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**Embodying masculinity in female dominated research settings: a male reflection of
'doing research' in massage parlours.**

Abstract

This paper considers the male experience of conducting fieldwork in massage parlours; off-street environments in which women exchange sexual services in predominantly heterosexual monetary transactions. It critically examines debates surrounding the desirability of gender incongruence between researchers and their informants. By acknowledging the complex interplay of gender and relations in the field, experiences of power are presented as variable rather than fixed. Honest and detailed accounts of interactions with sex workers illustrate the complexities of embodying masculinity in clandestine and feminized spaces. The perceived benefits and limitations of gender incongruence are presented. The need to consciously manage and comprehensively reflect on the impact of gender, in addition to the complex array of power dynamics in the field is discussed.

Keywords

Gender, masculinity, massage parlours, ethics, sex work

Introduction

‘As she sat clad in the G-string she had worn on stage and with her legs on the dressing table, we became slightly mesmerised. We had difficulty in even remembering the questions we wanted to ask let alone getting them out of our mouths in an intelligible manner’ (Skipper and McCaghy, 1972: 239).

Skipper and McCaghy’s reflections of interviewing ‘strippers’ embody many of the concerns embedded in feminist epistemologies surrounding voyeuristic and masculinist research in to the feminine ‘other’ (Hubbard, 1999a, 1999b). Their account offers a rare male reflection on the impact of gender incongruence with participants during fieldwork, but does little to instil confidence in the ability of male researchers to responsibly engage with and contribute to debates of gender and sexuality.

Although not offering a formal solution to the myriad complexities of gender incongruence in the field, this paper recounts my experience as a male researcher conducting fieldwork in the female dominated and highly feminized spaces of massage parlours; off-street environments in which women exchange sexual services in predominantly heterosexual monetary transactions. This paper focuses primarily on gender, but it is acknowledged this cannot be dissociated from additional characterisations of ‘self’. I am male, but also relatively young, well educated, British, white, heterosexual and middle class. Interrogation by others of my fluid and intersecting positionality has however focused predominantly on my gender. At times concerns have been raised about my ability as a male researcher to contribute useful knowledge that does not, as Hubbard reflects (1999a: 233), simply ‘fetishize’ sex workers and their profession. Of the identities I embody, my masculinity has been of particular interest to colleagues inquiring how I navigated the oppressive hierarchies that often exist between researchers and their informants.

This paper critically considers debates on gender incongruence between researchers and participants as a starting point to delineate the power differentials encountered during the research process. It presents my interpretation of how my masculine embodiment effected my interaction with female respondents across

the massage parlours accessed. I recount that by utilising the performative aspect of gender identity, I consciously managed my interaction with sex workers and massage parlour managers. By deconstructing and assessing my performance of masculinity, I attempted to address elements of the unequal distribution of power that exists in the field. In recognising that gender is not simply something that one 'does' (Bohan, 1993: 13), but also something that is received and interpreted by others, I consider how participants responded to my own identity work. Even though I endeavoured to conduct myself in a responsible and respectable manner, I reflect of whether female participants perceived my male presence in this way.

In an extension of this analysis, I acknowledge that power is not unidirectional (O'Connell Davidson, 1998). Like Groes (2017:164), I experienced the inversion of power relations during fieldwork. Respondents were empowered by an awareness that the success of my research was dependent upon their participation. I was subjected to experiences that were designed to embarrass me, and women would engage in conversations that although jovial, were infantilizing and emasculating. Parker (2016) and Stahl (2016) note that humour at the expense of the researcher can be valuable in fostering rapport and reciprocity in the field. I recount how the loosening of structural barriers in this way appeared to broaden the variety and detail of the narratives and insights that respondents provided in to the social worlds of massage parlours.

In addition to responding to the projected anxieties surrounding my positionality, I have been motivated to write this article by the paucity of male accounts detailing the navigation of gender difference in the field. Whilst Ortiz (2004; 2005) and Thomas (2017) offer important exceptions, accounts relaying the role and influence of gender incongruence during fieldwork have predominately been provided by feminist methodologists and female ethnographers (Sale and Harris, 2011; Poulton, 2012). Poulton's (2012) reflections of studying the 'hyper-masculine' subculture of football hooliganism contribute to ongoing discussions of the merits, limitations and challenges of cross-gender fieldwork (Gurney, 1985; Sampson and Thomas, 2005; Enguix, 2014). It is noted, for instance, that gendered male assumptions of femininity can problematise female researchers' attempts to access, establish rapport and build trust in 'male worlds' (Horn, 1997; Gill and Maclean, 2002; Sale and Harris, 2011, Poulton, 2012). By drawing on my own

experiences of conducting research in massage parlours, this paper intends to contribute to ongoing debates on the merits and challenges of cross-gender fieldwork.

