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“There's massive pressure to please her”: On the discursive production of men’s desire to pay for sex

This paper presents a discursive analysis of 43 men’s narratives about paying for sex, collected using a combination of online and traditional face-to-face interview methods. It argues that the societal pressures placed on men to “perform” sexually help to produce conditions that make paying for sex desirable. Paying for sex provided men with a “safe” space where they felt exempt from expectations to display sexual experience, skill, and stamina. Moreover, men valued paid sexual encounters with experienced sex workers as spaces where they could acquire sexual experience and skills to better approximate idealised versions of heteronormative male sexuality. The paper explores the emotional aspects tied up in men’s desires to pay for sex and attends to the question of power within the paid sexual encounter, shedding light on the complexities, nuances and multiplicities within client-sex worker relationships. In conclusion, this paper discusses the value of addressing the broader social structures, sites such as media, online spaces and medical industries, where heteronormative discourses on male sexual “performance” continue to be reproduced and maintained.

Sex work; clients; South Africa; masculinities; heteronormativity; online research

Buying and selling sex is both criminalised and highly stigmatised in South Africa, yet many men still choose to pay for sex. Contrary to stereotyped understandings of clients as deviants or social misfits with limited avenues for engaging in sexual encounters with women, research shows that men from all walks of life pay for sex, and that many choose to do so instead of, or in addition to, other available options (Huysamen, 2017; Sanders, 2012). What is it about paid sexual encounters that make them valuable and desirable to men? How are the meanings that men make of their paid sexual encounters entangled with broader discourses of masculinity and male sexuality? In attending to these questions, this paper presents a discursive analysis of 43 men's narratives about paying for sex. Rather than simply questioning *why* men pay for sex, this paper explores *what* it is that men pay for when they pay for sex.

Literature review: Men's motivations for paying for sex

Sex is bought and sold by people of every gender and sexual identity. However, cis men remain the primary purchasers of sex, and cis women the primary sellers of sex (Smith & Mac, 2018). While there is a well-established and growing body of literature on women who sell sex in South Africa (Gould & Fick, 2008; Huschke & Coetzee, 2019; Learmonth, Hakala, & Keller, 2015; Mgbako, 2016; Richter & Bodin, 2017; Stadler & Delany, 2006), there is very little published on men who pay for sex in South Africa.

International research into clients' motivations have endeavoured to identify and categorise the motivational factors associated with men's paying for sex (Holzman & Pines, 1982; Jordan, 1997; Joseph & Black, 2012; McKeganey, 1994; McKeganey & Barnard, 1996; Milrod & Weitzer, 2012; Pitts, Smith, Grierson, O'Brien, & Misson, 2004; Xantidis & McCabe, 2000). The following emerge as strong motivators across these studies: paid sex is less work or less complicated than other heterosexual relationships, it satisfies urgent sexual needs, and has a high excitement or entertainment

value. These studies suggest men also pay for sex due to the desire for a variety of sexual partners and new sexual experiences, to avoid emotional involvement or the risk of being pressured into a committed relationship, and because they seek emotional connection or companionship.

A smaller body of critical qualitative research explores men's in-depth accounts of their motivations for paying for sex. These studies bring to light the complexities and contradictions entangled in men's motivations for paying for sex. This research suggests that male clients are not a homogenous group who can be easily categorised, and that men pay for sex for a variety of reasons that may change throughout their lives (Huschke & Schubotz, 2016; Huysamen, 2019; Huysamen & Boonzaier, 2015, 2018; Prior & Peled, 2018; Sanders, 2012).

The findings of these studies show how heteronormative discourses on masculinity and femininity are reflected in men's stated motivations for paying for sex (Huysamen, 2017; Huysamen & Boonzaier, 2015, 2018; Sanders, 2012). However, there is evidence that some men's narratives about paying for sex may also queer the boundaries of compulsory heterosexuality (see Huysamen, 2019). Men regularly described themselves, in line with the male sex drive discourse (Hollway, 2001), as having a strong and urgent biological need for sex. At the same time, they constructed women as emotionally needy and as using sex as a way to "catch" or "hook" men, forcing them into committed relationships. Paid sex was constructed as desirable because it allowed men to fulfil their "need" for sex, while they believed the monetary exchange absolved them from any of the obligations, responsibilities, or negative aspects commonly associated with women in heterosexual relationships.

