Enhancing the Study of Sex Work

I write this as an academic who has focused on understanding the sex industry and advocating for the rights of sex workers in much of the time that Sexualities has been a space for the social sciences and sexuality to be brought together in the dissemination of research, scholarship and thinking. I have approached this reflection specifically relating to the field of sex work, or what has been called ‘the sociology of sex work’ as a sub-discipline. For this reflection I reviewed all of the issues of the journal, a truly fascinating and indulgent exercise, to track how sex work research has emerged through the journal. There were some 47 articles directly relating to the sex industry / sex workers with many more circling the periphery of the broad subject. The extent and nature of sex work research has significantly increased over recent years, again overlapping with the time that Sexualities has been a hub for airing these ‘new’ investigations, commentaries and empirical insights. Prostitution has gone from being viewed as a uni-dimensional activity largely about female street commercial sex or the ‘sex wars’ feminist debates, to being understood as the complex and inter-related economic market for all genders, sexualities, orientations, cultures, and spanning across the consent/coercion and voluntary/forced divides. As the discipline has developed it has become apparent that it is only truly interdisciplinary research that can understand the complex phenomena that is commercial sex.

Sexualities has been an important space where researchers of sex work feel at home and able to air complex and often stigmatising areas of their work to fellow peers and those that respect the importance and sensitives of doing research on sex/ualities. The journal has become a safe space, one where diversity and difference is recognised as an important and essential part of human nature and where researchers come together to understand the broader nature of human sexuality, it’s implications and consequences for individuals and societies. It is here that the importance of studying sex and sexuality is shown most directly across the myriad of journals that house sex-related research. Sexualities has certainly pioneered sex work research and from my assessment it has done this by developing core themes in the past twenty years. Notably there are four areas which dominate the research terrain in sex work: 1) labour, intimacy and pleasure; 2) the context of culture, migration and sex work; 3) diversity in sex work looking beyond female sexuality; 4) methodological aspects of doing research in the sex industry.

1. Labour, intimacy and pleasure

The journal has been packed with boundary pushing data and analysis on the detail of the experiences between sellers, buyers, organisers and the dynamics of labour, pleasure and intimacy. Recently Smith (2017) focuses on intimacy and sexual pleasure alongside the performance sex workers engage in with their customers. This type of work has only been possible because it builds on the pioneering analysis by scholars such as Bernstein (2007) in this journal which switch our thinking to the economic value of sexual and emotional labour, reflected on also by others (Boris, Gilmore and Parreñas, 2010; Hoang 2010; Collins 2012; Read 2013;). These thinking around the labour involved in sex work, the form it takes and the labour relations that create commercial sex, have fed into the broader area of the sociology of body work (Walkowitz et al 2010).
2. Culture, migration and sex work

Importantly, the journal has embraced the identity differences that intersect strongly with cultural context, citizenship status and the place in global economy that sex workers occupy. Mai (2012) explores the specific position of non-heterosexual migrants in the UK sex industry, flagging up the complex intersections that are echoed in the work of others (Miller and Nichols 2012; Ross; 2010; Garcia 2010). The journal has been pivotal in setting the agenda for the cultural study of sex work, with a timeless piece from Agustin (2005) which has been a stalwart article referred to in many works since.

3. Diversity in sex work

The journal has showcased seldom aired research on BDSM (Lindemann 2011) and professional dominatrix work (Pinsky and Levey 2015), transgendered identities (Ocha and Earth 2013) as well as men who have sex work men in a commercial context (Hall 2007; Atkins and Laing 2012; Smith 2012). Encouraging the reader to think about the buyer of sex rather than the usual focus on the seller Rivers-Moore (2012) takes us on a trip to the Costa Rican sex tourism industry, Huschke and Schubotz (2016) reflect on the influence of Christian morality on the legal changes that make it a crime to pay for sex in Ireland, whilst Liddiard (2014) reveals the stories of men with disabilities as they experience the realities of gendered intimacies and pleasure.

4. Methodologies

The journal has enabled the complexities of ‘doing’ research in the sex industry to be discussed in a candid and fairly exposing manner for the contributors, done so in the spirit to ‘keep real’ the realities of researching a tricky area of social life. Hammond and Kingston (2014) talk bravely about their own stigma experienced as researchers whilst Thomas and William (2016) flag up the very realness of sexual desires of researchers in these contexts. Exciting new arts based methodologies have been shared as a participatory and visual means of getting in touch with the voices and experiences of sex workers (Cheng 2012; Capous Desyllas 2013), whilst the complexities of the doing have been fleshed out in the journal some time ago (Sanders 2006).

The pieces that have been very influential on my thinking are Frank (1998), Brents and Hausbeck (2007), and Bernstein (2007) for their contribution to both empirical and theoretical developments over a decade ago. Frank (1998) for pioneering thinking around identity, performance and intimacy in sex work (the case of strippers here). Brents and Hausbeck (2007) for telling us about the little known legalised system in Nevada and placing the licensed sex trade in the broader context of tourism, leisure and late capitalism as the sex industry moved into a period of mainstreaming both economically and socially. At a similar time Bernstein (2007) paved the way for broader thinking about relationships within the sex industry, highlighting the importance of class positioning and the idea of the new ‘respectability’ and ‘bounded authenticity’ within middle-class commercial sex encounters. These articles have been pivotal to my own work and feature highly in commentary and debates over recent years, shaping the discipline and providing others with confidence to write what they see and move beyond the stayed boundaries of the binary notions of coercion/choice.

Reviewing these four key themes and my reflections on over 40 articles which have sex work as their key topic area leads easily to the conclusion that Sexualities has been pivotal in developing sex work research. The ways the journal has contributed to the development of the area is largely in making space for peers to share, and provide motivation and impetus for a sub-discipline to develop and
scholarly networks to convene where these subjects can be discussed, critiqued respectfully and theoretically enhanced. The journal will continue to have a key role in the shaping of debates around sex work research in the future. In particular scholars may find it fruitful to return to some of their own theoretical musings and commentary about sex work, which can move the discipline forward and build on the strong empirical results which showcase the voices of sex workers.

Reference list


Liddiard, K., (2014) ‘I never felt like she was just doing it for the money’: Disabled men’s intimate (gendered) realities of purchasing sexual pleasure and intimacy Sexualities Vol 17, Issue 7, pp. 837 – 855
Lindemann, D (2011) BDSM as therapy? Sexualities Vol 14, Issue 2, pp. 151 - 172


Ross, B.L (2010) Sex and (Evacuation from) the City: The Moral and Legal Regulation of Sex Workers in Vancouver’s West End, 1975—1985 Sexualities Vol 13, Issue 2, pp. 197 - 218

Sanders, T (2006) Sexing Up the Subject: Methodological Nuances in Researching the Female Sex Industry Sexualities Vol 9, Issue 4, pp. 449 – 468