The research context

The spatial contours of a city's sexscape are far from homogenous as sexual services are produced and consumed in and across a variety of physical and virtual spaces. Escorting agencies, erotic dancing venues, street sex workers, massage parlours and private working flats are but a few of the various means through which sexual services may be acquired (Maginn and Steinmetz, 2015). A cursory web search further reveals a diverse range of sex workers utilising online platforms to advertise and arrange physical encounters with clients, as well as to mediate the provision of services 'virtually' - via webcams and chatrooms for instance (Sanders et al, 2018). This study has taken massage parlours in the city of Cardiff, the Welsh capital with a population of approximately 341,000 people, as its primary focus. Despite efforts to expand our understanding of the heterogeneity of the sex industry, as evidenced by an increased academic focus on male, transgender and internet sex workers and their clients, massage parlours remain sites in which many of the broad global themes that frame debates of sexual commerce manifest. Massage parlours are not an entirely novel research subject (see: Sanders, 2005; Cooper, 2016) but conducting research within them helps understand how this sector of the sex industry relates to a broader economic nexus of labour, migration, and ethnicity (Mai, 2013). I have endeavoured to explore the factors and processes that culminate in sex workers positioning themselves within Cardiff's massage parlours as a single sector and locale in a multifaceted and global sex industry. Further attempts have been made to consider the intersection of such factors alongside sex worker's accounts of the lived experience of the social worlds of massage parlours, and how this shapes the practice, governance and support of sex work and sex workers at a local level.

Massage parlours as research sites

Massage parlours are a form of indoor establishment in which sexual services are traded. They are often comprised of a street front entrance, leading to a reception and waiting room area, from which service rooms are accessible. Additional areas provide sex workers with spaces to eat, sleep and relax between clients. The massage parlours accessed were relatively clandestine spaces, but maintained a degree of public visibility, typically utilising shop fronts in urban areas. The *urban* is used generally here in reference to the spaces and places recognised by most as comprising or signifying the epicentre of urban and city life (Maginn and Steinmetz, 2015: 5). As Maginn and Steinmetz (2015: 5) outline, it is those zones of transition, industrial areas and discrete night-time economy spaces in which the trade in commercial sexual activities often thrives. Despite its relative visibility in populous urban areas, considerable terminological variation and ambiguity surrounds many aspects of indoor sex markets, including massage parlours. During fieldwork research sites were denoted with contrasting terminology; as massage parlours, massage and gentlemen's leisure suites, saunas and brothels. It is noteworthy here that sex workers and massage parlour managers resented the term *brothel*. This was due to associated negative connotations of dirt, disorder and exploitative practices such as pimping, attributes presented as incompatible with their own premises.

Throughout this paper field sites are referred to as massage parlours. Massage was presented as the primary function of each premises in the public domain, around which sexual services were negotiated at the discretion of sex workers. This reflects that massage parlours in Cardiff, like those across the United Kingdom (Cooper, 2016), operate within an ambiguous legal framework. Whilst selling sex is not itself illicit, living off immoral earnings and soliciting sexual services are criminal offences (Sexual Offences Act (1956). It is illegal to profit from managing or keeping a brothel; any establishment used to trade sexual services by more than a single sex worker. Vice and prostitution laws are however implemented selectively (Sanders et al, 2009), and massage parlours are generally allowed to remain operational so long as they do not pose a public nuisance and sex workers are neither coerced, trafficked or under the age of eighteen.

The four massage parlours accessed during fieldwork varied considerably. Parlours contained between four and nine service rooms, with up to fifteen women working at peak weekend times. Whilst one parlour appeared to exclusively employ women who embodied heterosexual somatic and sartorial ideals (Renold,

2000: 310), others employed those whose bodies would be othered within contemporary heterosexual ideals of feminine embodiment (Renold, 2006; Ringrose and Renold, 2014: 777). One parlour manager noted that “As a customer based firm we have to cater for everyone”. Some field sites had basic furnishings, with peeling wallpaper and patches of damp on walls and ceilings, whilst others were more lavishly decorated, with a range of luxury bedroom furnishings and accessories.

