

'The Worst Thing is the Screwing' (2): Context and Career in Sex Work

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This article, and an earlier linked one, focus on the labour process of the modern Western female prostitute. Drawing on available qualitative research from the United Kingdom and Australia, and research undertaken by one of the authors in New South Wales, we argue here that the ways in which individual prostitutes understand themselves, the work that they do and their relationships with clients are at least partly informed by the discursive context of their labour. We seek to highlight the variety of discourses which currently give shape to prostitution in the modern West, and in so doing discuss the ways in which individual workers may engage with these discourses to make sense of their life-world — for example, whether they understand themselves as victims of patriarchy or as feminist activists. In this second article, then, our focus moves from the encounter between the client and the prostitute to the prostitute's career, and we provide a discussion of the various ways of understanding how and why prostitutes enter the profession, how and why they stay in it, how and why they exit this occupational field and how and why they understand themselves in particular ways following such an exit.

Introduction

In our earlier article ('The Worst Thing is the Screwing' (1), Brewis and Linstead 2000) we discussed the nature of prostitution as a service industry, looking in detail at the demands on prostitutes to define and negotiate boundaries between their working lives and their personal lives. We examined techniques for managing the commercial sex transaction in order to achieve this, and also demonstrated that this process is problematic, highly variable and constantly permeable. As we argued there, identities are negotiated in a discursive context where attitudes towards sexuality, work and leisure may delimit or enable the possibilities that sex workers have for establishing and developing themselves as subjects (Foucault 1979). Here we look at this wider intertext and extend our consideration of the prostitute's work from the client encounter to the career.

In this article, as in the first, we review academic research in the UK and Australia, and accounts from prostitutes themselves in these locations, as well as paying some attention to data on sex work in other geographical locations in passing. Again, our concern is to develop a rich picture drawing primarily on similar English-speaking, late modern/'advanced' capitalist societies for qualitative data, mostly from adult female prostitutes, and our observations apply to this sample

rather than to prostitution in other locations across the world, or to male, transgender or child prostitution, where conditions may be quite different and not in many ways comparable. Where our first article explored how identities are negotiated and constructed within and around the commercial sex transaction, focusing on the interactional features of identity construction, this article focuses on the contextual and structural features which influence this process. We conclude, as we did in Brewis and Linstead (2000) that identity construction in prostitution is complicated and highly locally variable, which we would expect, given that, as an industry, it is both global and local. The sex industry exhibits much of the variety in organizational structure and job content that many other industries display, and demands a variety of skills of the woman who expects to make prostitution a successful career. These may include marketing, accounting, business planning, property management, financial control, promotion, entrepreneurship, knowledge of the law, political skills, education, acting, counselling and human resource management, even without considering those more specific *ars erotica* upon which the profession is founded. Differences in legal and cultural frameworks, policing practices, political pressures and social and cultural institutions (including those of education and health) provide a highly specific local context for the organization of

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sex work, and ultimately govern whether it becomes a recognizable 'industry' or not. Labour markets, economic forces and the development of horizontally segmented and vertically stratified markets further produce an array of different possibilities for establishing and cementing professional identities.

As we argued in Brewis and Linstead (2000), self-identity in late modernity is primarily characterized by how the individual consumes, and what is consumed, distinguished by lifestyles rather than 'personality traits'. This has entailed a reversal of the classic assumption that identity is defined by what the individual does or makes, by their involvement in production. The consumption process itself becomes a process of symbolic production and reproduction. Sites such as sex work, where work and leisure, production and consumption, naturally intersect are therefore especially important for the understanding of contemporary self-identity. Here areas traditionally (p)reserved as private, such as the body, become commercially traded and are consumed as the boundary with the public sphere is rendered permeable. The focus of our first article was to what degree this boundary dissolves, and to what degree it is sustained, however leakily, for individual prostitutes. The breaking down/maintaining of this boundary is partly dependent on the prevailing discourses — linked fields of talk, text, practice, institution and action — which surround these sites of social interaction (Foucault 1972, 1979), and this is our focus here.

Commodification of the body is the conceptual prerequisite for the commercialization of sex, so we will initially give some attention to how consumption developed from the late eighteenth century to become the defining motif of late modernity, and how this development might underpin our contemporary understandings of prostitution. The way in which leisure has come to play an important role in modern life, as a deserved respite from work; the positioning of the quest for pleasure as a crucial aspect of this free time; and the transformation of consumption from an activity carried out for sustenance alone into an activity which is seen to afford pleasure are all important in casting prostitution as a consumer industry in late Western modernity. Very importantly for our argument here, it is also the case that these developments go some way to explaining one of the powerful discourses through which prostitutes understand themselves and the work that they do — that of prostitution as sex work. This then leads us into our discussion proper, of the discourses that currently surround the commercial sex transaction.

The changing character of leisure in modernity and the commodification of pleasure

Many commentators concur on the importance of understanding consumption in understanding contemporary Western society (see, for example, Baudrillard 1988; Bauman 1983; Campbell 1989; Featherstone 1982, 1990, 1991; Gardner and Sheppard 1989; Haug 1986; Jameson 1991; Mort 1989, 1996; Tomlinson 1990; Williamson 1986). It is frequently claimed that consumption is *the* major leisure activity in late modernity. Consumption is seen by Campbell (1989) as having begun to assume its modern characteristics in the eighteenth century, among the middle classes. His explanation for this relies heavily on his concept of 'imaginative hedonism'; the quest for pleasure in dreaming of how consumer goods might enhance one's life, and he places particular emphasis on pleasure as a defining characteristic of modern consumption (Campbell 1989, p. 69).