However, across many of these studies, men also expressed a strong desire for intimacy and an emotional connection within the client-sex worker relationship

(Bernstein, 2001; Chen, 2005; Earle & Sharpe, 2008b, 2008a; Huff, 2011; Huysamen & Boonzaier, 2015; Jordan, 1997; Kong, 2016; Milrod & Weitzer, 2012; Prior & Peled, 2018; Sanders, 2008, 2012). For many clients, the more the client-sex worker interaction resembled an authentic romantic encounter, the more satisfactory it was deemed to be. Within the sex work industry this kind of “authenticity” is often referred to as the “girlfriend experience” (Bernstein, 2007; Chen, 2005; Holzman & Pines, 1982; Katsulis, 2010; Milrod & Monto, 2012; Sanders, 2008). Relevant to men’s emotional desires and demands within their paid sexual encounters is Hochschild’s work on *emotional labour*, which can be defined as the labour involved in evoking, shaping, or suppressing emotions, thoughts, behaviours, and expressive gestures in order to meet the requirements of a job (Hochschild, 2003). Bernstein (2007) suggests that part of the emotional labour that sex workers perform involves expressing sexual pleasure as well as genuine interest in desire for the client. Sanders (2008, p. 413) argues that “the sex industry is not simply about selling sex and sexual fantasies”; rather it is also about attending to the emotional needs of male clients. Bernstein (2001) uses the term *bounded authenticity*, to argue that paying for sex is appealing to some men because it provides the intimacy of a genuine relationship, but within boundaries that insulate them from the obligations commonly associated with heterosexual relationships. This paper further explores the emotional aspects tied into men’s desires to pay for sex and interrogates how these are linked to broader discourses on masculinity and male sexuality.

Methods

Theoretical Framework

This research is informed by poststructuralist theories of discourse, power, and resistance (Butler, 2008; Foucault, 1995; Weedon, 1987). From this epistemological position,

knowledge is not understood as fixed or stable, but as socially constituted, multiple and ever-changing. The term “discourse” as I use it here is not limited only to language or text, but any signs or symbols that people use to represent themselves to one another (Parker, 2004). Discourse denotes a system of meaning for understanding, experiencing, and acting in the world. It regulates behaviour, stipulates how ideas about certain subjects are put into practice, and establishes rules that restrict alternative ways of talking about or conducting ourselves within a particular socio-historical context (Foucault, 1995; Hall, 2001). From this discursive perspective, the researcher does not view participants’ narratives as objective accounts of truth or as mirrors of reality, but is instead concerned with how individuals negotiate their identities and make sense of their lives using the discourses available to them (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013; Wetherall, 2007). Such an approach to language embraces plurality of meaning, and therefore I see my analysis as just one of many possible readings of the data.

I follow queer theorists Sara Ahmed (2006) and Judith Butler (2008) in understanding gender as *performative*. From this position, it is not simply because we are male or female, for example, or because we identify as a particular gender, that we perform certain corresponding gendered acts, but through repeatedly performing these seemingly mundane acts, we *become* gendered. In this sense, the gendered subject is created through its actions, rather than these actions merely proceeding from a stable gendered identity.

Connell’s work on *hegemonic masculinity* presents the most widely used theoretical framing of how masculine identities are discursively constituted and is thus relevant to this discursive analysis of men’s talk on paying for sex. The term hegemonic masculinity, coined by Connell and collaborators in the early 1980’s, can be

said to denote a constellation of cultural ideals that both defines what an ideal or “real man” may look like in any given society and maintains men’s dominance over women and other men (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The cultural ideals tied up in hegemonic masculinity create a hierarchy of access to power and status, because, although the criteria for hegemonic masculinity are generally unachievable, some men are better able to approximate it than others. In line with queer theory, hegemonic masculinity is not seen as a static and essential state of being, but something that one “becomes” through performing certain *masculinizing practices* in order to signify themselves as desirable men (Butler, 2008; Connell, 2000, 2005; Frank, 2003).