The majority of sex workers in Cardiff’s massage parlours at the time of data collection were women who had migrated from Central and Eastern Europe. Only three of the sixteen sex workers interviewed were British. As only one participant, a parlour manager, was male, my interactions in the field were predominantly with women. Research sites were accordingly experienced as female dominated and feminized spaces. Male clients were present during my visits to research sites, but my contact with them was minimal. They were kept in waiting rooms and moved around the parlours discreetly.

Critically assessing gender incongruence

The often sensitive biographies of women who trade sexual services in massage parlours, coupled with the highly stigmatised and clandestine nature of their labour obfuscates considerations of ethics and researcher positionality. Research in such settings demands an ethically rigorous research strategy (Sanders et al, 2009: 166-186) and feminist researchers have emphasised the complexity of gendered power dynamics that occur between researchers and their informants (Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981). The concerns surrounding gender incongruence are explored below, and I draw on accounts from my own fieldwork to demonstrate how embodying masculinity can complicate research in feminized spaces. I propose that although gender incongruence is not an insurmountable obstacle to ethically rigorous social inquiry, it requires the researcher to consciously manage and comprehensively reflect upon their masculine embodiment throughout the research process (Sparke, 1996; Hubbard, 1999a; 1999b). Crucially, this reflection should extend beyond the researcher’s perceptions of their own conduct, to consider how it is perceived by those they interact with. On occasion even when I felt I was acting in a responsible manner, my male presence, on reflection, was not perceived in such terms by female respondents.

The suitability of male fieldworkers in female and feminised research settings has been contested, particularly amongst feminist epistemologists (Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981). Anxieties surrounding the desirability of male cross-gender research often pertain to feminist efforts to counter the 'malestreaming' of women's issues across the social sciences. Feminist methodologists have highlighted the role privileged male perspectives have played (and in many cases continue to play) in constructing women as 'other' and the issues that affect them as peripheral and irrelevant (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996; Sanders et al, 2009). In response, feminist models of research have tended to reject traditional 'scientific' positivist (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998) or foundationalist (Stanley, 1996) approaches in favour of grounded experiential knowledge. Rather than striving to achieve value-neutrality, generalisability or to identify 'the facts', feminist methodologists have focused on reflexivity, consciously considering how the researcher has affected the construction of knowledge (Letherby, 2003; Sanders et al, 2009; Ackerly and True, 2010).

Central to feminist reflections of researcher positionality is the unequal distribution of power between the researcher and researched, and how it might be minimised (Maynard, 1998; Oakley, 2002, 2016). Seminal feminist texts (Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981) have at times emphasised gender symmetry between the researcher and informer as a possible strategy to reduce the influence of unequal power during social inquiry (Sallee and Harris, 2011). This notion is based on a belief that shared gender understanding and common sisterhood can help enable the researcher to navigate power differentials and social divisions.

The importance of gender in the process of 'doing' research, particularly in relation to the study of the sex trade, has been demonstrated by various authors. Sanders (2005: 26) felt gender congruence with participants gave her 'a crucial advantage' when studying off-street sex workers. Hubbard (1999a: 232) similarly perceived that his male presence, when trying to informally converse with female sex workers at health projects, was seen as an 'unwelcome intrusion into a predominantly female (and feminized) space'. Such accounts highlight the importance of gender in shaping interactions with participants, but as Groes (2017) discusses, researchers face a complex array of power dynamics in the field. His research with *curitodras*, a group of young women engaging in transactional sex in Mozambique demonstrates the array

of structural barriers a male researcher can face when studying women who trade sexual services. He cites race, gender, status and occupational differences as key barriers preventing *curitodras* from providing him with detailed and intimate accounts of their social lives during their initial interactions (2017: 158).

