

**Reflexive Research and Sexual Stories**

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## **1. Introduction**

Research into commercial sex is notoriously hard as it can be stigmatised and emotionally laborious. However, recently there has been a significant increase in the variety and volume of research being successfully undertaken (Sanders, 2008.) Despite this success, it is important to recognise that research is a complex social interaction and the relationship between researcher and participant influences all stages of the research process from recruitment to findings. Thus, as Plummer (1995) highlights when researching sexual and intimate lives, the researcher is part of the process of generating private sexual stories and bringing them into public view.

In order to make sense of and explain the sexual narratives produced and thus allowing for a greater understanding of how sexual knowledge is formed, research must be conducted reflexively. Furthermore, as Finlay (2002) argues interrogating intersubjectivity increases the trustworthiness of qualitative data. This paper explores this need for reflexive practice by recognising that however much we strive for objectivity in a bid to represent the truth, we must be aware of the issues above and account for the role of the researcher, as an individual, in the generation of knowledge throughout the research process.

The aim of this paper is not to explore what reflexive practice is or how it is undertaken – there is not enough time here in this short space. Instead, drawing on the experience of conducting and the empirical data collected,

from a PhD project which focuses on men who pay for sex with women in the UK, this paper highlights how researcher subjectivity and positionality can enter the research and thus emphasises the need for reflexive research. By using real examples to demonstrate these issues, instead of reviewing concepts theoretically, it is hoped that this paper is accessible to all those undertaking research into sexuality, ranging from activists to NGO workers, to academics in a step towards building the bridge between academic research and that done out side the academy. To start, there'll be a brief over view of the research project. Secondly, there will be an introduction regarding the rise of reflexive research practices. Following on, the positive and negative influences of my position as a; young, female researcher working in a professional academic environment, interviewing older males about their involvement in a stigmatised and secret activity - paying for sex – will be discussed. Finally, the emotional labour necessary listen to, elicit and understand sexual stories including the parallels between the researcher and commercial sex worker will be presented.

## **2. Research project**

Research involving male clients of female sex workers has previously focused on limited issues such as; why men seek out prostitutes (2006) and what they buy (Monto 2000) with many studies drawing from street based prostitution users. Consequently, knowledge surrounding male clients was of a limited and superficial nature. However, recently there has been a shift in focus and work has started to acknowledge the breadth of the industry by exploring the rise of the internet (Sharpe and Earl 2008) the girl friend experience (Bernstein 2007) and the importance of mutual pleasure (Sanders 2008.)

Continuing this shift and aiming to generate a more complete picture and recognising the multifaceted nature of the industry, 35 men who pay for sex with women in the UK were recruited using an internet message board and the local paper. Interviews were conducted either face to face, over the phone or using MSN and many participants took part in both first and second interviews. The key aim of the research was to explore, in depth, the

subjective relational and sexual experiences and lives of men who pay for sex in both their commercial and non commercial worlds.

The data explored; initial and continued industry involvement, relationships, sexuality and sexual practices, intimacy, law and policy. The parallels and dichotomies between their commercial and non commercial lives were explored as well as the leakages between these 2 worlds and in doing this their sexual identities, histories and understandings have been traced from childhood to present day. The research starts from the position that it is only when we begin to look at the fuller picture surrounding those involved in commercial sex and begin to explore the personal and private issues of men's involvement as purchasers of sexual services, can we begin to understand the attraction to and their involvement in the commercial sex industry and begin to make it safer for all those involved.

### **3. Reflexivity and Sexual Stories**

Reflexivity and issues of subjectivity have long preoccupied sociologists and over the past decade, reflexive practice has risen up research agendas, with the social context in which knowledge is produced beginning to be acknowledged. It has been the main preoccupation of feminists, such as Stanley and Wise (1993) who argue that knowledge is contextually specific and the researchers biography including: age, race, class, gender, sexuality etc affects what they find and therefore, what we know. Furthermore, Finlay (2002) claims that the *perceived* 'problem' of reflexivity is due to the positioning of the researcher as central to the worlds they study and that there is now an increased awareness that 'how knowledge is acquired, organised and interpreted is relevant to what the claims are' (Altheide and Johnson, 1994 p. 486 cited by Mauthner and Doucet, 2003 p.416.)

Even though there is now an increased awareness of the need for reflexive practice, Broom at al (2007) emphasise that the majority of reflexive writing in qualitative research focuses around women as participants and that there is much less work exploring male interviewees. In addition, there is limited work on the intersections with gender and other factors such as age, sexuality or

status. This paper draws on Plummer's (1995) notion of sexual stories, in which he argues that unreflective knowledge is no longer acceptable as the creation of sexual stories is social, in that the researcher is part of the process of being observed, analysed and written about (p.12.) In a bid to begin to fill this gap in the literature, I will start by exploring my position relative to the participants.

