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# YOUNG MEN CONSUMING NEWSPAPER PROSTITUTION: A discourse analysis of responses to Irish newspaper coverage of prostitution

Joseph K. FitzGerald, Brendan K. O'Rourke

## Introduction

In this article we look at how young men consume coverage of prostitution in Irish newspapers. This is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, because the media, and newspapers in particular, seem to be an important source of information for people (Meade, 2008). This is especially true in the case of prostitution, as the only contact the citizenry generally have with sex-workers is through the media (Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips and Benoit, 2006). In many Western countries consuming media is one of the main activities that people, particularly young people, engage in and therefore is the prism through which they view the world (Cushion, 2009: 125). Sex and sexuality is a topic particularly worth exploration because of societal concerns about the role of media in influencing sexuality (McManus and Dorfman, 2005). The study of how the media handles sensitive topics concerned with problematic sexuality has received some attention (Brown, 2002; Stenvoll, 2002) and the issue of sexuality in Ireland has also been addressed (Ferriter, 2009; Inglis, 1998). However, the area of prostitution in Ireland, and its representation in the media, has received less attention. Additionally our utilisation of discourse analysis is unusual, as is the focus on men. We set out to understand some of the key discursive strategies used by young men in framing their discourse in response to newspaper coverage of prostitution.

The next section provides a brief overview of societal and media discourses of prostitution. This is followed by a description of the particular methodological choices made in this research. Two prominent ideological dilemmas are then illustrated by the analysis of extracts from the data. Finally, there is a discussion of the interpretations offered and some conclusions are suggested.

## Societal and Media Discourses of Prostitution

Prostitution is a highly marginalised, stigmatised and ignored phenomenon generally, and in Ireland in particular (Ferriter, 2009; Inglis, 1998). It has traditionally been associated with deviance and immorality (Jones et al., 2005: 63; McLaughlin, 1991: 250). More critically feminist approaches (Raymond, 2004) have stressed the presence of a monetary transaction as alienating a woman from her sexuality. Raymond

(2004: 1174) criticises prostitution for being nothing more than violence against women, stating that 'violence is endemic to the sex of prostitution and traps women in the system of prostitution'.

Feminist views and theories have contributed much to the public debate on prostitution, as different branches of feminism hold differing views on the subject. Marxist feminism's criticism of prostitution is based on economic grounds (Kesler, 2002). Here the argument is that a restructuring of the marketplace or an 'overthrow of capitalism' (Beasley, 1999: 61) is necessary to rebalance the current sexual inequality that exists in society; a sexual inequality that is the major contributor to prostitution. Radical feminists regard prostitution as 'violence against women' (Scoular, 2004: 344) and they wish to establish 'all prostitution as a violation of women's human rights' (Scoular, 2004: 344). Both Marxists and radical feminists regard prostitution as sexual domination (Outshoorn, 2001: 472). However, a fundamental difference between the two is that radical feminists believe women are coaxed into prostitution in an act of 'sexual slavery' (Scoular, 2004: 344), whereas Marxist feminists believe that 'the economy' (Beasley, 1999: 61) forces women into prostitution because of the inherent inequalities within its very structure.

A rival feminist discourse emerged in the 1980s, loosely associated with liberal feminism, which contends that 'prostitution can be a profession: a sexual service provided by women' (Outshoorn, 2001: 474). Scoular (2004: 347) too notes a movement of sex workers that formed in response to feminist refusals to view prostitution as work. This recognition of prostitution as a profession, which Outshoorn (2001: 474) calls 'the sex-work discourse', allows for arguments of tolerance and the viewing of prostitution as a legitimate form of employment. Sanders (2008: 713) argues that moral objections continue to suppress the rights of prostitutes, with such policies forcing sex workers to continue to work in the 'unregulated shadow sex economies and be faced with increased dangers, a lack of protection and citizenship rights'. Furthermore, liberal feminists argue that 'contrary to some of the most common myths, women can also enjoy commercial sex and often without any emotional involvement' (Kontula, 2008: 610).