This helps illustrate Phoenix's (1994) assertion that gender symmetry alone does little to surmount the diverse differences between researchers and their informants in terms of ethnicity, age, class, sexual orientation and so on. Researchers have multiple identities that must be negotiated each time they enter the field. Whilst gender is important, researchers possess numerous identities, each accompanying them during the collection of data, with implications for the power dynamics between researcher and informer (Troyna, 1998). Sharing a gender with participants might be advantageous during certain types of fieldwork, but it would be an over-simplification of the influence of shared gender subordination to suggest that gender congruence alone might surmount power differentials and social divisions between researcher and participant (Oakley, 2016: 198).

This is in part because gender is constructed and performed as an act of everyday self-presentation. It is a fluid social construct (Deaux & Major, 1990; Lucal, 1999) and not something one has, but rather something one 'does' (Bohan, 1993: 13). Just as a researcher might reflect upon and manage their presentation of self in relation to class or sexuality, they can reflect and manage their gender identity. This is not to imply that it is invariably suitable for male researchers to conduct fieldwork in sites such as massage parlours, but to assert that there are a number of identities and power dynamics to be reflected on by all researchers.

This is presented as a conceptual starting point to delineate my experiences of power differentials in the research process. Although I encountered a range of power dynamics, those rooted in gender were found to be particularly pertinent; such are the broader social and structural contexts that perpetuate the subordination, marginalisation and stigmatisation of women who trade sexual services. Alongside the myriad characterisations of self, gender may be regarded as particularly salient when contextualised in research sites, that for some, exist as institutions of male supremacy and patriarchal oppression (Overall, 1992). Though such an epistemological stance is often refuted (see: Sanders, 2016), successful navigation

of the field - retaining access, establishing rapport, recruiting participants and collecting data - made paramount reflections upon, and the management of my masculine embodiment.

The performance and management of masculinity in female dominated and feminized spaces.

Few male researchers have recounted their experiences of gender incongruence in the field. Notable exceptions include Thomas (2017), who conducted research with health professionals in female dominated Down's Syndrome screening units, and Ortiz (2004; 2005) who explored the lived experiences of women married to professional athletes. Ortiz (2005: 265) notes 'embodying masculinity can become a complicated issue in female worlds'. He emphasises the importance of male researchers working to align presentations of self with female participants' perceptions of appropriate and acceptable masculinity. Both Ortiz (2004; 2005) and Thomas (2014; 2017) employed 'muted masculinity' as a means of negotiating gender difference in the field. This technique involved a series of dramaturgical strategies through which masculinity is disaggregated and subsequently reconstructed through the performance and management of verbal interaction, visual appearance and behaviour across a range of field situations. Ortiz (2005: 270) notes that gaining acceptance and approval in the private lives of his participants demanded that he avoided displaying traits associated with the hegemonic masculinity that dominates professional sports. Thomas (2017: 7) similarly worked consciously to reduce masculine traits disparaged by female participants, such as arrogance and aggression amongst predominantly male doctors. In relation to my own research, I felt projecting certain masculine attributes would have jeopardised the study in a variety of ways. I was most conscious of distancing myself from male clients, and wanted to construct my male self as a legitimate inquirer and keen listener. Women reported a particular disdain for clients who were impatient, loud and domineering. I am usually reserved in character and fearful of confrontation, but nonetheless consciously worked to avoid displays of physical and conversational dominance.

I felt it was important to avoid 'masculine' displays of bravado, but I was also conscious of power dynamics relating to material status and wealth. Like Groes (2017: 158), I tried to undermine my own

status as a privileged middle class white man in the company of comparatively marginalised Eastern European women. I found my self dressing in a particular manner, wearing plain clothes and removing accessories that I thought might exacerbate power differentials. I would remove my watch during trips to field sites. Although relatively cheap, its design mimicked more expensive designer brands and I did not want it to influence sex workers' perceptions of me. The unequal distribution of power in relation to the ability to acquire certain material goods was highlighted during a conversation with Brittany, a Romanian sex worker, who had spoken of her excitement having spent fifteen pounds on a new hand bag. I could not escape my relative privilege, but consciously avoided displaying luxurious items that I might use when conducting research in other contexts, such as my smart phone and laptop. During my previous research with professionals in the Criminal Justice System, I would often use my computer to take notes during interviews. In the massage parlours I resorted to the use of a pen and paper. Like Ortiz (2004; 2005) and Thomas (2017) I 'muted' my masculinity during interaction with participants. I however also engaged in additional dramaturgical strategies designed to navigate the complex interplay of power differentials in the field.

