosmetic surgery. I lost half a stone and started planning all the things that I could sort out with surgery, a list that could have been never ending. I took up pole dancing classes in a misguided attempt to feel sexy again.

At the point when I was seriously considering cosmetic surgery, I had a reality check. It occurred to me that I don’t see men making much of an effort for their other halves – we’re lucky if they so much as brush their teeth for us some days! I’m just as appreciative of a fine male body as men are of a good looking woman but I would personally feel uncomfortable paying a man to take his clothes off for me and no-one is telling me that I should be doing this “because I am a woman”. I was happy with M. and felt that me paying other men to take their clothes off for my enjoyment would be an insult to him. However, it never seems to cross any man’s mind that is an insult to their wives/girlfriends that they choose to do this.

Over the next few months, I talked to most men I knew about the subject and was disappointed to find that the majority patronise strip clubs infrequently or regularly. I wasn’t surprised to learn that some men I knew did this but I had expected much more of

others. It is those whom I had higher expectations of that I feel particularly uncomfortable around now. It devastated me especially to know that my 2 brothers and my boyfriend could go to strip clubs without compunction.

Some months later, in order to try and deal with my still strong feelings on the issue, I decided that the only constructive thing to do was to talk to my brothers honestly about how I felt about them visiting strip clubs and to try to get some reassurance from them. Following some discussion via e-mail with them both, I received a phonecall from my mum telling me that raising the subject with my brothers was offending them and that, if I carried on talking about it, I was in danger of alienating myself from them and the rest of the family. No-one seemed worried about offending me!

My self-esteem and my self-confidence had already taken a huge knock in the aftermath of the strip club visit. Knowing that my Mum was siding with my brothers on an issue that I found so distasteful and sexist knocked my self-esteem almost into the ground. The message I took from her phone call was that my brothers were valued by my own mother more than I was and that they were given free rein to behave how they liked for no other reason than that they were born male. Feeling extremely alone and confused, I ended up paying hundreds of pounds for counselling to work through my feelings, thinking I needed to be “cured” of my problem.

After the conversation with my Mum, and my brothers, my relationship with my older brother in particular suffered. I believe that deep down he feels uncomfortable about going to strip clubs but, when I talked to him, he defended his right to go, as has every man I have talked to about it, and I know that he has been to strip clubs on at least three other occasions in the last year.

Although he has lived in Australia for the past few years, we were still very close but I'm unable to be close to him now and I find myself avoiding his phone calls. If he can treat some women like objects, falling back on the lazy argument that the girls are choosing to do that job, what does that say about how he views women as a whole, and me, his sister? I believe that he would hate it if I earned my living that way but he can't admit to that because otherwise he would have to justify why he thinks it's okay to degrade someone else's sister.

My ex-boyfriend did eventually take on board why I'd been upset. I don't think he had felt particularly comfortable in the club anyway but, to begin with, he had used the same, clichéd arguments about choice, and empowerment, and men just being men, and he had defended his right to pay other women to take their clothes off for him beyond the confines of a loving relationship. The argument boiled down to the implication that, if I didn't like it, there was something wrong with me because everyone else had been fine with it.

I felt that the argument trotted out about men “just being men” by everyone I spoke to was self serving. It is a way of men blaming their biological makeup to justify having their cake and eating it and it is an excuse for women not to have to challenge their behaviour. It's almost as if it suits both sexes to believe that men are poor helpless beings who are slaves to their hormones!

If roles were reversed for just one day, and the number of strip clubs in the country aimed at a female clientele outnumbered those aimed at men by a factor of hundreds, and it was

men who were sat at home whilst their female partners paid other men to take their clothes off for them, would they be just as accepting? I wonder how men feel if we played on their insecurities by going to a club to pay “better” male specimens to take their clothes off for us whilst we sat back and occasionally showed our appreciation by shoving tipping dollars in their g-strings? I doubt they would be happy about it. Yet, for no good reason, it is accepted the other way around.

One year on, I feel angry and depressed about it all still. It is hard not to think about it whilst there are so many reminders of our 'porn culture' seeping into every day life; the lads mags on prominent display in nearly every supermarket or newsagents; the poledancing classes on offer at my local gym; the news of yet another lapdancing club opening up in the historic part of my home city, Plymouth.

I feel angry at the club owners who create a market for the strip clubs and who normalise an activity that shouldn't have a place in our society today by siting them on the high street in large numbers.

I feel angry at the women who tolerate or accept their partner's visits to strip clubs. By not challenging them, they are complying with the behaviour shown by their sons and partners and are silencing women like me who do speak up.

Most of all I feel angry and disappointed at the men who should know better. The majority would not be happy if their wife, girlfriend or daughter “chose” to earn money that way. One male friend said that I didn't “get it” when I suggested that, rather than paying women in a club to strip off, they ask their wives/girlfriends instead, and that they may feel that to be asked is a huge compliment. He said that the men who go to these places would not want their wives/girlfriends being treated that way. The depressing conclusion I drew from this comment is that it is acceptable for men to knowingly treat some women with disrespect but not others. The double standards and hypocrisy shown by the men who perpetuate the demand for strip clubs disgusts me.

The shift in perception I have been forced to make about men I liked, especially my brothers, has been profoundly depressing. I find myself feeling contemptuous towards men I had previously respected. It upsets me enough to keep me awake at night sometimes still.

I am 32 years old. I didn't dream when I was growing up and going through school and university that this is something that I would ever have to spend my time campaigning against or that I would have to confront in my own peer group and family. Frighteningly, I know that three work colleagues have recently been on separate stag weekends abroad where the sole purpose was to use prostitutes. If the trend is not reversed now, this could be the next thing that becomes “normal” because men are “just being men”.

The majority of men I know have grown up thinking that it is normal for them to go to strip and lapdancing clubs. Knowing this, I am wary of entering into a relationship now because I could end up in a similar situation again. Will the effort of trying to negotiate with a man who thinks it is acceptable be worth it?”.