Media coverage of prostitution can be seen as part of its general coverage of sexuality. Some stress how the media has traditionally supported a hegemonic masculinity and a submissive femininity (Patterson and Elliott, 2002: 239). On the other hand Gould (1992: 136) notes that the presence of erotica in advertising could cause attitude changes that favour non-violent and non-degrading sexual behaviour. Elliott et al. (1995: 213) too argue that overt sexuality in advertising can positively transform the language of sexuality, as it can allow men and women to share an emancipatory choice of consumption meanings.

More specifically prostitution tends to be dealt with in the context of specific cases by the media, rather than being dealt with as a broader, more generalised topic. Studies done of print media's coverage of prostitution (Stenvoll, 2002; Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips and Benoit, 2006) found a number of prominent themes tend to occur in the coverage. These themes include depicting prostitution as a problem of public order, heavily associating prostitution with illegal trades, most notably crime and drugs, and the framing of sex workers as moral pollutants. Exaggerated word usage was found to be prevalent, with such words as 'invasion' or 'swarms of people' being common (Stenvoll, 2002: 153). McLaughlin (1991: 253) argues that some forms of

media, in aligning prostitution with danger, put the responsibility for that danger on the prostitute: 'She becomes a danger to herself, a danger to others, and an accomplice to the dangerous acts of others.'

### **Method**

The central research question of this empirical study was: how do young men consume newspaper coverage of prostitution?

Focus groups were chosen as they allow discourses to emerge 'on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment' (Krueger, 1994: 6). The ability of focus groups to produce discourse in the area of sexuality was shown by Elliott et al. (1995) and Elliott and Elliott (2005). Advice on the use of focus group data for discourse analysis was gleaned from Freeman (2009), Puchta and Potter (2004) and Frith (2000). Though the research focus is on young men's construction of what is in the media, data was gathered using both a men-only group and also a mixed-gender group – this was because male reader's constructions of the media they consume is not merely done in a single sex world. The mixed-gender group was made up of eight participants – four male and four female – who we name here as John, David, Frank, Mark, Lisa, Maria, Clara and Orla. The men-only focus group was made up of seven participants who we name here as Eric, George, Martin, Barry, Wayne, Alan and Adam. Both focus groups also contained a moderator. Focus group talk on the issue was stimulated using five newspaper articles (detailed in Appendix 1). The pieces were selected to stimulate a variety of conversations on the topic of prostitution, in an attempt stimulate a diversity discourse.

As O'Rourke (2009) points out, discourse analysis has many varieties but the main inspirations for the analysis used here are the eclectic but interaction-orientated and language-focused approaches of Potter and Wetherell (1987), Elliott et al. (1995) and Wood and Kroger (2000).

### **Analysis**

In our interpretation of the data presented here we focus on illustrating two ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988) that seem important in the way the young men discuss the newspaper articles on prostitution. Ideological dilemmas are ways of constructing a representation of reality that focuses attention on oppositions, and perhaps a spectrum in between those opposites, to the exclusion of other dimensions. For example, discussing criminal behaviour as 'bad' or 'mad', focuses on personality-based aspects of criminal activity to the exclusion of situational aspects of the same phenomenon. We are not claiming that identifying a particular ideological dilemma reveals it to be bad or repressive. Indeed without ideological dilemmas it would be very difficult to grapple with many issues at all. Therefore rather than taking an a priori critical stance towards any particular discourse, we follow Foucault (1980) in believing discourses are generally powerful, but whether they are necessarily liberating or repressive is difficult to know without a detailed study of how that discourse is used in a particular circumstance.

Our analysis discusses two prominent dilemmas that we found evident in the young men's discourse. The first theme we discuss below illustrates the men discussing prostitution as a phenomenon that occurs at a distance from themselves – be that as involving different people or in different geographical areas. The second

theme sees the men struggling to categorise prostitution, which subsequently sees them try to distinguish whether prostitution is a forced or voluntary profession.

### *The 'Us' versus 'Them' Dilemma*

In both focus groups those engaged in any way in prostitution – as prostitutes, as their customers, their regulators or even those who might object to their trade – were distanced from the 'us' of the focus group. This is illustrated in Exhibit 1, which comes from a mixed-gender focus group and is stimulated by an article about the sex trade in Kerry, a rural region of Ireland outside the urban environment in which these focus groups took place.