In particular, Campbell asks how pleasurable consumption came to be legitimate among an eighteenth-century middle class who traditionally had been strongly Puritanical and had therefore rejected luxury and embraced asceticism. Here he enters into a complex theological argument, beginning with the Reformation doctrine of Calvinism, a central tenet of which is predestination. For Calvinists, then, much of life revolved around searching for signs which would tell them whether they were one of God's elect. However, for another strand of eighteenth-century Protestantism, also Puritan in origin, this was intolerable, begging the question how: 'Infinite Goodness ... [could] design or delight in the misery of his Creatures' (Crane, cited in Campbell 1989, p. 111). Proponents of this stance had it that predestination rendered incomprehensible any concept of God's eternal love, preferring to suggest that humans are made in a loving God's image, that this love must be felt as well as expressed in charitable acts and, centrally, that there was pleasure to be derived from charitable acts. Importantly, this progressed in some tracts towards an 'altruistic emotional hedonism' — the idea that we should do good for the pleasure it affords.

Furthermore, Campbell also points out that the place of emotions in Calvinism itself ought to be considered in analysing modern consumption — particularly the melancholia which properly characterized those who sought signs of their elect status. Displays of feeling that pointed to a doubt that one was saved were seen to be an indication that one

was in fact a member of the elect. Furthermore, the self-mortifying pleasure experienced as a result of these negative emotions began, suggests Campbell, to be an end in itself. Thus he argues that the 'kindliness' of altruistic emotional hedonism eventually met with the 'self-pitying morbidity' of Calvinism in 'a common concern with the pleasures of feeling' (Campbell 1989, p. 135).

Here, then, Campbell identifies the way in which emotions became legitimized as a source of pleasure during the eighteenth century and therefore formed the foundation for the onset of modern consumption, as characterized by imaginative hedonism. For him, the key changes are cultural, driven by the various forms of Protestantism emergent during the Reformation. Baudrillard (1988) concurs with this position, suggesting that the basis of consumerist society is the replacement of a puritan morality with a hedonistic morality based on pleasure.

It is also arguable that Campbell's thesis of a shift in cultural values can be seen to work in tandem with the thesis that Bauman (1983) and others present of consumption acting as a 'sop' to the rigours experienced by the modern worker. The commodification of pleasure and the recognition of the right of individuals to enjoy at the very least a specific and sectioned part of their lives, such as the weekend, as a respite from possibly degrading and demeaning work, also created a space for the (re)construction of identity (Donaldson 1996). George Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier* noted that this was true even of the working class who found themselves out of work during the Depression of the 1930s, who would often spend their money in one single extravagance or big night out and starve for a few days, rather than eke it out during the week:

Life [on the dole] is still fairly normal, more normal than one really has the right to expect. Families are impoverished, but the family system has not broken up ... in a decade of unparalleled depression, the consumption of all cheap luxuries has increased ... You may have three-halfpence in your pocket and not a prospect in the world ... but in your new clothes you can stand on the street corner, indulging in a private day dream of yourself as Clark Gable or Greta Garbo. (Orwell, cited in Campbell 1984, p. 227)

Beatrix Campbell (1984) found a similar phenomenon among the unemployed of the early 1980s, in the same areas of Northern England visited by Orwell. This sectioning off of areas of our lives where pleasure through

the satisfaction of the instinct is allowed rein, and a different kind of identity work gets done, has significance for the recognition of prostitution as a consumer industry. However, it also has significance for the regulation of industry as a whole for, as Gramsci (1971, p. 297) points out, industrialists, and particularly Ford, have been concerned with the sexual conduct of their employees, because 'the new type of man demanded by the rationalisation of production and work cannot be developed until the sexual instinct has been suitably regulated and until it too has been rationalised' (see also Marcuse 1969; Burrell 1984, 1992).

Despite the fact that our understanding and appreciation of sexual matters have developed considerably since Gramsci's original comments, as Hawkes (1996) argues, the regulatory constraints and anxieties have shifted in focus rather than lifted. Now it matters not simply that there is an area of existence in which one can indulge and consume sex, but what *kind* of a consumer of sex one is has also assumed primary significance — disciplinary control is exercised through the labelling of lifestyle choices rather than via the imposition of legislation. None the less, one can always throw away lifestyles, stable relationships and sexual attachments along with received ways of behaving, just as one can acquire them without commitment or effort. Furthermore, in today's disposable society, varieties of the sex act not available through 'naturally occurring' relationships may be legitimately (although not necessarily legally) purchased from others — as 'plug-ins' to satisfy unmet unassuaged desires within the framework of a conventional relationship, or as psychological prostheses for self-identity. The law may not accept this, and it is also true that commercial sex may offer an added *frisson* for the client because it is illicit in other ways, but clients do seem to feel that it is legitimate for them to satisfy needs in their lives through payment for sexual services, to be someone that their everyday relationships do not allow them to be and to be released from daily restrictions (McKeganey and Barnard 1996, pp. 48–57; O'Connell Davidson 1996, p. 190; see also Brewis and Linstead 1998). This is entirely consistent with the historical development of self-identity through consumer consciousness. Clients buy what they need ... facelift, Armani suit, liposuction, phalloplasty, Porsche, blow-job, a whipping or bondage session ... to enhance their self-esteem in the most appropriate way (Hawkes 1996, p. 117).

