

Selling Sex in Cardiff and London

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The advent of AIDS in the early 1980s found a scientific community sorely lacking in recent and reliable information about a number of the populations primarily affected, none more so than male sex workers, a group marginal not only to mainstream society, but to other marginal groups. The small literature that existed before the 1980s nevertheless paints a picture which incorporates:

two compelling stereotypes: that of the straight hustler and that of the teenage runaway prostitute. These two portraits, often merged in a single, sorry account, dominate contemporary sociological descriptions and fuel popular and journalistic stereotypes. (Davies and Simpson, 1990, p. 109)

These images derive primarily from the work of Reiss (1961), Butts (1947) and, in Britain, Harris (1973) and Lloyd (1979). Of these, Reiss has certainly been the most influential. He describes a group of heterosexually identified young men engaging in sex work and characterizes the norms which allow them to reconcile a heterosexual self-image with homosexual activity. These include an emphasis on the financial rewards of the work and a denial of physical pleasure from the sex; a disdain and even hatred for the punter; and a restriction of sexual activity to the insertive, masculine role in oral intercourse.

Three aspects of this analysis are relevant here. First, we note a reluctance to believe that the rent boy can be homosexual by preference. Indeed, such a figure is strikingly absent from the literature. In policy terms, this presupposition manifests itself in the implicit goal of most interventions, removing the young men involved from sex work, and in the absence of sex work from interventions targeted on, or indeed developed by, the gay community.

Second, it seems taken for granted that no young man would rationally choose sex work as a means of living. It is sufficient at this point simply to note that sex work can, in many circumstances, be a relatively lucrative and attractive alternative to repetitive and demoralizing factory work or the ill-paid harum-scarum of the fast-food empires.

Third, child sexual abuse features prominently in early discussions of male sex work. On the one hand, there are those who take the youth of the men involved in sex work as *a priori* evidence that prostitution is little more than formally structured abuse (Lloyd, 1979). On the other hand, sexual abuse also appears as a key feature of the suggested etiology of the 'prostitute personality'. The late Richie McMullen has argued strongly that there is a 'logical process' from receiving gifts and/or money as 'reward' for suffering abuse as a child, through a process of self-legitimation in which he persuades himself of his complicity in and enjoyment of the abuse, to a position which 'allows him to abuse others and/or set himself up for further abuse' (McMullen, 1988, p. 40). West's work (1992) has, however, failed to find empirical support for this contention, and elsewhere we have doubted the logic of the argument (Robinson and Davies, 1991).

At the heart of this traditional discourse of male prostitution is the figure of the powerless prostitute. An alternative view of sex work has emerged from within feminism. At the heart of this new discourse is an attempt to replace discussion of 'prostitution' with the idea of sex work. In so doing it emphasizes the economic aspect of sex work, what people do, rather than the pathological or proto-psychiatric aspect, what they are.

Shorn of its feminist specificities, this perspective makes a distinction between sex work and destitution. It recognizes and highlights the fact that the literature and most discussion of male sex work concentrates on the conjunction of these two features, looking only at the homeless, drifting or otherwise 'chaotic' young man on the streets of the large cities. It then contrasts this with the existence of a flourishing market in sex supplied by individuals who in no way correspond to this stereotype (see Davies and Simpson, 1990; Robinson and Davies, 1991; Hickson *et al.*, 1994; also Marotta, Waldorf and Murphy, 1988, for American examples). Noting that there are many who carry out sex work in congenial circumstances and with control over their lives and work, it argues that this is a possible goal for all those who find themselves involved in sex work. Better, they argue, to work from a flat with the ability to choose customers than from the street-corners with desperation.

With this basic perspective, a different set of policy preferences from those associated with the traditional view emerges. These seek the decriminalization of sex work and, more broadly, its rescue from stigmatization. More specifically, it identifies the need to make sex workers better at their jobs (see Kooistra and Hazenkamp, 1992). This involves a number of specific agendas. First, it rejects removal from sex work as the only or the best solution in all cases. Second, it recognizes the importance of punter-free spaces as a means for workers to organize their own work in as congenial a manner as possible. Third, it recognizes that the aim of programmes for and by sex workers is to exploit the market position that they have. This involves the further development of existing skills and the empowerment of individuals.