#### **Exhibit 1**

[23] Orla: And how come they're ((the prostitutes)) all from other countries, like, do you know what I mean?

[24] Frank: It's a bit weird that it's in Kerry as well isn't it? (laughing)

[25] Lisa: You wonder why, like, it's getting so big. Like why Irish men would want that? I'm thinking, like, if it's getting, (.) if it's growing quickly [in the last year]

[26] Frank: [In Kerry]

[27] Lisa: then the men in Kerry, and in other villages in Ireland, then men must be liking it

*Source: Transcript from 60-minute mixed-gender focus group detailed in Author (2009). Transcription notation used is detailed in Appendix 2.*

In Turn 23 Orla asks about the prostitutes: 'how come they're all from other countries', thereby distancing them from herself. Frank also creates distance between the focus group members in the urban environment of Dublin and the prostitution taking place in the less densely populated county of Kerry. In Turn 25 Lisa focuses on the gender – not hers – of those 'Irish men' wanting 'that'. Before Lisa can finish Frank is quick to stress the different location of the problem by overlapping his qualification 'In Kerry' in Turn 26. As Lisa follows up her explanation of rapid growth with accepting that the demand for prostitutes focused on in the newspaper article are in distant and non-urban 'Kerry, and in other villages'. Despite being a readily available resource for talking about prostitution it is here in the early turns of the mixed-gender focus group that the issue that the male demand for prostitution is raised by a woman whose gender can easily distance her from that aspect of prostitution. The construction of the male demand as specifically from Kerry, and 'other villages', is a strained one that hints at the importance of the distancing of the group members from prostitution.

This distancing work is seen again in Exhibit 2 from later in the mixed-gender focus group, which discusses the possibility of prostitution becoming legal in Ireland.

#### **Exhibit 2**

[92] Frank: I think there would be uproar if they brought that in. Remember when Ann Summers opened there about ten years ago, and people went mental because it was opening opposite the GPO. So I'd say if prostitution was legal (.)

[93] John: Remember when Stringfellows opened up, and that was closed down rapidly

[94] Frank: What?

[95] Lisa: Stringfellows ((a lap-dance club))

[96] Frank: Oh yeah

[97] David: Like even with the strip-clubs, even though they're legal, there's still problems with controlling them, because they have a lot of foreign workers that mightn't be regulated and brought in for the same reason. Might be prostitutes but they're slaves, it would seem pretty much, you know what I mean. They're working in these permanent, and their passports are taken off them. So if they can't regulate lap-dance clubs, how, what hope do they have of regulating brothels and that, you know what I mean.

[98] John: Especially in our society with the drinking, people getting drunk and violent and such

[99] David: Obviously, it's proven to work in different societies. Like Germany, as well, one of the biggest brothels in the world opened up before the world cup.

*Source: Transcript from 60-minute mixed-gender focus group detailed in Author (2009). Transcription notation used is detailed in Appendix 2.*

Frank begins this exhibit by talking about how 'people went mental' when an Ann Summers sex store opened in Dublin. So the very idea of prostitution ever being legalised appears to be implausible to Frank. 'Uproar' would ensue, not from Frank but from 'people'. John then appears to support Frank's claim, referring to the protests over the Stringfellows lap-dancing club when it opened up in the centre of Dublin. David then refers to the inability of the authorities to regulate lap-dancing clubs. 'If they can't regulate lap-dance clubs' (Turn 97) then there is no possibility of regulating legalised prostitution. He does not express any personal objection to the legalisation of prostitution, but questions the viability of such a move because of the frailties of others. John does initially seem to take a more involved role when he begins Turn 98 talking of 'our society' but it seems the 'people getting drunk and violent and such' are unknown. In the final turn of this exhibit, David accepts that 'it's proven to work in different societies' (Turn 99). The participants discuss the frailties of society and its stakeholders, rather than give definitive confirmation or rejection of a personal stance, and only once (Turn 98) do they declare that society to be theirs. This is a subtle tool that allows them to distance prostitution from them rather than bring it closer.

