

Male prostitution

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Traditionally, scholars have focused their attention on female prostitution and have ignored male and transgender prostitution, despite the fact that males and transgenders comprise a substantial percentage of the prostitutes in many cities (Weitzer 1999). In the past decade, however, a growing body of literature has examined male sex workers. Most male prostitutes sell sex to other men.

Male providers, male customers

There are some basic similarities as well as some important differences between male and female prostitution. For instance, there is a similar hierarchy in each—stratified by whether the worker sells sex on the street, in a bar or a brothel/club/massage parlor, through an escort agency, or as an independent call boy. Like female street workers, young men on the street often enter the trade as runaways or to support a drug habit, and they engage in “survival sex.” Like upscale female workers, call boys and escorts possess social skills that allow them to relate to educated, upper-class customers, and they may develop emotional attachments to some of their regular clients (Smith *et al.* 2008; van der Poel 1992). And, like female workers in the mid- and upper-level tiers, similarly situated males are more likely than street workers to hold positive views of their work and themselves (Koken *et al.* 2010; West 1993). Interviews with 185 male prostitutes in three Australian cities found that two-thirds felt good about being a sex worker (Minichiello 2001). A study of male escorts reported that, as a result of being generously paid for sex, the escorts felt desired, attractive, empowered, and important; they also developed greater self-confidence and more positive body images over time (Uy *et al.* 2007). As a male brothel worker stated, it was “so wonderful to have love made to me by so many wealthy and socially elite men” (Pittman 1971: 23).

Economic motives are central for both male and female sex workers, but some males are also motivated by the potential for sexual adventure that prostitution may offer (van der Poel 1992). Differences in the ways male and female prostitutes experience their work are evident in the following areas. Males tend to be:

- involved in prostitution in a more sporadic or transitory way, drifting in and out of prostitution and leaving the trade earlier than women (Aggleton 1999; Weinberg *et al.* 1999);

- less likely to be coerced into prostitution, to have pimps, and to experience violence from customers (Aggleton 1999; Weinberg *et al.* 1999; West 1993);
- in greater control over their working conditions, because few have pimps (West 1993);
- more diverse as to their sexual orientation: some self-identify as gay; others as bisexual; and others insist that they are heterosexual despite engaging in homosexual conduct, an identity-behavior disparity typically not found among female prostitutes (Aggleton 1999);
- less stigmatized within the gay community (Aggleton 1999; Koken *et al.* 2010) but more stigmatized in the wider society because of the coupling of homosexuality and prostitution.

Like female sex workers, males draw boundaries around the services they are willing to perform. Some limit their activity to oral sex; some engage in penetrative but not receptive oral or anal sex; and others engage in all types. Some limit their encounters to sexual exchanges, while others are open to more comprehensive interactions, including cuddling, massage, and conversation. This has come to be known as the “boyfriend experience,” a quasi-romantic, yet paid, encounter.

Although most research focuses on street prostitution, a thriving indoor market has been studied by some researchers. Male brothels are fairly rare, though a few have been studied (Pittman 1971). One hybrid brothel-escort agency, a business that provided services to about 200 clients per month, was studied by Smith, Grov, and Seal (2008). Most of the sexual encounters took place outside the agency, but some were “in-call,” occurring in a designated room at the agency. Some of the workers even lived at the agency. When not working, some of the men engaged in social activities with other men at the agency, including the manager and friends of their fellow escorts. The manager served as a mentor to the escorts and was well liked by them. Like madams in female brothels, the manager screened clients and sought to ensure a safe and pleasant working environment for his employees. The benefits of working for this agency were that it provided a “sense of community” for the workers, “shielded escorts from potential stigma,” and was “a source of positive support” for their work and lifestyle (Smith *et al.* 2008: 206, 208).

Most escort agencies do not double as brothels, resulting in much more social distance between the employees. Salamon’s (1989) study of an escort agency in London that did not provide in-call services reported very little social interaction between the manager and the workers, and few workers knew any of the others.

Research on street prostitution offers a picture of a very different world—more risky for the workers but also potentially exciting. McNamara’s (1994) ethnographic study of male street prostitutes in Times Square, New York, in the early 1990s found a community involved in selling sex on the street and at peep shows, gay bars, the bus terminal, and hotels. Most were Hispanic youths, and most of the clients were white men. The sex trade was remarkably well ordered: “very few problems occur either between the hustlers and the clients or among the boys themselves. In the vast majority of cases, the activities are completed without incident” (McNamara 1994: 62). The police generally left the prostitutes alone unless there was a disturbance.