As we suggested in Brewis and Linstead (2000), this persuasive account of what

prostitutes and clients are and do has been mirrored by the sex industry itself, with prostitutes being presented, and some presenting themselves, as business people legitimately servicing a social need and, as such, proud of their skills, knowledge, professionalism and altruism. We will return to this argument in greater detail, but before we do so we need to address a question which has been repeatedly raised by feminist analysts of sex work — is the labour exerted by the prostitute in fact essentially different from that of any other worker in any other industry? Can the same arguments apply to prostitution as to other forms of work? This also leads to the question of whether it is possible to envisage the activities of sex workers as feminist. The important points here are, first, that there is little agreement on these issues and, second, that the competing feminist understandings of prostitution are reflected in and constituted by accounts from prostitutes themselves — that is, they form part of the discursive context of the profession.

Sex workers as feminists?

With regard to female prostitutes, certain commentators have suggested that prostitution is not just sex work; that working as a prostitute differs considerably from working in other jobs (see also Brewis and Linstead 1998). Even those 'conventional' occupations requiring emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) are seen as much less demanding than prostitution; the prostitute is understood to be far more a part of the 'product' that is consumed, which therefore leads to her 'self' being consumed along with her services. Pateman (1988) takes issue with the 'sex worker' characterization of prostitutes on two main fronts. The first is her contention that 'labour power' in its usual sense is a 'political fiction' anyway, because employers gain 'the right of command over the use of the worker's labour, that is to say, over the self, person and body of the worker during the period set down in the employment contract' (ibid, p. 203). Likewise, in prostitution, the punter gains control over the prostitute's 'person and body' (just as the employer does in the contract with the worker), as opposed to simply being in receipt of her sexual services. However, Pateman's second, more significant point is that the *prostitute* is involved in the contract with the *punter* in a different way from the way in which 'ordinary' workers are involved with their *employers*. As far as Pateman is concerned, the employer may gain access to their workers' 'persons' during

their contract of employment, but is not as interested in this aspect of the contract as they are in the commodities that the worker produces — and the profit that these commodities generate. Punters, on the other hand, have 'only one interest; the prostitute and her body' (ibid). For example, Pateman (1988, p. 207) cites McLeod's work with clients in Birmingham, and their complaints about prostitutes being cold and mercenary, to support her case that there is more to prostitution than the simple sale of sexual services — for her, prostitution has to do with the patriarchal affirmation of masculinity. Pateman (ibid, pp. 205–6) also sees prostitution as different even from other occupations in which the body is bought and sold (e.g. sport) in the sense that the prostitute is paid for direct sexual use of her body, as opposed to the right of command over how she uses it. Finally, Pateman (ibid, p. 207 — emphasis in the original) makes the point that sexuality and self are intimately connected, so that 'when a prostitute contracts out use of her body, she is thus selling *herself* in a very real sense'.

There is also evidence from our review of the available literature that some prostitutes understand their occupation in the way implied by Pateman — i.e. that they quite literally sell their selves when they contract with clients. Inga, for example, says:

Personally it's mentally destroyed me. I've had nervous breakdowns. I've had an overdose. I've been that depressed I wouldn't go out anywhere. I didn't want to live any more ... I've cut my wrists and stuff like that. (cited in Cockington and Marlin 1995, p. 169)

[I]t mucks people's brains up totally. It's mucked my brain up totally ... *The worst thing is the screwing. The screwing of my mind and body.* (cited in Cockington and Marlin 1995, pp. 183–4 — emphasis added)

Pateman's position, then, rejects the liberalist interpretation that prostitutes are nothing more (or less) than sex workers, arguing that other forms of labour power are not intrinsically tied up with identity in the same way that sexuality is, that selling other forms of 'labour power' do not involve the direct use of one person's body by another, nor such an overt 'acknowledgement of patriarchal right' (Pateman 1988: 208).¹ This representation of prostitutes, often supported by their own accounts, tends to concentrate on the ways in which workers distance themselves (/their selves) from their work, as discussed in 'The Worst Thing is the Screwing' (1) and

in Brewis and Linstead (1998), and acknowledged by Pateman (1988, p. 207) as follows: 'the integral connection between sexuality and sense of self means that, for self-protection, a prostitute must distance herself from her sexual use'. Moreover, as we have also argued in 'The Worst Thing is the Screwing' (1), distancing is more or less difficult depending on the individual circumstances of the prostitute.

In her own critique of the 'sex worker' perspective, O'Connell Davidson (1994, 1995, 1996) suggests that prostitutes are engaged in a much more demanding form of emotional labour than any other type of service worker and that prostitutes tend to work very long hours, both to earn enough to render the work 'bearable', and also so they do not take enough time off as to make returning to work difficult. The prostitute also sells sex which is not fully commodified — thus they are socially dishonoured to the extent that money buys no 'escape'. Furthermore, the 'employer' in the prostitute-client relationship does not, suggests O'Connell Davidson, depend on the prostitute as mainstream employers depend on their workers — clients can survive without sex sold by prostitutes, but prostitutes require clients' payments to survive.²

Both Pateman and O'Connell Davidson, then, seek to make a case for prostitution being different from other forms of wage labour, and to undermine the power of the sex worker argument. Gherardi also takes issue with the sex worker position, but in contrast, implies that service work is much closer to prostitution in its true sense (the literal selling of sex) than the actual work of a prostitute in reality (which sometimes involves no sexual acts at all³):

Sexual skills are acquired and incorporated into the organizational role. The organization acquires command over the sexuality of its employees, within certain limits. Women with jobs that require, implicitly or explicitly, an attractive appearance — hostesses, saleswomen, receptionists, secretaries — are dutybound to be agreeable or seductive, and must be or pretend to be 'sexy' in their dealings with the public. (Gherardi 1995, p. 43)

Conventional service work is presented by Gherardi as often demanding sexual skills such that women especially may genuinely prostitute themselves to satisfy employers or consumers.⁴ Thus she suggests that we cannot simply sell our disembodied labour power in any profession, whether it is prostitution or not. Here Gherardi echoes Pateman. However, Gherardi's position not only avoids the sex worker argument's naïveté, but also does

not insist, as Pateman does, that female prostitution poses more of a risk to the worker's sense of self than (almost) any other occupation (see also Brewis and Linstead 1998).