Securing access and legitimizing a male presence

Accessing and conducting research in the massage parlours necessitated that I, along with my female gatekeeper, employed a number of strategies designed to foster trust, reciprocity and rapport with sex workers and parlour managers. I was fortunate to be made privy to a significant amount of contextualized knowledge through my gatekeeper before, during, between and following visits to field sites. Though I had never previously entered a massage parlour, I benefitted from my gatekeeper's detailed understanding of their functioning in Cardiff. She had developed a familiarity with the rhythms and routines of research sites through her own work, and could advise me on how I might best engage with participants. She recommended what time of day to telephone parlours with certain requests, when it was more suitable for us to visit and so on. This support and guidance would be indispensable to all researchers, but her acceptance and trust within the massage parlours was particularly useful in navigating the gendered barriers I encountered.

I felt that it was crucial to establish and legitimise my male stranger presence (Simmel, 1924) as a non-client, interested in exploring the grounded experiential knowledge of participants as sex workers and parlour managers rather than acquiring sexual gratification. This was principally due to the fact that the overwhelming majority of men who visit massage parlours do so as prospective clients. My gatekeeper accordingly worked in an attempt to authenticate my male presence and social inquiry, initiating introductions to participants and accompanying me on the majority of parlour visits. Introductions situated me as a colleague and researcher from the university. I was presented as a professional and became associated with the support and advocacy services my gatekeeper offers. I was assisted in distributing a poster detailing my research aims in English and migrant women's native languages, and my introduction to the field was staggered over several months. Preliminary visits were used as an opportunity to build rapport with sex workers and parlour managers prior to conducting more formalised inquiry.

The acceptability of masculine embodiment in certain social spaces

It was vital that I became aware of the appropriateness of my masculine embodiment within certain spaces in the massage parlours. Research sites contained a series of rooms, each contributing to the successful functioning of the parlour. 'Front stage' (Goffman, 1959) spaces were accessible to both sex workers and their clients, such as the reception, waiting and service rooms. 'Back stage' (Goffman, 1959) areas such as staff rooms and parlour kitchens were however reserved exclusively for sex workers and were accordingly highly feminised. This gendered division of space made my masculine embodiment most apparent when in or immediately around back stage spaces. For instance staff rooms were areas that constituted personal and private space for sex workers that they used for relaxation and sleeping, as well as additional activities such as changing clothes or applying make up. The need to respect the privacy of these spaces was highlighted on my second visit to a massage parlour, as captured in my field notes:

'I had been talking to Susan, the parlour manager, whilst she made me a cup of coffee. I had arranged to come and speak to her about her perception of the support she provides sex workers through her

managerial role. She handed me my drink and suggested we talk in the lounge, a room where we could sit more comfortably [and where subsequent interviews took place]. As I followed her away from the kitchen, through the reception and down a corridor, we passed the staff room. Susan leant through the door - "Say hi girls". I was standing behind her so could not see in to the room, but a number of 'hellos' were directed at me. Eager to appear friendly, and to introduce myself personally, I too leant around the door. Doing so revealed three women clustered around a chair helping Brittany [who would later become a participant] dye her hair. She was sat topless with only a towel around her neck. Upon seeing me, she quickly raised the towel over her shoulders to cover as much of herself as possible. Although she and the other women laughed, it was, on reflection, awkward laughter. I had intruded their personal and private space'.

This is an example of how, despite my attempts to engage in the research in a responsible and respectable way, my maleness was nonetheless problematic. Regardless of my degree of comfort with Brittany's nakedness, it was obvious that she regarded my presence as threatening. I subsequently removed myself from the situation, and even when I was later explicitly invited to enter staff rooms, I refrained from doing so. I remained conscious that I was unable to ensure all women (many of whom were not participating in the study) were comfortable with my presence, either as a male or relative outsider. I would therefore recommend to respondents that we used other less private areas of the parlours for our discussions. These spaces were situated away from sex workers' more private quarters, and were only on occasion accessible to clients, though not during interviews. Initial introductions to sex workers and parlour managers often took place in reception spaces immediately upon arrival, and we would move promptly to kitchen or lounge areas to converse. Here, where my presence was anticipated, interaction with participants by and large felt natural and unstrained, and we minimised our intrusion on other sex workers who did not wish to participate.

