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“I never felt like she was just doing it for the money”: Disabled Men’s Intimate (Gendered) Realities of Purchasing Sexual Pleasure and Intimacy

Abstract

Scholarly enquiry into the interrelationships of disability and commercial sex remains seriously under-represented within disability and sexuality research. This article, however, draws upon the sexual stories of heterosexual disabled men in order to explore their embodied realities of purchasing of sex, pleasure and intimacy from non-disabled female sex workers. A thematic analysis of these sexual stories revealed multiple and complex motivations for, and experiences of, purchasing of sex, pleasure and intimacy; a purchase ultimately shaped by men’s social and political positioning as disabled and, as with the motivations and experiences of heterosexual non-disabled men, by discourses of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative sexuality. Given the dearth of research in this area, a number of questions are identified which make important contributions to transdisciplinary knowledges of disabled sexualities, commercial sex work, and disabled sexual citizenship.

Key words: disability; sex work; masculinities; citizenship; pleasure

Introduction

Debates regarding disabled people’s use of sex workers take place both inside and outside of the academy and have emerged as a “hot topic” within their emerging sexual politics and campaigns for sexual citizenship (Sanders 2007). Despite this, scholarly enquiry into the interrelationships of disability and commercial sex, particularly regarding disabled people’s experiences of commercial sex (as both purchasers and workers), remains seriously under-represented within disability and sexuality research (Shuttleworth 2010; Sanders 2007). This is likely because such enquiry may be seen to (further) ‘contaminate’ disabled sexualities with connotations of deviancy and ethical ambiguity, thus reinforcing the ableist constructions of disabled (specifically, male) sexualities as deviant, inappropriate and perverse (Shildrick

2002; Brown 1994). It can be further explained by the relative little scholarly attention towards disability and sexual life more generally within disability studies, where gender, sexuality, intimacy, love and pleasure – disabled people’s sexual politics and histories – have seldom shared same stage as their social and political histories (Shakespeare et al 1996; Finger 1992).

Outside of the academy, however, in order to become ‘full sexual subjects’ (Kanguade 2010: 197), disabled people and their allies have begun campaigning for their sexual citizenship within a rights-based framework. Not only is the concept of sexual rights considered ‘a powerful tool to expose the relationship between human rights and the sexuality of persons with disabilities (sic)’ (Kanguade 2010: 197), but it has offered activists, Sanders (2010: 151) argues, ‘a means to speak out about sexual oppression’. Thus, a rights-based framework, which follows on from disabled people’s campaigns for rights within public life (Davies 2000), is argued to legitimise disabled people’s sexual citizenship by placing it firmly on the agendas of disability rights movements – from which it has been historically been absent (Shakespeare et al 1996).

Disabled people’s claims for sexual citizenship, however, are not unique. Notions of ‘citizenship’ (as opposed to other means to sexual freedom and autonomy) have gained social and political significance in recent times, with gay liberation, lesbian/feminists and queer activist movements fighting for access to sexual rights, or sexual citizenship, for decades (Richardson 1998). Plummer (2003: 68) argues that this is underscored by a convergence of the private and the public in postmodern Western societies generally, where ‘the personal invades the public and the public invades the personal’; thus, sexual citizenship and civil citizenship are interlaced and mutually dependent (e.g. see Plummer 1995; Giddens 1992; Richardson 1998; Weeks 1998). While there remains no singular definition of sexual citizenship (Richardson 2000), a common understanding is that sexual citizenship refers to the

claims to (sexual) rights that are made by a sexual minority group (Richardson 1998; see also Weeks 1998). Weeks (1988: 39) further positions sexual citizenship as being ‘about enfranchisement, about inclusion, about belonging, about equity and justice, about rights balanced by responsibility’; while Plummer (2003) has utilised the notion of ‘intimate citizenship’ (rather than sexual citizenship) because it centres claims to rights of public and private intimacies which extend beyond the erotic and the sexual.

Disabled Sexual Citizenship?

From a disability perspective, Shakespeare et al (1996: 208) broadly position sexual citizenship as being ‘about intimate pleasures, desires, and ways of being in the world’. Siebers (2008:154) argues that if we are ‘to liberate disabled sexuality and give to disabled people a sexual culture of their own, their status as a sexual minority requires the protection of citizenship rights similar to those being claimed by other sexual minorities’. This is on the grounds, he suggests, that ‘disabled people experience sexual repression, possess little or no sexual autonomy, and tolerate institutional and legal restrictions on their intimate contact’ (Siebers 2008: 136). Further, as Wilkerson (2002: 41-42; see also Earle 1999) argues, many also ‘face restrictions, penalties, and coercion, and are denied access to important information, all in relation to their sexuality’. Thus, Wilkerson (2002: 33, 35) suggests, because ‘sexual agency is integral to political agency’, ‘sexual democracy should be recognised as a key political struggle’ for disabled people.