However, it is not the case that there are feminists who see prostitutes as freely labouring in the occupation of their choice and those who see them as instruments of patriarchy — the discursive picture is a good deal more complex than this. Helpfully, Sullivan (1994) gives a lucid summary of feminist arguments for and against female prostitution, including the feminist arguments that marriage and prostitution exist on a continuum of patriarchal sexual behaviour (see also McIntosh 1994). Tabet (1991, cited in Sullivan 1994, p. 265), for example, argues that there is 'a continuum of forms of sexual service, not a dichotomy between marriage and the other relations implying sexual economic exchange'. Different forms of sexual slavery, as Pateman argues, nevertheless achieve the same objective. Shrage (1989) and Overall (1992) appear to be in agreement, Overall arguing that it 'makes sense to defend prostitutes' entitlement to do their work but not to defend prostitution itself as a practice under patriarchy' (cited in Sullivan 1994, p. 266). Sullivan, in a similar argument to Grosz (1995), points out that this argument has its weaknesses — simply, that there are no pure positions outside patriarchy and phallogocentrism or, so the authors here would argue, free of social or psychological repression. We cannot escape complicity because all struggles are bound up with what they struggle against, and are thus inherently impure (Grosz 1995). Not all struggles are equal — some challenge the dominant paradigm, some stretch and bend rather than subvert it, others are content with the status quo. Again, with Foucault, we would argue that this can only be determined by a close examination of the micropactices which constitute 'prostitution' in specific and located forms, as a field of power/knowledge.

There are also important disagreements between feminists who are sympathetic to prostitutes (see also Brewis and Linstead 1998). Perkins views sex work as empowering, arguing that 'female prostitution is a social situation in which women have more power over sexual interactions than in any other circumstance involving both sexes interacting' (Perkins 1991: 389). For Perkins, because 'prostitutes can set limits on the work they do, can acquire economic power and a knowledge of "true" male sexuality, they are a far cry from the common feminist assumption of prostitutes as the most explicit example

of female oppression' (Perkins, cited in Sullivan 1994, p. 267).

Again this construction of prostitution is reflected in accounts from workers themselves. A 1986 study by Diane Prince (cited by the *Prostitutes' Education Network*) found that call girls and brothel workers had higher self-esteem than before they became prostitutes; 97% of call girls liked themselves 'more than before'. An anonymous contributor to *SIN* magazine (the on-line magazine of the South Australian Sex Industry Network) supports this:⁵ 'I like being a sex worker because I am a feminist and as a feminist I am working in a profession that is empowering and is a celebration of my womanhood in a way that no other profession is.'

There are in fact several examples in the data we have reviewed of prostitutes defining themselves as engaged in work that is empowering, or in work which is a form of political activism.⁶ Indeed, Perkins' work was based on a sample of sex workers in Sydney and suggests they resemble women in more 'normal' occupations in this respect — although this research has attracted criticism for focusing on 'high class' prostitutes and therefore ignoring problems which lower-class workers face (for an illustration see Inga's account in Cockington and Marlin 1995). None the less, Sullivan (1994, pp. 267–8) suggests that both arguments have merit, arguing that prostitution is not 'inherently empowering' but that feminists should not therefore 'condemn female prostitutes' or the sex industry for failing to conquer patriarchy. She suggests that feminist accounts of prostitution need to respect what prostitutes do whilst also focusing on 'gendered structures of power in *all* work and personal relations' (emphasis added).

On this basis, then, as we also argued in Brewis and Linstead (1998), prostitution is neither entirely like, or entirely unlike, other forms of paid work. Like the prostitute herself, the category of sex work is a liminal one, existing, as O'Connell Davidson (1996, p. 194) puts it: 'in a space between two worlds; a space that is incompletely dominated by the free market ideology and incompletely detached from premarket values and codes [shame, dishonour etc.]'. Thus the identity work on the part of the prostitute is both similar to and different from techniques employed by the alienated worker to allow them to tolerate the rigours of the working day and preserve a reasonably healthy sense of self. However, it is also clear that the ways in which prostitutes seek to manage their identities in line with the work that they do may vary depending on whether they define

their work as oppressive and degrading, or on the other hand as empowering and/or as feminism/political activism.