Exhibit 3 comes from the men-only focus group and is a discussion centring on what should be done to deal with the issue of prostitution.

### Exhibit 3

[386] Barry: Well my point I'm getting to is if, if it happens in certain countries and it's legalised and it's safe, then if it's so apparent in Ireland maybe the same should be done. At least then it would take the smut, the sleaze and the danger away from it

[387] Martin: Yeah but look what happened to Amsterdam. That's just regarded as a dingy old dump

[388] George: And it's seen as a gateway to get into other

[389] Martin: Yeah exactly, that place is full of drugs and everything, smugglers and that kind of thing

[390] Barry: Well it's only, the plus side of that is at least if prostitution is occurring, at least it's safe, you know they're tested or whatever, the prostitutes are safe themselves and people who use prostitutes are safe

[391] Eric: I think we're forgetting that they're people here, not prostitutes

[392] Barry: They are people, exactly

[393] Eric: We need to look at why they've become prostitutes and I think a lot of them are, they're easily lead, they're weak

*Source: Transcript from 61-minute focus group of men-only focus group detailed in Author (2009). Transcription notation used is detailed in Appendix 2.*

Again, this time in the men-only focus, we see how the 'them' involved in prostitution is distanced from the members of the focus group. Turn 386 refers to prostitution as something 'if it happens in certain countries' and it is very tentatively argued then maybe 'if it's so apparent in Ireland maybe the same should be done'. The hedging stresses the uncertain knowledge of the speaker and reference to 'the smut, the sleaze and the danger' also adds to the distance. Martin, in Turn 387 offices further distance with his introduction of Amsterdam as 'just regarded as a dingy old dump'. George in Turn 388 builds on this distancing by pointing out how Amsterdam 'is seen' – note the distancing from any direct knowledge or 'gateway' to the very far away world of 'other'. This other is specified somewhat but also made strange as Martin comes back in Turn 389 as 'drugs and everything, smugglers and that kind of thing': the 'drugs' and 'smugglers' are specified but distant and the 'and everything' and 'that sort of thing' are even more alien. Turn 391 sees what might appear to be a narrowing of the gap between those involved in prostitution and the group but the personhood of those recalled turns out to be confined to the prostitutes – one would guess constructed as not of the gender of anyone in this men-only group. Furthermore Turn 391's wording reveals a dichotomy; 'they're people here, not prostitutes' (Turn 391). Furthermore in Turn 393 it is clear that the people that have 'become prostitutes', 'a lot of them are, they're easily lead, they're weak'.

#### *The Active Subjects or Subdued Slaves Dilemma*

Exhibit 4 comes from the mixed-gender focus group and sees the group having a discussion centring on whether a prostitute has a choice about entering or leaving the profession.

#### **Exhibit 4**

[212] David: Most of the prostitute's I'd say are trafficked in. Any time you read about it, it's always just foreign girls. And the problem with the likes of Baggot Street and stuff like that, the big scare is that pimps are trafficking people in. If you clamp down on the pimps, you're kind of clamping down on the problem. I don't think it's fair to prosecute them girls that are being trafficked in, but it's very hard to distinguish

[213] Lisa: How do you prove they've been trafficked in?

*Source: Transcript from 60-minute focus group of mixed-gender detailed in Author (2009). Transcription notation used is detailed in Appendix 2.*



David makes the link between prostitution and trafficking, saying ‘Most of the prostitutes I’d say are trafficked in.’ David also refers in this turn to ‘pimps’, suggesting that they are the reason for the sex industry so that to ‘clamp down on the pimps’ would be ‘clamping down on the problem’. This is clearly a different construction of the problem than that in Exhibit 1 above. The young men’s discourse focuses on the organisational role of the men, in the form of pimps, rather than on the role of men in the form of demand. The problem is constructed as one of the lack of freedom of choice for the prostitutes, rather than resulting from the free choice of men that hire prostitutes.

Exhibit 5 is from the men-only focus group and involves the group trying to categorise what exactly prostitution is.

### Exhibit 5

[563] Alan: I don’t think prostitution should be viewed as violence against women ‘cause it’s not that

[564] Barry: If it’s consent, if they didn’t consent it wouldn’t be prostitution, it would be rape

[565] Wayne: Yeah, well what lads are going to come, not just rich millionaires who just want to get away from their wife?