The cultivation of a safe discursive space conducive to an effective research exchange was dependent upon factors in addition to the recognition of the spatial dynamics of a massage parlour. During initial discussions and introductions to sex workers and parlour managers I was often subjected to a series of positioning questions that served to establish my 'moral standpoint' on sex work (Sanders, 2012: 25). Power during my interaction with participants was not unidirectional (O'Connell Davidson, 1998) and

respondents were empowered by an awareness that the success of my research was dependent upon their participation. During processes of establishing rapport and reciprocity, women took command over our interactions. At times I was placed in situations that I would seek to avoid in my 'non-professional' life, providing respondents with opportunities to disrupt the structural power imbalances that existed.

An example of this can be found in my interaction with Basia, a Romanian sex worker of a similar age to me. I became the object of her own scrutiny when she asked "Now a question back to you, how do you see people working in this job?". I was highly conscious that my answer to her question would be important in her analysis of me. Basia was positioned at the top of the social hierarchy that existed amongst sex workers in the massage parlours. I was aware that her perception of me would be important in influencing whether or not her colleagues would engage with the research. This prompts consideration of Köpping's (2002) concept of a 'seduced seducer', whereby as Groes (2017: 164) describes, researchers and their informants can enter a process of 'mutual seduction'. My response to Basia's question had a visible effect on her demeanour. She began to speak less tentatively, and over the course of the two hour discussion that ensued she shifted from sitting rigidly upright, to casually lying on her back with her legs over the arm of the sofa, at times making jokes at my expense with other sex workers as they passed the area we occupied. This highlights the importance of being able to present oneself in a way that participants feel is appropriate. Answering Basia's question in a way that she found problematic could have restricted the information and scope of the narratives she shared with me. In this instance however, it further demonstrates how my desire to be accepted by Basia placed me in a situation that I would otherwise seek to avoid. My perceptions of 'appropriate' behaviour as a male academic researcher led to a sense of discomfort when speaking with her as she lay on a sofa in her dressing gown and underwear. Yet, due to the fragility of access and my reliance on her as a key informant, I did not question or challenge her behaviour in the way I might if interacting with a relative stranger as a 'non-researcher'. Basia's knowledge that I was keen to maintain access to the massage parlours gave her the confidence to humour me in front of her colleagues. This is perhaps an example of the physical play and mundane flirtation that can occur during fieldwork (Blackman, 2007), capturing the complexity of power and gender dynamics in the research process.

My intrusion on Brittany, as discussed earlier, demonstrates how I was unable to ensure attempts to act responsibly were always perceived in such a way. This was a key limitation to my identity work and efforts to navigate power differences in the field. It was evident however that power was not something that only I possessed. As the previous extract highlights, Basia exercised considerable power over me and the success of the research. The intricacies of gender and power relationships in the field can be demonstrated further by my interaction with Bonnie, A British sex worker in her forties. Prior to agreeing a time to meet for an interview, she had inquired about my research interests. Initial introductions by my gatekeeper often gave a short window of opportunity to outline my research themes and legitimise my inquiry. Bonnie was intrigued as to why I had accompanied my gatekeeper during her weekly visits to the parlour, asking jovially “Do you always have young men following you around?”. I interpreted her question as inviting clarification of the reasons for my presence in the parlour, having unambiguously cited my age and gender. Our subsequent discussion was sufficient in instilling a degree of trust and legitimacy around my attendance and inquiry, and she agreed to talk further with me about her experience as a sex worker.

Where as my male intrusion on Brittany’s nakedness was problematic and clearly compromised her privacy, Bonnie’s nudity, as detailed below, did not appear to cause her discomfort and was an unremarkable aspect of our interaction. Though I became anxious to avoid causing harm through my masculine presence, it was apparent that there was no single effect of gender in the field.