According to this theory of hegemonic masculinity, certain characteristics tend to signify the ideal man across many heteronormative patriarchal societies, these may include being rational, unemotional, financially stable, competitive, dominant and powerful. The ideal man is also unquestionably heterosexual – he is sexually desirable, experienced, and always ready for sex (Carrigan et al., 1985; Hollway, 2001; Mooney-Somers & Ussher, 2010; Shefer & Ruiters, 1998). However, what is hegemonic and dominant in a society is neither universal nor stable, but rather complex and shifting to adapt to the challenges of the time and context (Barker & Ricardo, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Phoenix & Frosh, 2001). Indeed, there is growing evidence of shifts in what is deemed desirable masculinity, with a more sensitive, egalitarian man who has access to his emotions, and supports gender equality and non-violence emerging as the ideal way to be a man (Dellinger, 2004; Hearn & Morrell, 2012; Lamont, 2015; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). It is through this poststructuralist lens that I explore the meanings that a sample of 43 South African men make of paying for sex.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited online through two online classified websites (www.gumtree.co.za and www.locanto.co.za). I posted advertisements in sections of the online classifieds where erotic services are ordinarily advertised, stating that I was a researcher looking to interview men about their experiences of paying women for sex. I provided an email address where anyone interested in participating could contact me. Participants could choose whether they wanted to conduct the interviews face-to-face, via Skype video or audio calls, or using instant messenger (IM) platforms. Forty-three South African cisgender men from urban centres across South Africa were recruited. The participants ranged between the ages of 22 and 67 years of age. Twenty-six participants identified themselves as white, 13 as Indian, three as Black, and one participant identified as “Coloured”¹.

Given that men who pay for sex are considered a hard to reach population, this online recruitment strategy proved to be very effective. However, it was limited in that it predominately attracted white middle-class men who were computer literate and had regular access to the internet, many of whom used the internet to facilitate their paid sexual activities. This recruitment strategy potentially excluded poor men who did not have regular access to the internet and did not access paid sexual services online. In South Africa, where class is still stratified largely along racial lines, this means that many poor Black men would have been excluded from the sample. Given the dearth of research on men who pay for sex, particularly in South Africa, future research that recruits participants, using offline recruitment methods would be a valuable supplement to the current research.

¹ ‘Coloured’ is a racial term created during Apartheid to refer to a heterogeneous group of people. Despite the abolition of Apartheid, this term is still used to identify and name people in South Africa.

Data collection

Data was collected using both traditional and online interview methods. In-depth Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 11 participants in public cafes or restaurants. Two interviews were conducted over Skype video calls. Thirty interviews were conducted using instant messenger (IM) applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Gmail chat. Participants and I conversed in real time using text messages (see O'Connor & Madge (2016) for further discussion on synchronous online interviews). Audio recordings were made of the face-to-face and video interviews and transcribed verbatim. IM interviews came with the benefit of being self-transcribing (Kazmer & Xie, 2008; O'Connor & Madge, 2016), the texts from the online instant messenger interviews were directly transferred into word processor documents that then functioned as the interview transcripts.

Informed by a narrative research approach (Riessman, 2008), I aimed to ask open-ended questions that invited participants to tell detailed stories about their experiences of paying for sex, allowing them to lead the interview and determine its pace, tone, and content. Face-to-face and Skype interviews tended to elicit longer, more detailed narratives, where in IM interviews participants and I tended to converse in shorter sentences, often using the simple or shortened vernacular that is characteristic of text messaging. Online IM interviews, on the other hand, invited a level of disclosure about particularly sensitive or stigmatised issues that face-to-face interviews seldom did. While both face-to-face and online methods of data collection brought with them their own unique advantages and limitations, employing a combination of online and traditional interview methods afforded the opportunity to collect vast, interesting, and diverse data.²

² See Huysamen (2018) for a reflexive methodological discussion on the interview process, particularly the impacts of her positionality as a feminist woman researcher on the data.