Although most of the research on sex tourism centers on female prostitutes and foreign male clients, sometimes men travel abroad to meet and pay for sex with other men. Padilla’s (2007) ethnographic study in the Dominican Republic provides a unique window into gay male sex tourism. Many of the workers do not self-identify as gay—in fact, many are married—and they service men simply because they comprise a much larger market than female sex tourists who are willing to pay for a sex encounter. Many sex tourists eroticize this, as it seems to accord with the fantasy of having gay sex with a heterosexual male. While some male prostitutes aim to avoid long-term or serial relationships with particular clients, due to the potential emotional risks

involved, others cultivate long-term clients, develop affectionate feelings toward them, and await their next visit. The latter put a premium on meeting customers who will continue to send money or gifts after they return home. Padilla found a connection between the material and emotional aspects of these relationships: workers who received the most economic rewards were most likely to develop affectionate feelings toward a customer. Older clients were more likely to seek stable and more intimate relationships with a specific worker, while younger clients sought sex with multiple partners.

Male providers, female customers

Relatively little is known about male prostitutes who sell sex to women, and the few studies on this topic all center on tourist destinations. A handful of studies have examined contacts between affluent Western female tourists and young Caribbean men, who meet at clubs and on beaches (Phillips 1999; Sanchez Taylor 2001, 2006). There are some basic similarities between female sex tourism and male sex tourism (e.g., economic inequality between buyer and seller) as well as some differences (e.g., female sex tourists rarely act violently against male prostitutes). There is a profound economic inequality between the buyer and seller, and this gives the buyer a similar level of control over the worker, whether the latter is female or male. Like male sex tourists, female sex tourists use their economic power to buy intimate relations with local men, and during these encounters they assert control over the men. One study in the Caribbean concluded:

The kind of control exercised in their relationships with local men is actually very similar to that exercised by male sex tourists in sexual economic relationships with local women . . . They are able to use their economic power to limit the risk of being challenged or subjugated.

(Sanchez Taylor 2006: 49–50)

Female customers may become long-term companions or benefactors to the men, and in some cases this can lead to marriage.

Many of the female sex tourists do not define themselves as “customers” who buy sex from local men. Instead, they construct the encounters as “holiday romances” or “real love,” and almost none describe their affairs as “purely physical” (Sanchez Taylor 2001: 755). The women do not see themselves as sex tourists and the men do not see themselves as prostitutes. However, the latter do receive material rewards for the time they spend with foreign women, including meals, lodgings, gifts, and money. According to Sanchez Taylor, these relationships therefore have all the hallmarks of sex tourism, irrespective of whether they are short or long term or whether money is exchanged, provided that the man receives at least some material benefits. Similarly, Phillips (1999: 191) argues that these transactions can be “easily fitted under the umbrella of prostitution,” even though both the tourist and the provider do not perceive their liaison as such.

The “host club” in Japan is another example of male sex work involving female clients. Similar to the hostess clubs where women entertain male customers, host clubs are locations where women go to enjoy themselves in the company of attractive male hosts, which may include sexual encounters. Such bars have flourished in the past decade, with approximately 200 now operating in Tokyo alone. The hosts serve exorbitantly expensive alcoholic drinks to their clients and lavish praise, compliments, and advice upon the specific women to whom they attach themselves. The nature of this phenomenon is captured in the concept of “commodified romance” (Takeyama 2005), which involves nonsexual intimacy but may also include sexual services.

Why do women seek out these paid encounters? An ethnographic study of host clubs revealed that “customers claim that there are few other places in Japan’s male-centered entertainment world where women can safely enjoy romantic excitement” (Takeyama 2005: 204). According to this study, the vast majority of hosts have had sex with at least some of their customers, although they prefer to avoid sexual intercourse in order to keep the woman coming back to the club and paying the high prices (the host gets a cut). Some hosts sleep with their customers without having sex with them.

Conclusion

Further research on male sex workers who service women will help address the question of whether the customer’s gender influences the character and subjective meaning of the encounter. To what degree, if at all, is gender inequality or domination present in exchanges between female customers and male workers? Do female customers engage in less objectification of the workers, or is objectification evident irrespective of the customer’s gender? Do female customers expect more emotional involvement from sex workers than is true for male customers? When the customer is a woman, is there less likelihood of violence from either party? These questions have yet to be investigated, but such research would be invaluable in answering the theoretical question of whether prostitution has certain “fundamental” or “essential” qualities, irrespective of the gender of the worker and the customer, or whether it varies significantly according to the actors involved. To answer these questions, we need systematic examinations of male prostitutes who service men in comparison with those who service women, and of male and female prostitutes working in the same tier, such as the comparative studies by Koken *et al.* (2010) and Weinberg *et al.* (1999).

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