Sex Work and HIV

The emergence of AIDS and the identification of the modes of transmission of HIV have led to a great deal of research on rates of HIV infection among female and, to a lesser extent, male sex workers in various cities around the world (Tirelli *et al.*, 1988; Coutinho, van Andel and Rijdsdijk, 1988; Chiasson *et al.*, 1988; Elifson *et al.*, 1988). We refrain from detailed comment on these findings, since it seems a dubious and unscientific undertaking to compare the rates of HIV positivity in populations that are culturally diverse, from samples that vary in representativeness and in countries at different stages of the epidemic, as if the label 'prostitute' were a universal category with specific physical potentials for infection rather than a socially and culturally bound and constrained set of social and sexual practices and relationships.

Rather than this futile comparison, a recognition that sex workers may be presumed to be at risk of acquiring HIV through their work is needed and, thus, a valid aim of public policy is to assess the level of that risk and to take steps to enable those involved to minimize their exposure to infection.

Sex Work and Safer Sex

Many, if not most, health promotion projects promote the idea that unsafe sex consists of a particular behaviour or set of behaviours which have to be eradicated from the repertoire. When men having sex with men are concerned, anal intercourse is the behaviour most frequently and, given its high risk of transmission, rightly targeted activity. However, as we have elsewhere sought to argue (Davies and Weatherburn, 1991, Davies and Project SIGMA, 1992), at the individual level, such monolithic assessments of risk are neither actual nor realistic, nor always helpful features of sexual behaviour. While some individuals always and in every circumstance choose to avoid high risk behaviour, many others choose not to do so.

Despite this, most behavioural scientists recommend programmes which will ensure that the individuals avoid the behaviours entirely. We prefer a different approach, believing that individuals make complex assessments of the risk involved in a particular encounter or within a particular relationship, not on the basis of a sterile weighting of the benefits of sex in that context against the likelihood of infection and the disadvantages attendant upon it, but rather on the basis of a number of heuristic, contingent weightings, some of which may be more appropriate than others. In general, we believe that many gay and bisexual men have evolved risk minimization strategies that involve rational, well-informed and sophisticated decisions about their behaviour (for a detailed discussion of these points see Davies *et al.*, 1993, Chapter 5).

The actual risk for a particular sex worker will, of course, vary with the pattern of his sexual behaviour. In general, the greater the number of times he

has anal intercourse, particularly in the receptive mode, the greater the risk. The use of condoms for anal intercourse, while reducing the risk to both partners, does not eradicate the risk. Smaller risks attach to the ingestion of semen, while a pattern of work that consisted solely of masturbation would seem to carry little or no risk of infection, however many clients were involved. The degree of exposure of an individual will depend on the actual mix of practices in his repertoire.

Methods

The complexity of male sex work as a lived experience demands an appropriately complex set of methods for understanding what is involved. The study described in this chapter used observation techniques and unstructured interviews within a broadly ethnographic approach as well as more structured, formal interviews. Ethnographic methods have been successfully employed in researching social groups or subcultures which have either withdrawn and/or have been excluded from mainstream society (Humphreys, 1970; Whyte, 1943). Ethnographic research is premised on exploring research subjects and their activities in their 'natural' setting.

This chapter reports on findings from ethnographic fieldwork and interviews carried out in 1992–93 with two groups of male sex workers. The first group came from the West End of London where we found a large street scene, with complex, intrinsic social organization. The second came from Cardiff, where there is a small street scene with a degree of intrinsic social organization, but mainly symbiotic within a larger 'street corner' society. A total of 130 young men participated in the study.

Numbers and Backgrounds

Formal interviews were carried out with 81 young men in Cardiff and 49 in London. While we are confident that the Cardiff sample includes nearly all the workers regularly selling sex in the area, this is not the case in London, where the majority of our contacts came from the charity Streetwise, which provides a range of services for this group of young men.

The average age of the Cardiff group was slightly under 18, with a range from 15 to 23. The average age of the young men interviewed in London was slightly higher than those in South Wales at 20, with a range from 16 to 29. Although the reported ages may be different from real ages, there did not seem to be large numbers of young boys involved in either scene. The majority of the sample was white and British. Four black men (two in each site) were interviewed, and 11 of the London group were from Western Europe or the white Commonwealth, reflecting the capital's international attraction.