#### **4. Researcher Positionality**

There are the aspects that are more philosophical such as, why one chooses to become involved in projects and how that influences the research process and while these maybe important they are beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will focus on the more tangible aspects of 3 key factors; age, gender and status, covering opportunities and constraints that they provided, thus highlighting how I as the researcher am part of the process of generating sexual knowledge.

The most obvious key difference concerns gender; I was female and every participant was male. In addition to this, I was asking questions about a sexual and stigmatised activity. Furthermore, all the participants were older than me. They ranged from 29- 69 and the average age was 50. At the time of most of the interviews I was 26, some were conducted when I was 27 though. 2 participants were 29 and only 5 were in their 30's. So overall there was a considerable age gap between myself and the participants. However, some participants were not aware of my age as we never met & some I never even spoke to due to using MSN, and I was asked my age out of curiosity by one participant over the phone. Finally, my overall status, that I was a relatively young, PhD student working in a professional academic environment was at times significantly different from that of some participants. Participants ranged from being older academics with PhD's to younger men with no qualifications and being unemployed.

- **Advantageous**

These various factors were at times advantageous during the project and were indeed drawn upon by myself to assist in the progression of the research.

My gender provided motivation for some men to take part in the study, due to curiosity and the opportunity to speak about their activities to a woman. My status was also important for some men's motivation to take part in the research. Several of the men had PhD's and wanted to help as they knew how hard it was to get good data and participants. When I posted to recruit participants I utilised my *student status* and requested *help* in a bid to make myself seem unthreatening and to appeal to peoples better side.

In addition to individual factors influencing the research independently, there were intersections. My young, female status, presented me as unthreatening and gentle and also allowed a snowball sample to be generated as men posted on the message boards encouraging others to participate. They discussed the relaxing and cathartic aspects of taking part in the research. The role of a female researcher in facilitating the opening up of men has been highlighted by others such as - Broom at al. (2007) In addition to this, there was a significant amount of impression management on my side to ensure that the participants did feel comfortable talking about their experiences and that the interview was as painless as possible. This included being un-judgemental and not displaying my own emotions or opinions.

- **Constraining**

As well as the advantageous nature of these factors, the disadvantages of my positionality were also apparent. There was concern for my inability to understand or relate to the experiences the men talked about due to my age. One participant talked being married longer than I've been alive. This quote made me realise that the participants were in fact talking about experiences, times of life that I had no idea about but that were supposed to happen in my future. This made me question if I could really understand what they were talking about and draws on the philosophy of the 'insider / outsider' debate in sociological research.

Due to my young, female, professional status there were times that the men struggled with the language to describe their experiences despite being reminded at the beginning of the interview to use whatever language they

were comfortable with. This was apparent mostly when talking about sexual practices; such as what was bought on their first visit, or how their practices had changes or not. It was mentioned by one man about 'not using language like this in front of a lady.' At times I got the impression that the men were not quite sure about why such explicit questions were being asked, but the data that was gained offered insight into things that would not have otherwise been known such as that around sexual health and perceived risk. Several of the men claimed to not have full sex when they visited commercial sex workers as they do not like condoms, instead they have unprotected oral sex as they perceive that to be 'safe' enough to take part in without a condom. Thus if the explicit questions had not been asked then this would never have been found out. This highlights the possibility about other information being lost due to an inability or lack of desire to communicate to a young female researcher and the possible differences in the data if a male researcher was conducting the work.

Finally, as well as my own impression management to assist in drawing out the data, there is the potential for the men themselves to have taken part in their own impression management. My position as a young, female, professional student working in an academic area has alerted me to question if the men are telling the truth and how much of an idealised view, intertwined with reality, fantasy, and half truths due to the process of recollection from memory they were presenting? The men were very keen to distance themselves from the darker side of the industry especially relating to street prostitution, trafficking and drugs. Instead they often emphasised the importance of mutual pleasure and respecting sex workers which raises similar issues previously mentioned that if they were talking to a male researcher and would they have put as much importance on stressing these points?

As you can see there are significant advantages and disadvantages throughout the research project due to different personal features of the researcher. At times these were drawn upon to further the project but it alerts one to the issue of how much the stories offered do represent the 'truth' and

what would be the differences in accounts if the researcher had different characteristics? In addition to these more tangible aspects of gender, age and status other more subjective factors need to be acknowledged in reflexive analysis, so I am now going to move on to discussing emotional labour.

## **5. Emotional Labour**

It is now well documented in the literature that any type of research can involve Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour which refers to self and other emotion management in the paid workplace. This is distinguished from emotion work which is management in the non-paid arena. However, in certain research areas especially those that are sensitive or stigmatised - such as sexuality - the emotional labour of the researcher is increased. I will now turn to the role of emotional labour whilst being in the field, to demonstrate the influence that it has had on the project and thus highlight the necessity for reflexive research practice in this area.