Speaking to a Western context, the claims to sexual rights and thus citizenship currently being made by disabled people and their allies encompass a multitude of areas: reproductive rights and justice (Alvares et al 2011; United Nations Population Fund 2013; Public Education Project 2013); rights to privacy, sexual support and sexual access, particularly within the context of community and institutional care (Silverberg and Odette 2011; Sexual

Health and Disability Alliance); young people's sexual rights, most notably, to sex education (Brook Sex and Disability: My Rights Campaign); marriage and domestic partner rights (see Waxman 2001); child custody and parenting rights (e.g. Disabled Parents' Network); rights around domestic and intimate partner violence (Thiara et al 2011) and care-related violence (see Hassouneh-Phillips and McNeff 2004); rights regarding forms of bodily-based violence, such as (forced) sterilisation; as well as sexual, physical and emotional violence (Waxman 1991).

While disabled people's claims for sexual citizenship are broad and multifaceted, then, this article critically considers one specific area of the disability and sexual rights agenda: disabled people's (and others) calls for access to commercial sex as an embodiment of sexual rights to expression and pleasure; calls which are becoming increasingly normalised within certain disability activist spaces (e.g. Sexual Freedom Coalition; The TLC Trust; The Outsiders' Free Speech Campaign; Sexual Health and Disability Alliance). Such claims are affirmed by the concept of sexual pleasure 'as a human right' (Oriel 2005: 392) now being reflected within international discourses of sexual rights (see also Petchesky 2000). For example, the World Health Organisation's (2002: 3) literature on sexual rights highlights the right to 'pursue a satisfying, safe and pleasurable sexual life'; it is the lexicon of 'satisfying' and 'pleasurable' which makes the WHO's (2002) approach distinctly different from other sexual rights doctrines. Such rights have been problematised by some feminists, largely on grounds of their gender-neutral language and their failure to 'explain how the right to sexual pleasure, or any sexual right, may affect women and men differently' (Oriel 2005: 392, see also Jeffries 2008). While I don't have the space to elaborate further on this debate here, it is fully fleshed out within the remainder of this article.

Despite this, access to sexual expression and pleasure specifically through commercial sexual services (services provided by sex workers and/or sex surrogates) is being campaigned

for internationally; both by and on behalf of disabled people *and* sex workers (as individual campaigners), and also collectively via organisations such as the TLC Trust (Britain), Equitable and Accessible Sexual Expression (EASE, Canada), and Touching Base (Australia), amongst others. Alongside advocating and campaigning, these specific organisations also ‘assist people with disability and sex workers to connect with each other’ (Touching Base 2013) in order for disabled people to ‘engage in a variety of sensual and sexual situations’ (EASE, 2013) and help ‘professional sex workers and other service providers cater to the needs of the sexually dispossessed (sic)’ (TLC Trust 2011).

Furthermore, individual campaigners have also stressed the necessity of commercial sex work as a legitimate form of sexual access for disabled people. Notably, the sexual stories of White heterosexual disabled men with physical impairments have featured prominently in such calls, and these sexual stories have been prominent within the media. For example, in 2012 the British Broadcasting Corporation (hereby BBC) televised a documentary, *For One Night Only* (BBC 2012), featuring disability and sex (work) campaigner Asta Philpott and two male friends paying for sex in a Spanish brothel; and in 2007 it followed Nick Wallis, a young disabled man, in his plight to lose his virginity in the documentary, *The Children of Helen House* (BBC 2007). Similarly, the recent internationally screened documentary, *Scarlett Road: A Sex Worker’s Journey* (2012) has featured – alongside the story of sex worker and scholar Rachel Wooton – disabled men’s experiences of using her services. The plights of other disability and sex campaigners have also sparked significant media attention in the UK and beyond. For example, Chris Fulton, a man currently bringing a legal case against the UK government to fund his sex purchases (Denim 2013); Andrea Cudini, a Canadian man who has publically called for the legalization of sex work (Desplanques 2013); as well as non-disabled allies such as Becky Adams, a non-disabled former Madam who is establishing a brothel – Para Doxies – which will specifically cater for disabled clients; and Tuppy Owens, a

long-time disability and sex advocate and founder of The Outsiders and The TLC Trust, UK-based disability and sex organisations. Moreover, some politicians have made headlines calling for the decriminalisation of sex work specifically on behalf of disabled people. In 2013 Jerome Guedj, head of the Essonne department south of Paris (a regional government) called for the French Government to debate the inclusion of sex surrogates into social services (France's minister for disabled people, Marie-Arlette Carlotti, also publically welcomed the debate) and in 2012, Kelly Vincent, a South Australian MP, lobbied the Australian Government for the (legal) provision and funding of sex workers for disabled people.

Commercial Sex Work: Exploitation or Labour?