Data analysis

The data in this study was analysed thematically (without computer-assisted data analysis software) drawing on principles of both discourse and narrative analysis. I identified the discursive patterns in participants' talk by employing an approach to discourse analysis that could be defined as a "sensitivity to language rather than as a 'method'" (Parker, 2004, p. 310). Informed by a narrative approach, I was careful to keep participants' narratives intact where possible, viewing these stories as strategic and functional and as units of analysis (Riessman, 2008). I organised my data thematically: identifying common themes and subthemes and returning to, re-organising, and refining these themes repeatedly.

This kind of analysis requires a close reading of participants' use of language and a commitment to fragmenting their narratives as little as possible. To this end, I have selected longer excerpts from a few interviews to allow for the detailed discussion of the data that follows.

Discussion of findings

Paid sex as a way to "lose" one's virginity

I began each interview by asking participants to tell me the story of their first experience of paying for sex. About a quarter of the participants explained that their first experience of paying for sex was also their very first experience of penetrative sex. These men constructed sexual inexperience as deeply threatening, and as a hindrance to negotiating desirable masculine identities. For many of these men, paid sex was a way to "lose" their virginity and the sexual inexperience it represented. In the narrative that follows, Anesh talks about the events leading up to his decision to pay for sex:

I remember going out for group drinks... with my friends. It just so happened there was one guy that passed on. He had the perfect life. He had the perfect life.

The perfect wife. He had a Rolls Royce at 28. Cum Laude at School. Er, everything was set for him. Only married for one year and he dies in a car crash, in a car accident. And we're all sitting and my, my friend Gerry, says to all of us in the pub: "Thank the lord, he didn't die a virgin". [laughs] Everybody was laughing except for me [laughs]. Because I was still a virgin [laughs]. At 27 [laughs]. So it got me thinking, I don't want to die a virgin.... So I open up the newspaper and I looked and I said okay, let me try to lose my virginity. (*Anesh, 40, Skype*)

Anesh's narrative, peppered with his own nervous laughter, reflects how an adult man's "virginity" is collectively understood as something laughable within this homosocial context. Anesh and his friends find comfort in the fact that by the time their friend died, he had achieved what would be described as a "perfect life" for a man according to ideals of traditional hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2000). He had achieved success and status in his career, he was financially successful, and, most importantly, he was *not* a virgin. It is as if achieving all the other characteristics of successful masculinity may have been negated if Anesh's friend failed to prove his (hetero)sexual experience and competence.

In talking about their motivations for paying for sex, men reflected on their early sexual experiences. Many positioned themselves as vulnerable in relation to women, and imagined women as judgemental and rejecting. For example, in an IM interview, Dean (38) explained that, while all the other boys at school were "getting sex", the girls would not even talk to him because, he said, "I was poor, never had style, not one of the cool kids". Nelson's narrative below is another example of the kinds of stories men told about being sexually inexperienced teenagers or young adults who felt vulnerable in relation to women:

Interviewer: So on the topic of paying for sex, could you tell me about the first time you paid for sex, what was the context leading up to it?

Nelson: Young, shy and did not know how to talk to ladies. Lol, had low self-esteem. It was difficult for me to talk to girls and I just thought, hey why not just pay for it. So looked in the newspaper, found someone close to where I stayed and called her. I was like hey if I am paying I won't be rejected. So I went, I paid her R500, she gave me a BJ, she climbed on top of me and it was all over in 10 minutes.

Interviewer: Ok, I see. So you say you weren't very confident about being around women at that point in your life?

Nelson: No. Not at all! ... I had a low self-esteem. I was overweight. Well, I still am a bit but not fazed by it. I learned to deal with it and funny enough I do believe the short while I was paying for it, it helped me with that. (*Nelson, 33, IM*)

Many participants explained that at some stage in their lives (often in adolescence) they had been shy and uncomfortable around women, and felt that they lacked the confidence to approach them romantically or sexually. At the same time, their failure to approach women for sex also led to them remaining, in their minds, sexually inexperienced and inadequate. They felt that they lacked the sexual skills necessary to compete with other men, and that their inexperience would surely be exposed in an intimate encounter with a woman. A vicious cycle thus ensued. Losing their virginity to sex workers presented an attractive and non-threatening way to break this cycle.