- **Emotional Response to Being in the Field**

One expects interviews to be draining and tiring as you are constantly listening in a state of heightened awareness and sensitivity to personal stories and encouraging participants to discuss personal, private issues. However, emotional labour goes further than simple story elicitation and two key issues – that of being grateful to participants and emotional tensions – will be discussed.

I was incredibly grateful to the men for taking the time to talk to me and for being open and honest in their accounts about such a personal, intimate, legally grey and stigmatised area. They had to arrange meetings with me, take time out of their day, make excuses, cut into work time or cut into private time. Overall, I felt that they put a lot of trust and in some ways sacrifice in me so for this I am grateful, as their contribution is what will get me my PhD and allow me to base my career upon. However, these lead me to being overly polite and not challenging opinions. As mentioned earlier the men posted on message boards encouraging others to participate so as well as not offending them and their beliefs or ideas, I had to work hard to ensure that they only

posted nice things about me and the interview process – this was for all interviews not just face to face ones. Consequently, there is a link here to emotional labour and the previously mentioned process of impression management.

There have been times when I have been grateful to the participants and I have been more sympathetic towards them due to the fact that they have taken part in my study. I am also aware that whilst I am writing up I do not want to say anything negative about them as I am grateful to them for keeping to their side of the bargain - taking part – and I feel like I owe them something, especially as the majority of the participants took part to help me or to dispel negative stereotypes associated with their involvement in the industry.

In addition to this gratefulness, the actual listening to these stories placed my emotions in a dichotomous situation. My emotions ranged from pity to rage, happiness to sorrow, disgust to understanding, and laughter to cringing. At times I have felt immensely sorry for the men. I have been told stories of bullying and being laughed at for being a virgin, not fitting in and having no friends, wanting a girl friend and how commercial sex highlights their inadequacies and loneliness. There were also issues of dependency on women in commercial sex to achieve intimacy or for some men just to have touched a woman or have been cuddled. For me personally, I found this hard to think that some have never been held out side of a commercial sex encounter. This has made me warm to some of the participants and feel sympathetic towards them.

However, with these feelings of sympathy for the men, there were feelings of anger and rage. It was difficult at times to listen to stories from married men who were still having sex with their wives about their involvement in commercial sex. In addition, discussion that centred around the taken for granted access to women's bodies was at times emotionally problematic. In particular, one participant mentioned how "the quality of the girls went up with the introduction of student loans" – quality made me think of pieces of meat and being a student I could relate to the people they were talking about.



These tensions and difficulties have at time been hard to address and factor out of the analysis and write up process and however much one attempts to make sure they do not interfere with the research process it seems inevitable that they will seep in a some point. We all come with personal values and experiences, so these examples demonstrate that they can influence our research and so in order to increase the reliability of the data it is important that researchers factor these influences in by partaking in reflexive research practice.

- **Parallels to research / commercial sex relationship**

Finally, it must be recognised due to the nature of the interview, it possesses many of the qualities of a commercial sex encounter such as I was a young(er) female and we were discussing their involvement in commercial sex. In addition, there are many similarities between the researcher / researched and sex worker / client relationship concerning emotional labour. Both the female researcher and sex worker undertake a significant amount of impression management to ensure the desired result, for me that was getting them to talk about their experiences openly and encouraging others to recruit by posting on internet message boards and for the sex worker that entails client sexual satisfaction, return custom and possibly a positive comment on an internet site. It is well documented in the literature (Laver and Dolnick, 2002) about the therapeutic and listening role sex workers undertake especially regarding men's negative experiences of relationships, this is very similar to the tales told during my research due to my female and possibly young status. Furthermore, the maintenance of not challenging oppressive or misogynistic views is felt in both roles.

These parallels highlight the fact that the participants may also have seen the interview as a surrogate commercial sex encounter which may have impacted on how they perceive me and the encounter and therefore how they told their stories. Consequently this may influence the data and findings and the sexual knowledge that is produced.

## **6. Going forward**

In order to fully understand people's sexual practices, reflexive research is necessary due to the many places at which the researcher's positionality and subjectivity enters the research process. The examples shown here demonstrate how researchers' subjectivity influences the knowledge we generate through our work. However hard objectivity is strived for, bias still enters the project and this is especially apparent when working in gendered, emotionally laborious and sensitive areas – such as sexuality. Yet accurate research in this field is essential for progression and development but it is not impossible and can be done successfully. Therefore, in order to produce solid representations through research and to fully understand sexual practices, we must recognise our role as researchers by using the tool of reflexivity in the generation of participants sexual stories.

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