Back in the Academy, however, commercial sex work remains a hotbed of feminist debate (O'Connell-Davidson 2002). Radical feminists who subscribe to the 'oppression paradigm' (Weitzer 2009: 214) predominantly use seditious terms such as 'prostituted women' (Jeffreys 2008; Raymond 2004) and 'prostitute user' (Raymond 2004), and argue for the abolition of prostitution. This is on the grounds that male purchasing of women's bodies is a form of sexual exploitation supported by and reproducing the 'male sex right' (Pateman 1988): 'the privileged expectation in male dominant societies that men should have sexual access to the bodies of women as of right' (Jeffreys 2008: 328). Moreover, 'prostitution' is positioned as deeply harmful for women sex workers because it requires 'self-estrangement' (Chapkis 1997); commodifies the female subjectivity and body; can impact upon personal sexual subjectivity and relationships (see Hoigard and Finstad 1992); and thus equates to a form of sexual violence (Jeffreys 2008). However, feminists who adopt more nuanced perspectives apply terms such as 'sexual labour' (Boris et al 2010), 'sex workers' and 'clients' (Sanders 2007, 2008, 2010), and 'johns' (Holt and Blevins 2007), conceptualising prostitution as inevitable within capitalist structures where the sexual body becomes another commodity. As such, 'prostitution' should be recognised as a legitimate form of labour and

commercial service work (see Boris et al 2010); one which requires survival strategies similar to conventional service work, and where regulation of the industry would offer sex workers legal, political and civil rights (see Chapkis 1997).

In this article, then, following Weatherall and Priestly (2001) I reject a singular and fixed definition of the meaning of sex work. I do so in order to ‘highlight the multiple and contradictory meanings of sex work’ (Weatherall and Priestly 2001: 324) which are, I suggest, necessary within the context of the disability experience. Instead, I take a broad liberal feminist positionality, which is further ground in critical disability studies, and thus rejects radical feminist perspectives of sex work. This is not only on the grounds of their inherent essentialism (Weitzer 2009), but also because of the routine dis/ableism which often features in such analyses (see Jeffreys 2008 for a dis/ableist analysis of disabled men’s sex purchasing).

Moving forward, existing research has shown that non-disabled males who purchase sex often have multiple reasons for doing so which extend beyond ‘needing’ sexual release or gratification (Sanders 2007; Campbell 1998). For example, in her research with (non-disabled) male customers, Campbell’s (1998) male participants expressed that their motivations to buy sex were based on ‘excitement; sexual services not provided by current partner; sexual variety; convenience; lack of emotional ties; loneliness; and an inability to form sexual relationships’ (in Sanders 2007: 444). Elsewhere, motivations such as unattractiveness, poor sexual development (Atchison et al 1998), and thrill (Monto 2000) have been cited. Other research has shown how – for some men – commercial sex purchases can be a source of affection, warmth and intimacy (Sanders 2008); for example, that men’s commercial sexual relationships ‘can mirror the traditional romance, courtship rituals, modes and meanings of communication, sexual familiarity, mutual satisfaction and emotional intimacies found in ‘ordinary’ relationships’ (Sanders 2008: 400). Interestingly, disabled

men's purchasing of sex has been constructed within activist, academic and practitioner discourses far more upon notions of an unmet 'need' for sexual gratification and human intimacy; certain activist campaigns advocating commercial sex work as a legitimate form of sexual access for disabled people have positioned heterosexual disabled people as deeply sexually frustrated, wronged (in that their 'natural' needs are insatiate), and thus as sexual victims (Shakespeare et al 1996). For example, the TLC Trust advocates commercial sex for disabled people on the basis that sex workers '*rescue* disabled people from personal *anguish*, sexual *purgatory*, and touch *deprivation*' (TLCtrust.org.uk, 2011, my emphasis). Further, this legitimisation of (male) need is replicated in the scholarly works of some sex radical feminists who conceptualise sex work as a socially valuable form of labour through which 'disabled people, folks with chronic or terminal illnesses, the elderly, and the sexually dysfunctional' (Califia 1994: 245) can benefit. Within practitioner contexts, access to sexual pleasure for heterosexual disabled people has been, particularly for disabled men, entwined within notions of 'quality of life' – though this has been argued for non-disabled men too (see Sanders 2008) – with access to 'sexual relief' often being considered essential to psychological, emotional, sexual and bodily well-being (see Browne and Russell 2005).