Another possible discursive representation of prostitution is of these workers as sexual educators, counsellors or therapists, which is also supported to some extent by accounts offered by prostitutes themselves. This positioning of prostitution, as more or less an extension of the fields of social work, health care and education, is discussed in the next section, and is compared to the more conventional folk-devil depiction of prostitutes as the disease-ridden scourge of society (Harcourt 1994).⁷

Sex workers as educators

I really like that I am very skilled and professional at what I do and that clients acknowledge this and are grateful for it ... I like being a sex worker because the sex worker community brought the safe sex message into the general heterosexual community. I am a sex educator and proud of it. I show my clients how to have sex as safely as possible, no matter what type of sex they engage in. (Anonymous contributor to *SIN* magazine)

Prostitutes have been traditionally seen as being among the major sources and disseminators of sexually transmitted diseases — for example, in 1864, at the beginning of its efforts to implement legislation controlling prostitution, the Buenos Aires Municipality suggested that 'as it exists today prostitution enervates, sterilizes and even destroys ... all classes of society' (cited in Guy 1995, p. 48).⁸ However, in the West at least, there is certainly little substance to this myth, although the industry is not perfect in this regard. With the possible exception of some drug-using prostitutes, as discussed in 'The Worst Thing is the Screwing' (1), our review of the research suggests that workers in the sex industry in this part of the world tend to see safe sex with clients as *de rigueur*. For example, O'Neill (1997, p. 16) claims that empirical evidence from a variety of UK studies has 'shown categorically that women working as prostitutes are fastidious in their use of condoms'. Western prostitutes have also often played an active role in getting the safe sex message across to the wider community, not just to clients, but by campaigning publicly for safe sex practices. Support for sex industry workers through the health care framework has also increased dramatically, and the community works hard to educate its

members (McKeganey and Barnard 1996; O'Neill 1997, pp. 16–17; Van Beek 1994).⁹

Further to the above, sex workers are compared to social workers by Webb and Elms (1994, p. 175), who argue that education and counselling are a major part of the services that both groups must provide, and that they need many similar skills. Also, some sex workers report that they get great satisfaction from serving disadvantaged social groups:

I've seen guys with no arms or legs which a lot of girls would go 'Ugh' about. OK maybe I'm getting paid for it. But to me I get more enjoyment — if you don't mind me swearing — fucking a guy with no arms or legs. Not enjoyment. What's the word? Satisfaction. I get more satisfaction ... We have to be there for people like that. And people definitely don't respect us for that. Obviously I'm only fucking him because he is paying me. But I don't look at him any different. (Inga, cited in Cockington and Marlin 1995, p. 175)

From the research conducted by one of the authors in Wollongong, New South Wales, Gemma, a 20-year-old Greek/Italian of very striking good looks and one of the most requested girls in her parlour, said exactly the same thing — she was always happy to service the disabled clients because she felt that it was a worthwhile encounter which had some real social value. Moreover, Margot Alvarez, Director of the Red Thread in Amsterdam, now works exclusively with the institutionalized disabled (Chapkis 1997, p. 203).

Again, then, it appears that discourses surrounding the industry vary — and that some workers define their work as educational or as socially valuable in other ways, which informs and underpins the ways in which they manage and construct their personal and professional identities.

As with the discourse that constructs these workers as a diseased menace to society, prostitutes are also frequently seen as engaging in their chosen occupation solely as a means of economic survival — indeed there is little doubt that this is a major motivator for some sex workers. This discourse connects and overlaps with that which positions these workers as instruments of patriarchy. We now revisit these arguments in the light of an alternative representation — that of the prostitute as career professional.

Sex workers as career professionals

As suggested earlier, prostitutes are often cast as pawns of patriarchy, especially by moral

campaigners and feminist activists. These groups concentrate on the ways in which men use women's bodies and the subjective consequences of selling one's body. However, while some sex workers will see prostitution as one of their only options in making what they see as a 'reasonable living' (McKeganey and Barnard 1996), others see it as a positive career move and an occupation which they enjoy. They define themselves as entrepreneurs with freedom of choice of where and when they work and the kind of services they offer to their client base; they are proud of their skills and ethics, and their professionalism. This includes their sense of confidentiality towards their clients which, both in the literature and the Australian field research, we found impressive. We might also recall here the study by Prince (1986) in which sex workers had higher self-esteem and liked themselves 'more than before' they entered the industry. For some sex workers, then, the industry offers an opportunity for liberation rather than forced labour:

Many intelligent, self-confident women ... have chosen to work in this industry ... By depicting sex workers as either too emotionally crippled or too stupid to escape a fate which apparently any decent woman would find unspeakably degrading they [certain feminists] help perpetuate the sorts of patronizing stereotypes a true women's liberation movement should strive to eradicate. (Karen, law student and nude dancer in New York 1994, cited in Strossen 1996, p. 179)

It is not unusual for sex workers, as we have already seen, to claim their labour for feminism in the face of radical critique, but they may also connect this with an emphasis on its growthful dimensions. Nancy Hartley, quoted in Tanenbaum (1994, p. 18), claims that the sex industry:

provides a surprisingly flexible and supportive arena for me to grow in as a performer, both sexually and nonsexually ... an intelligent, sexual woman could choose a job in the sex industry and not be a victim, but instead emerge even stronger and more self-confident, with a feeling, even, of self-actualization.

As suggested above, for some this reported sense of professionalism blends with a sense of being an entrepreneur:

I'm a business woman. I try an' do ma best. They're payin' me for it and this is ma business. This is how I earn ma livin'. I don't jus' take the money and go 'och, fuck

'em'. They're getting what they paid for, that's the way I work. But only what they pay for an' no more. So I do ma' best. (cited in McKeganey and Barnard 1996, p. 88)

There seem from our review to be two significant dimensions on which the experiences of sex workers vary related to their 'career' in prostitution — the *business career* and the *moral career*. Neither of these has so far been explicitly considered in the literature as a source of comparison, but even a cursory examination of material available indicates that this would be fruitful.