‘I had been talking with Bonnie [a sex worker] for around half an hour when a client arrived. Bailey [the receptionist] met the man at the ‘discreet entrance’ at the back of the parlour and accompanied him to the reception area to explain which women were on shift. Moments later, I could hear the sound of heels on the tiled floor as women took turns walking from the staff room to introduce themselves. Bonnie carried on uninterrupted as this seemingly familiar routine took place. Yet as she spoke, she proceeded to remove the tracksuit she was wearing to reveal her pink lace underwear. Reaching over the arm of the sofa she quickly grabbed a pair of silver diamanté encrusted heels and put them on. Only then did our conversation stop as she said “*excuse me one minute*”, stood up and walked to the reception area. I heard her introduce herself - “*Hi, I’m Bonnie, nice to meet you*”. Within a few seconds she was back sat on the sofa opposite me. I did not need to remind her of what she was discussing previously - she had resumed

detailing her experience of off-street sex work in London and parlour work in Cardiff as if she never left the room. For the next forty-five minutes we continued our conversation without interruption, yet rather than redressing, she remained in her underwear, removing only her heels before reclining in to the sofa'.

Thomas and Williams (2016) encourage researchers to reflect on how their own sexual desires affect fieldwork. Whilst my reluctance to prompt Bonnie to re-dress might be critiqued as voyeuristic, I felt that insisting she put her tracksuit back on would have been inappropriate. Her body language and demeanour, in conjunction with her enthusiasm to resume summarising her experiences of sex work meant I refrained from interrupting her. This is perhaps another example of my becoming a 'seduced seducer' (Köpping, 2002), or of the mundane flirtation and physical play that can occur during fieldwork (Blackman, 2007). On reflection however, I do not feel that Bonnie was motivated by a desire to flirt or provoke me in any way. She appeared comfortable conversing without re-dressing after introducing herself to a prospective client. The fifteen year age difference between us may have been a contributory factor in creating a safe discursive space. She seemed to view me as being of a different generation, at times offering advice that was maternal in tone. My masculinity was interpreted and responded to alongside additional attributes of self. Though my masculine embodiment required careful management, it was important that I evaluated the effect of broader factors, such as age, during my interaction with the respondents.

Benefits of gender incongruence

In addition to posing challenges during my interaction with the field, there were some benefits to my gender incongruence. Thomas (2007:10) discusses how the female respondents in his study often interacted with him through sexualised and innuendo-laden humour. At times his status as a young male led to him being described as a 'toy-boy' by female participants. In contrast to this, I was often infantilized during my time in the massage parlours. I was teased for being reserved and shy and at times my gatekeeper would involve sex workers and parlour managers in making jokes at my expense. These displays often coincided with introductions to new respondents and seemed to play an important function in altering power relations and roles in the field. My gatekeeper appeared conscious of the impact that introducing a male researcher

could have, particularly in such gendered and clandestine spaces. As I entered parlours she would routinely announce my presence saying *“I’ve got a nice young man for you to talk to, I’m here to make sure you don’t eat him alive”*. I was framed as someone that needed to be looked out for and protected and women often offered me advice and reassurance during my time with them. For instance during a telephone conversation with Susan, a parlour manager, I was reassured ahead of my visit to see her that *“The girls are all really nice in here, you’ll be fine”*.

My performance of gender and sexuality at times facilitated conversation, and helped establish rapport and commonality with respondents. Sex workers were often eager to discuss my sexuality, relationship status and marriage intentions. Presenting aspects of my more personal and private life helped distance me from the role of a researcher. Offering more intimate insights in to my own social life appeared to offer a valuable contribution to the research relationships that ensued.

My visible ‘maleness’ created situations during data collection that played an important role in influencing the power dynamics within the field. In an attempt not to interrupt the provision of services to clients, and to enhance their discretion and anonymity, I was on occasion removed from certain spaces. In an attempt to avoid interaction with clients I was hustled in to cupboards, or hurried in to laundry or near by service rooms to make way for customers who wanted to leave through discreet exits or to use the bathroom. This process of hiding me repeatedly led to light hearted exchanges with sex workers, who found my often confused response to these sudden interruptions humorous.

My own (and the university ethics board’s) notions of what constituted ‘responsible’ behaviour for a male academic researcher interacting with female sex workers meant that I was keen to avoid physical contact with respondents. My desire to engage in appropriate forms of masculinity, and to distance myself from clients shaped my interaction with sex workers throughout the research process. I had not intended that fieldwork would necessitate hiding in confined spaces with respondents, and at times women could sense my discomfort and anxiety when being abruptly hurried in to discreet rooms. I was told on several occasions to ‘relax’ and ‘not to worry’. Women would poke fun at my anxieties, and this became a talking

point and means of infantilising me. My anxiety and visible reluctance to be placed in 'inappropriate' scenarios was cited in discussions, and women talked to one another about me being 'funny' on numerous occasions in my presence. I was visibly embarrassed in these instances, but felt they reflected that respondents did not perceive me in a threatening way. I felt that whilst my 'maleness' was problematic in certain instances, the attempts to hide me from clients played a valuable role in establishing rapport and reciprocity in the field.