Building upon existing knowledges of both disabled sexualities and commercial sex work, I present findings from a relevant British study which explored the complex ways in which disabled men and women managed and negotiated their sexual and intimate lives, selves, and bodies in the context of ableist cultures where they are, as Brown (1994: 125) states, assigned the paradoxical social categories of 'asexual, oversexed, innocents, or perverts'. In this article, however, I specifically explore heterosexual disabled men's motivations for purchasing sex, pleasure and intimacy from female sex workers; experiences which often constituted a significant 'chapter' within their (often far broader) sexual stories. Following the methodological details of the study, I examine men's experiences which reveal

the complexities in the lived and embodied realities of disability, impairment, sexuality, and gender as they ‘play out’ in men’s decision-making and motivations around purchasing sex. A thematic analysis of these narratives revealed how male informants’ motivations to purchase sex were, for the most part, contoured by their social and political positioning as disabled people and, as with the motivations of non-disabled men, by discourses of hegemonic masculinity and normative sexuality. In drawing some conclusions from this analysis, I ask some critical questions of commercial sex work as an embodiment of disabled people’s rights to sexual pleasure, and (tentatively) query its very inclusion in disabled people’s broader claims for sexual citizenship. In doing so, I make important contributions to transdisciplinary knowledges of disabled sexualities, commercial sex work, and disabled sexual citizenship.

The Study

Overview

Echoing feminist and anti-racist methodologies which routinely “centre” the minoritised within the research process (Dei and Johal 1995), the impetus within this study was to facilitate a platform from which disabled people could tell their *own* sexual stories (see Davies 2000; Shakespeare et al 1996; Leibowitz 2005). The emphasis of data collection, then, was upon eliciting informants’ sexual stories – collected via new social technologies and “online methods”, as well as via face to face interviews – in order to subject these stories to a thematic analysis. Importantly, sexual stories were conceptualised to be informants’ (re)constructions of their lived experiences and subjective realities. Reality was not presumed to be singular, fixed or objective; rather informants’ ‘reality’ was depicted and portrayed, meaning that the identities they projected were shifting and variable. That said, stories were not treated uncritically (see Bury 2001). Reissman (2001: 12) states that when story-telling, ‘informants do not “reveal” an essential self as much as they perform a preferred self’. This

does not mean, however, that a focus on performance suggests ‘that identities are inauthentic, only that they are situated and accomplished within social interaction’ (Riessman 2001: 1). Thus, as well as the content of stories, the purposes and motivations of stories and the performative aspects of narrative were also considered.

In-person (n=10) and Skype (n=2) interviews were transcribed verbatim and transcripts produced through instant messaging (MSN) (n=4), email (n=4), or in written form via a kept journal (n=5), were ‘cut and pasted’ into Microsoft Word documents but otherwise remained in the format in which they were produced and as intended by the authors. Inevitably, these transcripts differed in length, with in-person and Skype interview transcripts being longer because these interviews were more “naturally” conversational; that said, email transcripts could be 30-40 pages; and instant messaging interviews not much less. Thus, each method facilitated very in-depth sexual stories. In-person interviews and Skype lasted between 1.5 – 3.5 hours. Interviews which took place via journal writing and/or by email usually took place over 6 months (some lasted as long as 9 months). Interviews via instant messaging could take up to 10 hours; to aid the comfort of the informant these interviews were usually divided into 2-3 sessions. Despite the propensity of multiple interview sessions (dictated by an informant’s method choice), all but one informant were interviewed once. This informant requested he be interviewed for a second time because, having lost his virginity to a sex worker following the first interview, he wanted to “update” his sexual story. Lastly, while multiple standard ethical guidelines were adhered to throughout the research process, the ethics of asking (disabled) people to tell intimate and sensitive stories, (and of hearing, interpreting and retelling people’s stories), were particularly pertinent given the extent to which disabled people’s lives and bodies are routinely objectified, harmed and denied privacy through oppressive social and cultural practices (Sandahl 2003).

Informants

Informants were sampled through purposive sampling methods and recruited via features in popular disability press and on disability-related websites. In total, 16 disabled men, 9 disabled women, and one non-disabled female partner (of a male informant who wanted his partner present), aged between 20 and 64, and from a range of socio-economic groups told their sexual stories for the purpose of the study. All but one informant identified as (cisgendered) heterosexual; the remaining informant identified as a (cisgendered) lesbian. Informants predominantly identified as White British (n=22); but also as British Asian or British Indian (n=2), African (n=1) and also 'Unknown' (n=1) by an informant who refused to state his ethnic group. The majority of informants worked in either paid (n=11) or voluntary positions (n=5), or both (n=1), or were students in full-time university education (n=4). The remaining four informants identified as unemployed (n=4), and over half of informants were educated to university level. In terms of impairment types (both acquired and congenital), informants predominantly had physical impairments (n=23), with only one person having only a sensory impairment (n=1), and another having both a physical and sensory impairment (n=1).

Relatedly, 7 of 16 male informants had purchased sex from a female sex worker via indoor sex work markets (n=7/16). In contrast, all ten female informants said they had never purchased sex (n=0/10). These figures reflect findings from disability publication *Disability Now's* 'Time to talk sex' (2005) survey of 1115 disabled people which revealed that 22% of disabled male respondents reported having paid for sexual services in comparison to just 1% of disabled women; similarly, just 16.2% of disabled women had considered paying for sex in comparison to 37.6% of disabled men (Disability Now 2005). Interestingly, there are no comparative statistics for non-disabled men and women (Sanders 2007; see also Wellings et al 1994). This marked lack of women's experiences not only emphasizes the highly gendered

nature of commercial sex work, but further mirrors the widespread absence in both academic and non-academic fields of women as sex purchasers; although there are some exceptions (see Browne and Russell 2005).