With regard to the first dimension, the street population has a considerable shifting element of casuals, and in small areas like Australia's Port Kembla¹⁰ the whole population may turn over in a few months, depending on the season — the summer in particular attracts visiting workers. Also, the phenomenon of pimping, although not unknown, is relatively rare here, as it is in Glasgow. Consequently, women may move into and out of the industry at this level with ease; some may try it and never return. Furthermore, despite the higher incidence of violence at street level, in the industry as a whole violence is not endemic, nor is it more prevalent than in other sectors of society. Strossen (1996, p. 190) cites FBI reports which claim that 'the home is the centre of violence in twentieth-century America' and points out that one in every six violent crimes happens at work (of all types), including 8% of all rapes, 16% of all assaults and 4% of all homicides. Lamplugh (1996) makes a similar point about work in the UK — that workers are often subject to violent attacks — and she is not talking about the sex industry. Certainly, then, for many women working in the sex industry, conditions are less dangerous and onerous than those experienced by, for example, factory and mill workers.

In terms of career development, some workers move on to parlour work, others may set up on their own. One of the workers interviewed in the field research in Australia was taking a course on running your own business for one half day a week; another used her money to set up an electrolysis business, serving many people from the industry as well as a more general range of clients. Many prostitutes save up and put down a deposit on a house to work from, and may even operate more than one establishment (Barlow 1994, pp. 134–5). Such women may also act as a mentor to their staff in more than simple work terms — Barlow herself helps her colleagues with domestic arrangements, support and counselling.

Moreover, few women who are not self-employed seem to stay in the business after the age of thirty-five, with the exception of some of the street workers cited by McKeganey and Barnard; this is because, when in competition with other girls, older women may find their services in little demand. One way to prolong their business life is to specialize in services such as Bondage and Domination, or Sadism and Masochism (e.g. Blain 1994, pp. 119–20; Julia in Cockington and Marlin 1995, pp. 189–211). Barlow (1994, p. 137), however, argues that although 'the more organised women have a financial plan, with the help of a good accountant, many leave the industry with nothing to show for it'. We therefore have many snapshots of the industry, but we still do not know enough about how ordinary sex workers construct their careers over time. None the less, we perhaps can suggest that prostitution for some entrants into the profession is simply that — a chosen profession promising particular kinds of career development and progression. For others, it is a way of making money over a short period of time, not a long-term career choice. In any event, it is not necessarily the case that prostitutes are forced to undertake this work simply because of O'Connell Davidson's (1995, p. 7) 'dull economic compulsion', nor that, once in, they necessarily find it difficult to exit, or that they always see the work as dead-end.¹¹

The 'moral career' refers to the way in which women become involved in the industry, how they manage the process of having their first client, how they become accommodated to the fact that they are a sex worker and how and whether they come to satisfactory terms with their actions. Moira tells the following story:

my boyfriend's friend sat watching telly and said 'Look at them dirty prostitutes' ... and I said 'Just remember I am a prostitute and this is my settee paid for by prostitution and my TV and my carpet' and everybody looked at me horrified ... I was so horrified *in the beginning* ... the first punter just wanted to look ... I had these durex and I wasn't even sure how to put it on properly ... I had real horrible nightmares that night ... and I just counted my money, that was my comfort. (cited in O'Neill 1997, p. 7 — emphasis in the original)

Despite initially feeling 'horrified', Moira now appears to have come to terms with her occupation, in part because it affords her financial sustenance — and she is also able to justify her activities to others on these

grounds. It is clear from the literature that some, even though staying in the industry for more than a year, never fully come to terms with it and tensions remain in their working and private lives, and others, like Moira, adapt more easily (Barlow 1994, p. 134; Blain 1994, pp. 113–14; Cockington and Marlin 1995, pp. 170–1; Kerkham 1997, pp. 108–9). Some may decide that prostitution is what they want to do even before they try it, with great single-minded determination (Goodley 1994; Leigh 1994, p. 246). None the less, how the worker views their future and its development makes a significant difference to their self-construction and to the degree of self-reflexivity they demonstrate in their everyday activities.

Having reviewed the various discourses on Western prostitution, in an attempt to reveal their complexity and variety, we now move to consider the ways in which the social context in which the prostitute works may interact with/influence/give rise to particularly powerful discourses in specific locations within the sex industry.

Morality and the social context of prostitution

As has now become obvious, the morality of sex work is often called into question; responses tend to be culturally relative, and this obviously affects the self-identity of the sex worker. In countries like the UK, the legal system makes it difficult to operate as a sex worker and the work itself is seen as demeaning and morally reprehensible. Moral 'do-gooders' are inclined to see sex workers as a group needing to be saved and protected against themselves (Strossen 1996, pp. 179–198). This would seem to indicate that many people in this country see sex workers as immoral and lacking ability to make best use of their 'free will'. However, other countries, in Europe and elsewhere, accept or tolerate prostitution — although it is interesting to note that Sweden has recently criminalized the act of paying for or offering to pay for sex, but not the selling of sex.

Discrimination is also rife — both within sex worker communities and by the wider society against these communities. The hierarchy which exists within the sex work sector helps further isolate certain individuals who engage in sex work, especially drug-abusing prostitutes and street workers. Many police forces also adopt discriminatory processes in targeting certain groups for arrest. The *Prostitutes' Education Network* claims that, in America, average arrests related

to prostitution are made up of 70% female workers, 20% male workers, and 10% customers. Their statistics also show that a disproportionate number of sex workers arrested are 'women of colour' and that a large majority of these women are sent to jail.