[566] George: You see you don’t know because it’s so underground, you can never know truly, you can only sort of guess at it

[567] Alan: You can’t view all of it though as violence against women, it’s like anything. Like you could say, I don’t know a stupid example but, you could say a football match, if there is crowd trouble at a football match you could say alright well no crowd can come to this match now because of crowd trouble. You can’t stereotype everything

*Source: Transcript from 61-minute focus group of men-only focus group detailed in Author (2009). Transcription notation used is detailed in Appendix 2.*

Alan opens up an exploration of what prostitution is in Turn 563 by stating ‘I don’t think prostitution should be viewed as violence against women’. Turn 564, from Barry, builds on what Alan said by categorising prostitution as consensual sex. Wayne’s turn is rather ambiguous: On the one hand by asking ‘what lads are going to come, not just rich millionaires who just want to get away from their wife?’ (Turn 565) he is raising the issue of male consumers. On the other hand, his contribution maybe reifies that demand by implying the inevitability of demand from the ‘rich millionaires who just want to get away from their wife’. Indeed the mention of riches may provide a source of explanation of the consensual selling of sex by freely choosing prostitutes. In any case the issue of male demand, even if implied in Turn 565, is not taken up. Instead whether prostitution is free or forced seems to be the unknown referred to in Turn 566: ‘You see you don’t know because it’s so underground, you can never know truly, you can only sort of guess at it.’ This ignorance allows the conclusion in Turn 567 ‘You can’t view all of it though as violence against women’.

Exhibit 6 comes from the men-only group with the group debating a prostitute’s criminal record.



**Exhibit 6**

[576] Barry: Yeah, but there's a lot of difference between a lap dance and full blown sex like. I think though, in this article, it's interesting how they said people not giving them jobs 'cause they were prostitutes

[577] George: Well it's because of their criminal records, not because they're prostitutes, I mean if they consciously made a decision to go out and break the law then they should have a criminal record, I mean that's the law they broke

[578] Martin: I think a lot of them, they don't want to be in the industry, it's sort of their last resort and they're down on their luck or whatever

[579] George: As what you were talking about earlier I think that it's important that we separate the two (prostitution and trafficking) and if they consciously make the decision to go into the industry they are breaking the law

*Source: Transcript from 61-minute focus group of men-only focus group detailed in Author (2009). Transcription notation used is detailed in Appendix 2.*

Turn 567 highlights a topic raised in the stimulus piece of newspaper coverage that discusses how people who were involved in prostitution find it difficult to find employment after they have left the profession. This in itself again can be read as a choice issue, as job discrimination could be seen as an unfair constraint on the woman's choice to be a prostitute. The next turn makes it clear that individual responsibility and choice are indeed what are being talked about: George points out that it is not because of who they are but 'if they consciously made a decision to go out and break the law then they should have a criminal record' (Turn 568). When complicating factors regarding the individuals' choices are introduced the importance, constructed in Exhibit 5, of distinguishing between the issues, of free versus forced, is explicitly invoked. It is important to note that this construction cannot just be attributed to one speaker but is a feature of the collective interaction of the group.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Two ideological dilemmas were evident when analysing how young men consume newspaper coverage of prostitution. The theme of distancing demonstrates the men consciously constructing prostitution in places – for example Kerry, Germany or Amsterdam – and involving individuals – for example foreign women being trafficked in – that were far removed from themselves. The second theme saw the men grappling with what they argued prostitution to be, that is, is prostitution a forced or voluntary profession? In constructing it as a forced profession, the men can be seen linking prostitution to human trafficking. In constructing it as a voluntary profession, the men can be seen trying to separate sex with a prostitute and forced sex, or rape, in general.

In constructing prostitution as a distant phenomenon it may allow the men to be critical of many aspects of prostitution without implicating themselves in the criticism. This appears especially prevalent in their criticism of the male demand for prostitution. Constructing prostitution as a distant phenomenon also links it with the 'unknown'; as a dark industry that is a mystery to the general public.