Male and female informants in this study who *hadn't* purchased sex offered various responses to questions regarding commercial sex, and commonly expressed disgust, interest, or indifference. Many female informants responded with laughter and shock; likely, because women as purchasers of sex conflicts with the inert sexualities extended to women in heteronormative sexual cultures. Thus, purchasing sex is a form of sexual expression seldom available to heterosexual women (disabled or otherwise). Past this initial reaction, very little was said by women about purchasing sex. In contrast to women's silences, many male informants who *hadn't* purchased sex offered lengthy explanations as to why. Notably, through such long explanations many implied that doing so wasn't out of their reach as heterosexual disabled men; for example, purchasing sex was routinely situated as a practice in which they had "not yet engaged" (Bob); one to which they "could be enticed" (Robert); especially "if exploitation weren't involved" (Phillip). I now turn focus to the sexual stories of disabled male informants who *had* purchased sex.

Research Findings and Discussion

While a couple of male informants firmly attributed their sex purchase/ing to (male) sexual *need*, and thus constructed their motivations through a male biological sex drive discourse (Hollway 1996; see also O'Connell Davidson 2002), for the most part, informants offered a wide variety of motivations behind their decision to purchase sex. In doing so, they used a wide lexicon of explanation which extended well beyond essentialist discourses of sexuality and, simultaneously, was in part tied into the social, cultural and material disenfranchisement of disablement. Part of this could have been because male informants felt they had to offer 'valid' and substantive reasons to 'justify' what is still widely considered a

socially unacceptable, or immoral, practice, (or because they were being interviewed by a female (presumed feminist) researcher). Regardless, men's lengthy explanations of their motivations to purchase sex primarily suggest that while 'need' is a powerful discourse, it is not enough to justify the practice (see Sanders 2008).

For example, for Abram, a 35 year old employed single man with significant physical impairment, and Graham, a 52 year old unemployed single man with physical impairment, purchasing sex was a way to gain 'necessary' sexual experience and skills:

Abram: *"And then she sort of started kissing me ... I'd never even been kissed before [long pause] ...I think the first thought was how wet her lips were. It was new and I tried to get my lip action going a bit as well. I was able to just experiment, really. And just learn a little bit more what I'm capable of – there was one point where she was sort of sat on my face and just let me lick her and taste her. And I'd always wondered about that – I can't stick my tongue out very far so I always sort of wondered 'what could I do with my tongue in that respect?' Well, now I know. And it was probably better than I thought I would be capable of."* (Skype Interview)

Graham: *"It was the first time I realised a woman's body was warm, with no clothes on, naked, she was warm and that was a shock to me."* (In-person Interview)

The erotophobic social environments extended to disabled people within dis/ableist sexual cultures and the potential difficulty of finding sexual and/or intimate partners can mean that disabled people lack opportunities for sexual experiences (Shakespeare et al 1996; Sanders 2008). This, further combined with the compulsory and persistent sexuality ascribed to male bodies, can make purchasing sex a fruitful means for disabled men to gain sexual experience. While this means of learning about sex/uality is commonly conceived as an answer towards solving the 'problem' of disabled men like Abram feeling 'inadequate' or inexperienced as lovers (in terms of heteronormative sexuality at least) (see Aloni & Katz, 2003), some radical feminists argue that the commercial context detracts from 'genuine' learning because it offers only a 'depersonalised, objectifying form of sexuality' rather than one which is mutual, shared, and reciprocal (Jeffreys 2008: 334). However, disabled men in this study strongly

expressed that the commercial context was integral towards learning even the most “rudimentary” of intimate experiences, such as sensuous and erotic touch (e.g. how to enjoy touch which isn’t medical, therapeutic or part of care). Graham’s account shows this explicitly; his not knowing that a woman’s body is warm emphasises not only the deprivation of sensuous feeling that can be part of the disabled experience, but how commercial contexts can be a viable means of providing such embodied learning. For other male informants, purchasing sex was positioned as crucial towards learning about their own sexual body and sexual capacity (as Abram emphasises above) – not for themselves – but for the specific purpose of learning how to provide sexual pleasure both for and with *others*. Moreover, learning these “necessary” skills (to pleasure a partner) was positioned by some men as a productive step towards (later) *gaining* a fulfilling, mutual and reciprocal (non-commercial) intimate relationship. Therefore, sex purchasing was largely seen as purposeful, but only ever temporary, echoing findings from research with non-disabled men who seldom positioned their sex purchasing as ‘a permanent feature of their lives’ (Sanders 2008: 46).