Furthermore, police activities aimed at cutting down on prostitution (which tend to be mainly targeted at the street worker sector) cost many countries a lot of money. Again the *Prostitutes' Education Network* suggests a figure of nearly \$2,000 per arrest — with 100,000 individuals being arrested in America in 1994. Their figures show that cities in the US spend an average of \$7.5 million dollars on prostitution control every year, with New York spending \$23 million in order to try and control prostitution activity. Additionally, the decriminalization of prostitution has become a thorny issue, with moral groups claiming that it will destroy society while prostitute activist groups claim that it is their 'right' to engage in these activities, which they regard as 'work'. The United Nations passed a resolution in favour of decriminalization in 1949, and 50 countries signed this. This led to a decriminalization of the act of prostitution itself but retained the illegal status of advertising prostitution, promoting prostitution and living off such earnings. Whilst this kind of legislation may help workers to feel that their work is more legitimate, there is considerable evidence to suggest that, in practice, legislation is played out and operated by the police more as a game, rather than as a moral crusade. In New South Wales, coupling the decriminalization process with better standards of community policing has, however, helped to maintain supportive relationships between the workers and the public (Lazarus 1994).

Moreover, as implied above, sex worker rights groups are proliferating and gaining strength (see also Brewis and Linstead 1998). Some have set up their own Internet sites and actively campaign for sex worker rights. These include the *Sex Workers Alliance of Vancouver*, *COYOTE* (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) in Washington, the *North American Task Force on Prostitution* and *PONY* (Prostitutes of New York). This has made sex workers a much more visible and vocal group:

I think we're all prostitutes. Remember that! We all prostitute ourselves in some way. Selling yourself in general, presenting yourself. Not really sexually, but you know. It is one of the oldest professions in the world. There is nothing wrong with it. (Sylvie, cited in Webb and Elms 1994, p. 272)

To summarize, then, the ways in which prostitutes understand themselves and the work that they do, and the identity management that they engage in as a result, are undoubtedly influenced by the moral and legislative climate in which they work.

Bodies, selves and lifestyles

We have sought to demonstrate that the process of the construction of self-identity for the prostitute is an embedded process, one which is shaped by the institutions surrounding the profession, the social and moral climate of the time, the contemporary nature of sexuality and prevailing understandings of business activity, health, consumption and education. Opportunities and choices emerge, and need to be managed, both in accordance with different geographical and temporal settings, and in accordance with discourses of lifestyle, career, and health concerns. As a result, the prostitute's identity may vary from one which clings by its fingertips to life, heavily addicted, barely able to escape debt, involved in drug dealing and petty crime, in and out of court and subjected to the constant threat of violence from unstable partners, possibly with children in care and which sees itself as either hapless or guilty victim, to one which enjoys a high level of income, planned with proper financial advice, builds a secure business (in or out of the sex industry), pursues a health-conscious lifestyle, develops and shares caring and wisdom, provides a service distinguished by its quality, educates others, is active in the promotion of women's rights, and is assertive and positive in its self-regard. The emerging sense of self is, however, always developing through interaction, in which the identities of other interactants also simultaneously develop. Thus the sex worker's identity choices cannot be separated from those of other workers, clients, community members, the media, the police, the medical profession and social workers — particularly those involved in interventions in the industry — and the particular pasts and possible futures that the worker perceives and pursues through this intertext. As Giddens suggests:

The reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet constantly revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems. In modern social life the notion of lifestyle takes on a particular significance. (1991, p. 5)

For the sex worker, this process of creating the self in the context of a multiplicity of choices — made both by the self and by others — is also embodied to a greater degree than that which is common in 'everyday' life. Traditionally identity was interpreted as something given and experienced, which understanding would tend to construct the sex worker as patriarchal pawn — this is evident in certain feminist readings of female prostitution. However, with the contemporary shift to understanding identity as something created and negotiated within discursive language, image and action regimes, rather than fixed by rules, regulations, physical and cultural constraints, bodies have new roles and new meanings, and these new body regimes become 'open to continuous referential attention against the backdrop of a plurality of choice. Both life-planning and the adoption of lifestyle become ... interpreted within bodily regimes' (Giddens 1991, p. 102, cited in Hawkes 1996, p. 117). Sex workers both draw on bodily regimes in the shaping of their own subjectivities and modify and make them available for others — the body shaping self through appearance, dress, adornment and through techniques of giving and receiving pleasure and pain. Through their professional practice, prostitutes give these others additional elements in their lifestyle choices. Yet they also feed back into and change their own and others' bodily regimes through their discursive practice, their educational and social work, and their political activity.

Importantly, prostitutes' activities also complement the 'sex work' which takes place or fails to take place in the normalized sexual relationships of others (Duncombe and Marsden 1996). Hawkes (1996, p. 122) cites Marx in this regard: 'A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies a human need of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference.'

As Hawkes observes, and as implied earlier in this article, 'lifestyle sex' as promoted in the media continues to raise anxieties about sex for all of us, though now in the form of worries about sexual performance, strength and frequency of orgasm, variety and type of sexual activities, rather than through moral or physiological concerns — which were sometimes merged, for example, 'don't do that or you'll go blind!' (also see Brewis and Grey 1994). Sex work in its broadest sense is therefore something that all couples need to engage in if the physical side of their relationship is to work. Duncombe and Marsden (1996) give

an indication of how difficult this may be in practice, even without the media pressure on sexual lifestyles, as part of the challenge of keeping a long-term relationship alive, and how many couples opt for celibacy when this fails (see also Giddens 1992). Sex workers are commodified in so far as they respond to this performative need, to reassure others that they can have technically competent sexual encounters, even some simulated affection, yet they also fulfil more than this and in the process they subvert the activities of the public 'anxiety-makers'. For many of their clients, they allow and enable life to go on. Yet many of them pay the price for this reassurance in their own private relationships, and their constant struggle to maintain their sense of self-worth — which may continue long after they have left the profession.