Many men also constructed paid sex as a context where their emotional needs related to sex could be met. Paid sex offered participants like Nelson a safe space where they were able to “deal with” and overcome their insecurities and low self-esteem. In Nelson’s narrative, there is a sense of becoming in that he tells of emerging from his paid encounters as a slightly more confident and more sexually experienced man than when he began paying for sex – both his behaviours and emotions were more in line with the imperatives of normative male sexuality.

Performance, “sexpertise”, and women’s orgasms

Much critical work on masculinities shows how dominant constructions of successful male sexuality are centred on the notion of sexual “performance” and skill (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Potts, 2000a, 2000b). Participants’ anxieties relating to feeling sexually inexperienced is therefore hardly surprising. The desirable man must possess qualities that allow him to perform sexually. Sexual experience, sexual skill, the strength of his erection, and his ability to be athletic and strong during sex, as well as his sexual endurance and the maintenance of his erection are all essential to sexual performance. These discourses on the imperatives of male sexual performance are constantly reproduced in a variety of discursive fields, including medicine, popular culture, pornography, psychiatry, sexology, and the media (Potts, 2000b). Research has shown how these discourses are prominent in men’s lifestyle magazines (Attwood, 2005; Taylor, 2005; Waling, Duncan, Angelides, & Dowsett, 2018) which commonly problematise any “lack” in male sexual performance.

The discourse of sexual “experience” and its relationship to men’s sexual performance ran steadily through men’s narratives about paying for sex. In the excerpt that follows, Anesh continues to talk about the experience of losing his virginity to a sex worker, and reflects upon the value that this encounter had for him in terms of negotiating his sexuality:

So, I got to her [the sex worker’s] place. I was nervous. Obviously you don’t know what to do... So she took it from there and honestly the experience lasted six minutes. I mean it’s true, I’m a virgin. As soon as she came on me it just came out. So she laughed. You know? She giggled and she said are you a virgin? It was like watching one of these er Hollywood movies, obviously, it was like I was in that *American Pie* situations [laughs]. So on my mind was more that, geez, I fucked up, sorry for my language. It was only six minutes and I’m thinking to myself, I’m paying 350 Rand for six minutes which means I wasted my money. So, she laughed and she giggled and she said to me look, she actually

likes me. I'm a gentleman. She'll be able to assist me or groom me, you know, in that department. So, I saw her for six months. But, but she did warn me, in this six months, we saw each other for six to nine months, she said as I become more learned, I'll become more adventurous. (*Anesh, 40, Skype*)

Across participants' narratives, successful sexual performance was clearly defined in terms of how long the encounter lasted, which again shows how men draw upon dominant discourses around men's sexual stamina and endurance to make meaning of their sexual experiences. Potts (2000a, p. 137) suggests that "the focus on hardness, strength, activity, and endurance in hegemonic masculine sexuality determines how a man measures his own 'success in sex'". Almost all the narratives collected about men losing their virginity to a sex worker end similarly, in what the participants seem to construct as a "failed" first attempt at sex. Anesh describes his first sexual encounter as a failed performance ("I fucked up") because he ejaculated too quickly and the sexual encounter lasted only six minutes. This is similar to Nelson's narrative, where he says, "it only lasted 10 minutes". However, participants did not talk about being ashamed of this "failure" within their paid sexual encounters, and certainly did not talk of experiencing the feelings of humiliation that they said they feared experiencing in other sexual encounters with women. These participants constructed paid sex as a space where they did not have to risk being rejected by women, a space in which they did not have to feel ashamed or threatened by lack of experience, and a space in which they could have their first sexual experience without feeling compelled to put on a good sexual performance or exhibit sexual skill or endurance.

Perhaps even more importantly, participants described the paid sexual encounter as one through which they could acquire new sexual skills. In the preceding excerpt, Anesh describes how the sex worker offered to "assist" him, and how he learned techniques and

styles from her. Again, there is a sense of becoming, a sense that by using the space to “become more learned” or to “become more adventurous” Anesh had somehow graduated or progressed sexually. Similarly, Ashish (37, IM), talking about the benefits of his paid sexual encounters said, “I learnt the different ways to please a women and different positions which if I didn’t explore I would never have done”. In the excerpt below Kyle describes his relationship with a sex worker 15 years his senior, this is yet another example of men paying to learn new sexual skills.