Abram also said his decision to purchase sex was centred upon needing to invigorate his sexually ‘defunct’ body:

Abram: *“For months I’d barely felt any stirring down there. I was beginning to think that, physically, my body’s given up. That’s why I was really desperate to do this... to reassure myself. When I used to ejaculate in my sleep it’d be an embarrassing, messy business; but then it kind of stopped happening. And that can be even worse. That I’m feeling nothing; I’m just feeling complete emptiness. I think this experience kind of woke that up in me, that there were things happening down there, and it was giving me a buzz.”* (Skype Interview)

The way in which Abram positions the act of *having* sexual relations as (re)invigorating and sexualising his sexual-self and material sexual body cannot be separated from his experience of living with a progressive and life shortening neuromuscular impairment. Experiencing this bodily revivification through purchasing sex was narrated (understandably) as personally poignant, in that it was interpreted as gaining and maintaining “function” within the context

of a condition where bodily function routinely decreases. At the same time, however, his male sexual capacity and potency was (re)affirmed (“*giving me a buzz*”), without which he felt “*empty*”.

Equating embodying “sexiness” to sexual *action* with a partner, as Abram expresses, was a common assertion made by most other male informants who had purchased sex. Tying into hegemonic notions of ‘doing’ masculinity and male sexual pleasure, sexuality was constructed not as something intrinsic to the self, but relational in that it had to be ratified by engaging in sexual activity (with a woman) in order to be “real”. For example, Graham (in-person interview) said “*there needs to some sort of proof [to feel sexy], like having girlfriends, having sex, all that, that’s the proof that you are... [sexy]*”. Tony (instant messaging interview), an employed 26 year old man with physical impairment, said that as a virgin (who’d had no sexual contact) he’d never been in a situation to “*feel sexy*”; and Mark (in-person interview), a 35 year old unemployed man with progressive physical impairment, said that purchasing sex was the only time he’d ever felt “*sexiness*”. Sometimes this affirmation was so powerful it was experienced and narrated – literally – as “*genuine*”; as Terry (Skype interview) said, “*I never felt like she was just doing it for the money*”. In the context of disability, needing affirmation of desirability from a partner (paid or otherwise) in order to realise “sexiness” is rooted ableist constructions of the impaired body as wretched and abject (Shildrick 2002).

However, for Harjit (in-person interview), a 23 year old full time university student with significant physical impairment, purchasing sex was not only purposeful towards feeling like a sexual being, but also towards embodying the expected masculine performance when male friends casually discussed sex. Thus, being able to contribute his own *sexy* stories to friends’ discussions around sex made Harjit feel more included in the masculine sexual cultures of his friends. Markedly, both Harjit and Abram had “severe” impairments and came

from what they identified as “*restrictive*” ethnic and cultural backgrounds: Harjit lived with his African immigrant parents who had moved into the university Halls of Residence with him in order to care for him, while Abram, 35, came from a British Asian background. Their stories were similar in that both felt infantilised by over-bearing families – which can be part of the disability experience (Shakespeare et al 1996) – who allowed them little autonomy and, as both stressed, financial control. Harjit and Abram’s purchasing of sex was embedded within a wider emancipatory narrative whereby both men told stories of elaborate escapades when purchasing sex, which were meticulously planned and enthusiastically retold through the interview. For example, this included keeping the encounter secret; secretly hiding cash to “*save up*”; hiding bank statements; creating intricate alibis; negotiating privacy; and colluding with others to maintain the “*secret*”. Such stories were, firstly, indicative of the lack of autonomy and privacy many disabled people experience throughout their lives (Shakespeare et al. 1996; Brown 1994); and secondly, were very different from the sex work stories of other male informants of similar ages, and strikingly different to the stories of non-disabled men in other research (see Sanders 2008; Holt and Blevins 2007). From the excitable way such stories were told it appeared that a lot of the “*buzz*” both men said they got from their respective sex purchases was as much from exercising agency, autonomy, control and independence as it was about experiencing sexual fulfilment, pleasure, and satisfaction.

However, for others, sex was purchased because it was an “*easier*” process than investing money and time in dating (non-sex worker) women, reflecting findings from research on non-disabled men’s motivations; for example, that paying for sex can mean evading the ‘burden of the ‘courting’ rituals that are expected in heterosexual interactions’ (Sanders 2008: 43). Many informants expressed that their motivations to purchase sex were ground in having little access to spaces where they could meet prospective sexual partners

because of the general inaccessibility (as well as cost) of adult meeting spaces such as pubs and clubs (Shakespeare 2000; Earle 1999); but also because of the attitudinal barriers and discrimination (particularly verbal abuse) that many experienced while visiting such places (*“I didn’t wanna pay, I wish I could go out and meet someone but it’s not that easy”*). Attracting prospective (sexual) partners while in these spaces was also identified as a major problem (*“I can’t go into a nightclub and easily pull, although I have in certain circumstances, but I can’t do it easily”*); as Shakespeare et al (1996) suggest, the difficulty of sex for many disabled people is not *how* to do it, but finding those with whom to do it. While non-disabled men equally experience this, the social undesirability of the disabled identity within dis/ableist cultures combined with a (potential) non-normative bodily aesthetic, and also the low self-esteem endemic to the disability experience, undoubtedly intensify this issue.