Masculine embodiment around research sites

I found my positionality to affect my interactions with the field when around, as well as within research sites. During fieldwork I would often meet my gatekeeper inside massage parlours and therefore entered them unaccompanied. This presented a particular set of unanticipated challenges that I felt were rooted in my masculine embodiment. As Hammond and Kingston (2014) discuss, the sex work researcher may experience 'stigma by association' in both their professional and personal lives. On occasion I was heckled whilst entering research sites and though I remain unresolved as to whether my experiences fully constitute stigma by association, I nonetheless found my 'maleness' to present challenges when entering and leaving the research sites. This was primarily rooted in my, and others' perceptions that men entering massage parlours are invariably thought to be clients of sex workers. My visits to massage parlours often took place in the late afternoon, coinciding with the local rush hour. I was therefore invariably seen leaving the massage parlours by motorists caught in traffic outside the premises. Though I felt such occurrences were a necessary part of my research, I was nonetheless anxious when entering and exiting research sites. As Sanders (2008) notes, men who purchase sexual services are often prescribed a 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1968) enveloping the stigma, shame and deviancy associated with commercial sex. Individuals who purchase sexual services are in some instances constructed as 'blemished' and 'ritually polluted' (Goffman, 1968: ii; Sanders, 2008). Their activities are omitted from what is considered 'normal' sexual behaviour, exposing them to 'an associated 'stigma' of fear, disapproval, rejection and shame' if disclosed to outsiders (Sanders, 2008 in Hammond and Kingston, 2014: 330). Living in close proximity to many of the research sites exacerbated my anxieties of stigma by association. When buying groceries or eating in the many shops

and restaurants within eyeshot of the massage parlours, I often feared recognition or disclosure as a client by those unaware of my research.

I felt managing the potential to be mistaken for a client as part of emotion and face work played a key role in fostering reciprocity in the field. As Hubbard (1999a : 233) notes, access to sites such as massage parlours is, amongst other things, dependent on the researcher recognising the 'reality' of sex work as a legitimate form of labour. Rather than protecting my anonymity by using the discreet entrances often positioned to the rear of massage parlours, I entered via visible street fronts. I believed that seeming undeterred by being witnessed entering massage parlours might play an important role in conveying my 'moral standpoint' (Sanders, 2012: 25). I felt that demonstrating a reluctance to be visibly associated with massage parlours and sex workers by using discreet entrances could jeopardise attempts to foster trust and rapport with participants. It could have signalled that I lacked an awareness of the 'realities' of their labour and social worlds, and that I wanted to publicly distance myself from their stigmatised activities.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have attempted to provide accounts of how I felt embodying masculinity influenced my experiences of research in the female dominated massage parlours I accessed. By drawing on accounts from my own fieldwork I demonstrate how gender incongruence with participants required that I consciously managed and comprehensively reflected upon my masculine embodiment throughout the research process (Sparke, 1996; Hubbard, 1999a; 1999b). In recognising that gender is not simply something that is performed (Bohan, 1993: 13), but also something that is observed and reacted to, I note how it was necessary to extend reflections of my own positionality to consider how others responded to me. As the account of my initial interaction with Brittany demonstrates, even when I felt I was acting in a

responsible manner, my male presence was at times threatening and unwelcome.

My reflections of the field note that power was not experienced in a unidirectional manner (O'Connell Davidson, 1998). Participants were empowered by an understanding that the success of my research was dependent upon their participation. The loosening of structural barriers in this way exposed me to jovial ridicule, but appeared to broaden the variety and detail of the narratives respondents provided. By drawing on my own experiences of conducting research in massage parlours, this paper has intended to contribute to ongoing debates on the merits and challenges of cross-gender fieldwork. It has been my intention to highlight that although reflecting on my masculinity was an important part of the research process, so too was my consideration of the more complex dynamics of gender and relations in the field.

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