The forced versus voluntary dilemma sees the men trying to construct their stance on prostitution. This dilemma sees the men demonstrate traits of feminist discourse: radical feminist discourse is evident in the linking of prostitution to trafficking; liberal feminist discourse in the disregarding of prostitution as violence against

women; and Marxist feminist discourse in the linking of prostitution to an underground, black economy. These attempts to categorise prostitution are important to the men as they try to construct what prostitution is to them.

The literature on prostitution is heavily infused with feminism (Kesler 2002; Raymond 2004) but that is not to say that prostitution is a wholly female issue. In exploring how young men consume newspaper coverage of prostitution, there was evidence to suggest that men openly use feminist discourse in discussing this topic. If gender is truly to be considered performative, a man's utilisation of feminist discourse should not be surprising. Even the feminist discourse that is most critical of men, radical feminist discourse, was found utilised in the men's discussion.

In some aspects of its distancing the discourse of this group allows a greater discussion of the social structures around prostitution in contrast to the more individualised discourses that tend to dominate the discourses presented in newspapers generally (Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips and Benoit, 2006).

The legal situation of prostitution was a prominent discussion point throughout both focus groups. Public debate would pave the way for clarity to be reached in this area of discussion. The current stance of 'no comment' by public policy figures only infuriated the men, demonstrated by their desire for change. The overarching opinion given was that the current legal stance on prostitution is inadequate.

The focus groups voiced many diverse positions on prostitution; as Potter and Wetherell (1987) point out, constructions are beyond the reach of a stable and persistent view of behaviour and attitudes. Sometimes the young men talked of concerns over what they described as an imbalance of power; at other times the relations within prostitution were constructed as more egalitarian in nature; sometimes their talk represented the industry with disdain, associating it with deviance. However, most of the men expressed concern for the sex-workers themselves. Both a 'masculine' ethic of justice and a 'feminine' ethic of care (Litosseliti 2002) were demonstrated in the concerns of the young men.

This article, by concentrating on how media users respond to newspaper coverage, adds to our understanding of how media coverage of important and sensitive topics help shape how these topics are talked about in society. Such an understanding of users' responses is becoming more important both for those concerned with studying the media's effects on society and for those journalists who find themselves producing content for increasingly interactive media.

### Appendix 1 – Stimuli material

<http://www.kerryman.ie/news/sex-trade-booming-in-kerry-towns-569264.html>

<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2008/0303/1204240426624.html>

<http://www.independent.ie/national-news/sex-workers-criminal-records-curb-job-prospects-253504.html>

<http://www.independent.ie/national-news/arrests-soar-in-big-crackdown-on-sex-industry-380418.html>

<http://www.independent.ie/national-news/judge-refuses-to-allow-prostitution-charge-teen-live-with-mother-272478.html>

### Appendix 2 – The Jefferson-style transcription notation used

#### Symbol Meaning

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| . | A stopping fall in tone firmly understood as a full stop |
| , | A brief pause understood as a comma                      |

-	Indicates a sudden stop understood as breaking with previous sense
(.)	A brief but noticeable pause.
(# )	A timed paused where # is the number of seconds
	A falling tone
?	A rising inflection understood as a question
	A rising inflection not understood as a question
>text<	enclosed speech was delivered more quickly than usual
<text>	enclosed speech was delivered more slowly than usual
...	Deliberated excluded talk within a turn
[text]	Square brackets enclose overlapping speech
ALL CAPS	Shouted or increased-volume speech
°text°	Enclosed speech is noticeably softer than surrounding
<u>Underlined text</u>	Speaker is stressing the underlined speech.
( text )	Enclosed is transcriber's best guess of unclear speech.
(( text ))	Enclosed is a report of non-verbal activity, deliberate replacement of speech, or an inserted clarification.

*Note* This transcription notation is based on the notation developed by Gail Jefferson as described in Atkinson and Heritage (1984).

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Brendan K. O'Rourke lectures in DIT's College of Business and works on learning about discourses of the economy. He focusses on enterprise and strategy discourses, creativity and economics expertise. He is a co-founder and current director of both DIT's Business, Society and Sustainability research centre and its Discourse Analysis Group.

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