Finally, a couple of informants articulated that purchasing sex enabled *“a different type of sex”* whereby their pleasure and fulfilment could be the main focus:

Terry: *“When you pay for sex you get a really different feeling from what you would get from being in a consensual relationship. You feel more – I don’t want to say powerful, because you’re not. You feel – everything’s directed towards you, and everything in the sex is to your standards. When I’m in a relationship, around ninety percent of what I’m thinking is if they’re going to enjoy it; is it okay for them? Whereas with someone you’re paying for you don’t have that kind of stress of demand – it’s quite easy for you and everything is directed towards you. So you can just relax, instead of trying to share the experience with someone else.”* (Skype Interview)

Abram: *“By paying I was able to experiment without the tension of worrying about the other person. In fact, at one point I did, and she just smiled and told me, ‘forget about it - this is for you’.”* (In-person interview)

These accounts emphasise how commercial sex can enable a relinquishing of responsibility for producing a woman’s pleasure. Non-disabled men have been found to also pay for sex for this reason (see Sanders 2008; Campbell 1998). However, abandonment of pleasure provider

role may be further welcomed by disabled men with physical impairments who, because of the possible restrictions that impairment, non-normative socio-sexual development, and constructions of normative sex place upon sexual practices, may feel more inadequate in this role (particularly in normative ways) than non-disabled men.

Drawing Some Conclusions

In sum, a thematic analysis of disabled male informants' accounts of their motivations to purchase sex, pleasure and intimacy from female sex workers has revealed that purchases were seldom rooted in a male 'need' for sexual gratification, echoing findings from research with non-disabled men (Sanders 2008; Campbell 1998). Instead, it was found that disabled men's motivations rested precariously at the nexus of disability and hegemonic masculinity. For example, motivations included: gaining (as heterosexual men, "much-needed") sexual experience or sexual skills (the learning of which, as disabled people, they felt had been denied); invigorating and sexualising the 'unnatural' sexually 'defunct' heteronormative male (impaired) body; as a means to embody male sexuality ("sexiness") through sexual action; to have sexual experiences to contribute to masculine sex talk; to express agency and resist oppressive familial control; because paying for sex was "easier" in the context of inaccessible and unwelcoming adult social and sexual spaces; and for "a different type of sex" which privileges non-reciprocal pleasure. Ultimately, then, disabled male informants' motivations to purchase sex were as much contoured by their social and political positioning as disabled people, and namely the social, cultural and material disenfranchisement of disablement, as by discourses of hegemonic masculinity and normative sexuality. In drawing some conclusions from this analysis, I ask some critical questions of commercial sex work as an embodiment of disabled people's rights to sexual pleasure, and (tentatively) query its very inclusion in disabled people's broader claims for sexual citizenship. In doing so, I make important

contributions to transdisciplinary knowledges of disabled sexualities, commercial sex work, and disabled sexual citizenship.

Predictably, findings detailed in this article complicate common simplistic (ableist and sexist) cultural constructions of disabled male sexuality as anguished, tormented, and in despair (see Califia 1994); as ‘risky’ and ‘dangerous’ to others if not satiated (see Jeffreys 2008); and as detrimental to health and well-being if not affirmed (Browne and Russell 2005). Men’s multi-faceted motivations to purchase sex have shown that consigning disabled male sexuality to notions of victimhood or as subject to an insatiate sex drive, (constructions which have also been readily reproduced within media representations of disability and sex work), is not only inaccurate and unhelpful, but does little to challenge or disrupt dominant constructions of sexual normalcy, traditional gendered sexual power relations, or hegemonic masculinity – ableist aspects of sexual and intimate life which have long-been positioned as acutely oppressive for disabled people (Shakespeare et al 1996; Tepper 2000; Siebers 2008).

Importantly, through articulating their motivations to purchase sex, disabled men have, I suggest, exercised considerable sexual agency and autonomy. Not only did most male informants confidently verbalize their own (sexual) needs, desires, and wants (notably in ways that many women in the study seldom managed), they also articulated how these had been realised via actively engaging with commercial sex work contexts, exerting significant social and sexual power in the process. This is partly because commercial sex work, as a form of labour underpinned and produced by patriarchal and capitalist discourse, is already deeply embedded within conventional gendered ideologies of power, heteronormativity, and masculinity (which serve any male purchaser), but also because disabled male informants’ role as consumer – the bearer of money – inevitably provided significant opportunities to both claim and exercise power in this context (see Zelizer 1989).