The Cardiff group lived in a number of towns in the city's industrial hinterland. Some of these young men worked in their home towns while others

preferred to travel to the more anonymous city. This tends to confirm evidence from our fieldwork that there is migration along the main train routes. Thus, there is a natural movement within the area to Cardiff, the largest city, and from the area as a whole to other cities, including London. There is also some movement to Amsterdam, and while this is organized, we have had no evidence of coercion.

In London, nearly all those in the sample were homeless and the remainder had precarious living arrangements with friends or in squats. By contrast, nearly half of the young men in Cardiff (47 per cent) lived with their parents and another 17 (21 per cent) with a male partner in a flat or house. Sixteen (20 per cent) lived alone in a flat or bedsit and six (7 per cent) in shared accommodation. Only three were living in squats.

In the London group, the level of formal education was minimal, whereas in Cardiff 15 of the workers were still at school and a further 15 had no qualifications, forty-one had CSE qualifications and eight GCSEs, two of whom were studying for A levels. There were five with A levels, two of whom were students in higher education. While the Cardiff group seems to reflect fairly well the class composition of the city, the London group was clearly drawn from the most deprived section of the community.

All the workers interviewed in South Wales laid claim to either a gay or bisexual identity, whereas in London, the picture was less clear-cut. Seventeen of the 48 (35 per cent) regarded themselves as gay, one as homosexual and two as queer (total 20: 41 per cent). Only four (8 per cent) regarded themselves as straight or heterosexual and a further 14 (28 per cent) as bisexual. Most made some qualification about the inability of these broad terms to confine or limit their potential or actual experience.

Thirteen (26 per cent) of the London group had a regular boyfriend at the time of interview and six (12 per cent) had a girlfriend. Two of these had children. In addition, 25 (51 per cent) said that they had had casual non-paying male sexual partners, but only two had had casual female partners. Five (11 per cent) reported both male and female non-paying partners. Company, trust and stability were stressed by many as the positive aspects of these relationships and a small but significant number reported having a boyfriend or girlfriend with whom they had not (yet) had sex. Yet others, in the early stages of a relationship, reported that they were very sexual. In South Wales, 23 (28 per cent) had a boyfriend and only six (7 per cent) a girlfriend. Fifty-nine (73 per cent) reported a non-paying male partner in the month before interview while only eight (10 per cent) reported a female partner who did not pay for sex.

Careers

Interviews did not deal in detail with personal histories or moral careers. Participants were asked, however, to recall their first experience with a punter,

that is to recall their entry into sex work. Replies were recorded from 63 young men. Only five (6 per cent) of the respondents reported abuse at ages ranging from seven to 14. Another nine refused to answer this question, and in some cases the terms in which this was done suggests a traumatic memory. Nevertheless, the predominant figure in the recollections of the first experience is the recognition of an economic opportunity, though the dimensions of this are many. For a small number, a conscious decision is taken to work. For example,

We had recently moved into a flat together and were finding we could afford rent, gas, electricity, food but we had little left for going out or saving for a holiday. So we discussed how we could earn extra money and as a joke at first said let's go on the game. We discussed this further and said we'd give it a try but wanking only. The first night we tried we did three punters each – that was £30 in total. Now we try to do five or six and we are saving for a holiday in Tunisia.

Some found out about the possibilities of earning money from others who earned money in that way:

When I was 16 I went to a pub with a pal and he kept going to the toilet and coming back with money. He told me he was wanking old queens for £5 a go. He said it was easy money so I had a go.

Many, however, recall their 'first time' as part of the experimentation of youth. Central to this set of responses is the realization that what gave pleasure could also earn cash or goods.

I was 14 years old and was out fishing with an older boy . . . He said he'd give me 10 Embassy [cigarettes] if I wanked him off. I agreed. I suppose indirectly he was my first punter as prior to that I'd done it for nothing.

Also noticeable is the fact that the first punter is often of the same age, or slightly older than the boy himself. Respondents spoke frequently of 'a boy', 'an older boy', 'older boys in school' and son on. Others have been approached by older men, usually referred to as 'old queens':

I used to visit an older guy (about 55) and he used to give me money to touch me up. I think he's dead now.

I was 16 years old. An old queen came up to me and I thought 'If he wants it badly enough he can pay for it.' I told him it would cost him £5 for a wank. Silly old bugger gave me £5 and I wanked him off.

While these were clearly significant events for the young men involved, it is important not to attribute causal force to them without further discussion.