Conclusion

In Brewis and Linstead (2000), we suggested that female prostitutes engage in differing types of identity management, which vary according to the way in which an individual prostitute understands herself, the work that she does, and her relationship with her clients. Based on a similar review of existing data from the UK and Australia, and field research conducted by one of the authors in Australia, our argument in this paper has been that the particular kind of self-identity which a prostitute develops and seeks to maintain is informed by the discourses available to her — i.e. that these discourses form part of the context of sex work — and that her engagement with these discourses may well vary over time. Discourses reviewed here include those which position the prostitute somewhere on the continuum between 'sex worker' and 'instrument of patriarchy'; those which construct the social role of the sex worker — diseased and dangerous or educator/social worker/counsellor; and those which construct her business and moral career. Our overall remit has been to emphasize the complex and fragmented character of the profession, to suggest that uni-dimensional interpretations of prostitution as always degrading or, on the other hand, always empowering (although this is less likely given the current moral climate) are unhelpful when seeking to explore and understand the labour process of the modern Western prostitute. Moreover, the ways in which individual prostitutes understand themselves are equally complex and tend to involve protracted identity work in order for an individual worker to retain a temporarily coherent and therefore functional

sense of herself; to be able to continue in her profession; or possibly to make the effort needed to move out of the industry into more 'conventional' employment, and, thereafter, to be able to edit her personal history in order to think of and present herself as a subject 'untainted' by her previous profession. In this regard, our analysis seeks to depict prostitution simultaneously as an occupation which has features in common with many other occupations (especially, we might suggest, those which involve interpersonal contact with clients); as an occupation in which the tensions characteristic of other forms of employment may be writ large (such as the editing of personal biographies following exit from the occupational field); and as an occupation which has its own distinctive and discrete features (including the selling of a commodified sexuality).

Notes

1. The exception to Pateman's argument is her discussion of surrogate motherhood, and her suggestion that this form of contract puts the surrogate's self at more profound risk than even prostitution would, given that the surrogate sells the right to the 'unique physiological, emotional and creative capacity of her body, that is to say, of herself as a woman' (1988, p. 215).
2. For a critical analysis of O'Connell Davidson's argument, see Brewis and Linstead (1998).
3. Pateman suggests that the most correct definition of prostitution is the sale of penetrative sex itself, fellatio and hand relief. Other activities such as B&D (bondage and domination) she defines, not as prostitution, but as 'part of the wider sex industry' (1988, p. 199). Pateman also implies that prostitution by definition involves the sale of sex by a woman to a man, because of her insistence that selling sex originates in patriarchy. However, this does not explain men selling sex to other men or women (see Browne and Minichiello 1995; Davies and Feldman 1997; Goodley 1994; Docherty's story in McRae 1992; Prestage 1994), or women selling sex to women, even though Pateman somewhat reluctantly acknowledges at least the first two of these forms of prostitution. Hers is also a very narrow definition of prostitution, not to mention its neglect of the fact that prostitutes often move in and out of sectors within the industry during their careers. For example, Roxy Blain has sold both 'straight' sex and B&D during her time as a prostitute, and her work as a B&D specialist involved catering for 'Fantasies rang[ing] from castration to baby fantasies to complete confinement and corporal punishment — and everything in between — *with the exception of intercourse*' (Blain 1994, p. 120 — emphasis added).

4. For example, one of the authors of this paper, while working behind a bar, recalls being told by her employer to flirt with the male customers because it 'keeps them happy'.
 5. At the time of writing the magazine is temporarily off-line and has no web address.
 6. This is discussed in more detail in Brewis and Linstead (2000) — see the section entitled The social and politicized body.
 7. It is perhaps important to remind the reader that the sources reviewed here refer specifically to Western prostitutes, and that the social and educational position and conditions of work of prostitutes in many other regions — especially Latin America, India and sub-Saharan Africa — rule out all possibility of educating or counselling the client, and often render prostitutes themselves a risk to the health of others. As also suggested in Brewis and Linstead (2000), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention *HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report* estimates that the rate of HIV sero-positivity is running as high as 80% amongst prostitutes in the areas referred to above (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 1994).
 8. Also see Hershatter's (1997, pp. 226–41) discussion of representations of prostitutes as 'a deadly conduit of disease' in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Shanghai.
 9. Nevertheless, access to health care services is often provided along discriminatory lines — especially in countries which operate 'registered sex worker' schemes. In Germany, for example, there are 50,000 registered sex workers who can gain access to a range of health care services, yet estimates show that there are over 150,000 unregistered sex workers who are not in such a fortunate position.
 10. This is one of three centres of street prostitution in New South Wales, the others being Sydney's King's Cross and Newcastle.
 11. There is a growing body of work which examines and attempts to model the factors affecting the ability of the prostitute, particularly the street worker, to get out of the industry. The work of Mansson (1998) is providing a basis in Sweden for the supply of support services, advice and counselling for those women who, for reasons such as financial hardship, drug addiction, exploitative relationships, coercion and low self-esteem, are unable to break the cycle of prostitution and establish an identity for themselves outside of the occupation. Mansson's work is particularly helpful in identifying the problems that those women who accept a negative view of themselves (this often having been established through abusive relationships early in life) have in maintaining a more positive self-identity, even many years after ceasing to practise the trade, when because of the moral strictures of bourgeois society they have to hide or reinvent their personal history.
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