Therefore, it's pertinent at this juncture not to forget that both claims for and access to sexual rights, regardless of their foci, get determined by other facets of identity – most explicitly by gender (Oriol 2005; see also Petchesky 2000). Thus, a vital reason to *question* the very inclusion of access to commercial sex within broader claims for disabled sexual citizenship is because of the implications it has for disabled female sexual citizenship. Notably, the silences of disabled women in this study (and beyond) concerning sex work, combined with disabled women's marked absences as purchasers of sexual services (Disability Now 2005), explicitly reveals the ways in which commercial sex work contexts are, as stated above, entrenched in traditional ideologies of gender, heteronormativity and heterosexuality which are predicated on a mode of normative sexuality that requires female passivity and asexuality, giving disabled women (and LBGTQ disabled people) little opportunity to explore and empower their sexual selves in similar ways. This hasn't been helped by the routine gender-neutrality within public, activist and (some) academic discourses of disability and commercial sex (see Wooton and Isbister 2010), as well as the marked gender-neutrality within discussions of sexual rights to pleasure more generally (Oriol 2005; Petchesky 2000). Thus, the inclusion of commercial sex work into disabled people's broader claims for sexual citizenship is problematic because it is a form of sexual access that is, at best, sexually inequitable and as such offers disabled women and others relatively little in terms of their own sexual desire, expression and pleasure.

Also relevant here, is the fact that commercial sex work *is* part of an industry whereby the female sexual body remains a commodity to be bought and sold; but more importantly, part of an industry whereby female workers *can* experience significant oppression, marginalisation and violence, as well as a routine denial of their rights (sexual rights, healthcare rights, employment rights, and also, in places, human rights). Thus legitimising, decriminalising and/or legalising disabled people's (men's) rights to embody sexual pleasure

through commercial means does so in the very context of this suppression. Importantly, this suppression has significant implications for both sex working and non-sex working women in patriarchal cultures, in that sanctioning, or normalising, disabled men's purchasing of sex from women preserves the patriarchal gender divisions which oppress *all* women (and, I would argue, men; albeit in different ways).

Equally important, are the ways in which disabled (male) sexualities are naturalised within discursive constructions of commercial sex and disability. Crucially, the naturalising of disabled sexualities offers little towards challenging the very structural, institutional and systemic dis/ableist discourses that desexualise disabled people, for example: segregation; marginalisation; institutionalisation; sterilisation; exclusion from the labour market; as well as environmental barriers such as poor physical access; forms of oppression which constituted equally significant chapters in both men's *and* women's sexual stories. As the prevalence of social-cultural sexual oppression within disabled men's own motivations have shown, as Sanders (2007: 452) articulates, 'efforts should concentrate on tackling wider discriminatory attitudes and structures' which inhibit and suppress the sexual lives, selves and bodies of all disabled people. Thus, the dangers of *not* extending disabled sexualities an intellection beyond pre-social modes of sexuality inevitably divorces sexual autonomy, agency and access from social and political power and civil citizenship (which are the fundamental underpinnings of sexual citizenship politics), serving to recreate the problematic historical division of public and private oppressions within past disability rights movements (Shakespeare et al 1996). One could argue, then, that the very *inclusion* of rights to pleasure via commercial sex work (as currently constructed) is deeply contradictory to the current context of the sex and disability rights agenda; the ethos of which is to uncover, document, and fight against the political, social, economic, cultural, institutional and psycho-emotional

desexualisation, dehumanisation, (sexual) oppression and violence which impacts the lives of many disabled people (see Waxman 1991).

Finally, a further reason to *question* the inclusion of access to commercial sex work in disabled people's broader claims for sexual citizenship lies in the ways it further restricts the possibilities and potentialities of what 'sexual access' can mean in the lives of disabled people. As disabled men's own sexual stories have emphasised, commercial sex work offers only an individual "solution" to a lack of access to sexual pleasure, and does so on grounds of payment. It is a form of sexuality rooted in individual exchanges between a worker and a buyer; thus reducing sexual access to (commodified and commercialised) bodily gratification, rather than, for example, a broader, more creative, collective and equitable conceptualisation of sexual access which may have greater emancipatory potential for disabled people's (individual and collective) sexual citizenship. For example, 'sexual access' as encompassing access to sexual support (Silverberg and Odette 2011; Earle 1999); and/or access to the 'the psychological, social and cultural supports that acknowledge and nurture sexuality' (Shuttleworth 2003:6). Or, ultimately, a broader recognition of sexual access as disabled people obtaining the rights, freedoms, and supports to build 'a sexual culture of their own' (Siebers 2008: 154); but crucially, one which is, as Weeks proclaims (1988: 39), 'about enfranchisement, about inclusion, about belonging, about equity and justice, and about rights balanced by responsibility'.

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