Kyle: Maybe that's why I have not been with any other sex worker since I met her...She is the first women I made orgasm. She taught me how.

Interviewer: Ok, so she has been helpful in that way too, teaching you new skills?

Kyle: Showed me her G-spot and told me what and how to touch her. I felt great after that. (*Kyle, 39, IM*)

Kyle, Ashish, and Anesh’s narratives suggest that sex workers sold men more than just sex: they sold them sexual experience and, most importantly, sexual skill. These women were described as taking the time to patiently teach men “the different ways to please a woman”. The kind of patient, non-judgemental, teaching involved in these paid sexual encounters can be interpreted as being part of the emotional labour involved in the work that sex workers do.

Sex workers sold men like these an opportunity to learn the very important skill of making a woman orgasm. Much critical research on heterosexuality (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gilfoyle, Wilson, & Own, 1992; Potts, 2001) has argued that the presence and evidence of a woman’s orgasm is central to male sexuality because a man’s ability to produce an orgasm is constructed as indicative of his sexual competence and skill. It is the woman’s orgasm that, as Potts (2000a, p. 64) terms it, is the proof of the man’s

sexpertise. It is this *sexpertise* that men can buy from sex workers. Thus, paid sexual encounters were valuable to these men because they offered them a non-threatening space where they could acquire the sexual experience and skills they needed to prove their ability to perform sexually *outside* of these paid encounters.

Men's narratives also provide insight into the complex power dynamics that can be at play within client-sex worker relationships. These narratives complicate simplistic client-as-exploiter, sex worker-as-helpless-victim understandings of sex work that are often uncritically applied to every kind of client-sex worker relationship. In both Anesh and Kyle's narratives, the sex worker assumes a position of power as the knowledgeable and sexually mature teacher, while the client assumes a relatively passive subject position as her inexperienced and bashful student. Anesh describes himself as sexually inexperienced, nervous, and unsure of how to interact with, or relate to, the sex worker. Conversely, he describes the sex worker as calm, knowledgeable, and experienced, and as taking the lead ("she took it from there") in the interaction. Anesh's choice of the word "groom" further illustrates the adult-child/teacher-student dynamic of the relationship, because, when used in the context of sex, the term usually refers to the process of an adult drawing a child into a sexual relationship. Being an experienced teacher who sells a valuable opportunity to learn new sexual skills can afford the sex worker some material power over her client. It motivates him to pay for her skills exclusively ("that's why I have not been with any other sex worker since I met her") and keeps him coming back regularly ("we saw each other for six to nine months"). Research of online advertisements placed by sex workers, shows that sex workers actively capitalise on upon men's desire for the kinds of emotional services that allow them to "imagine themselves as seen, chosen, and desired" (Gezinski, Karandikar, Levitt, & Ghaffarian, 2016, p. 792; Pruitt & Krull, 2010). These narratives about the experienced teacher and the bashful student

suggest that, rather than every client enjoying absolute power in every paid encounter, some sex workers can, and do, wield a level of discursive and material power over their clients.

The performance of your life

Participants' narratives suggest that some men's anxieties around the pressure to perform sexually did not always cease as they grew older and became more sexually experienced. For men like Richard, whose narrative follows, sex remained something that could be potentially stressful or threatening:

Which comes down to pride but also comes down to the fact if you want to have sex with this person again, *they* need to want to, you know. It's all very fine and well going through all this, you know, winning the person's attention, you're having a great third date and you have sex what happens after that? When you feel you put in the performance of your life and they like "eh I'll give you a call next week". So then it's back to, well you know what? I really like so-and-so and if I pay her, I get to see her every Tuesday morning. (*Richard, 43, Face-to-face*)

In Richard's story about a fruitless dating experience, he attributes the woman's rejection to his own sexual performance ("When you feel you put in the performance of your life and they like 'eh I'll give you a call next week'"). This is one example of how men constructed sex in terms of their own sexual performance, rather than as an erotic encounter between two complex individuals. That something is a performance implies that there is an audience to observe and appraise this performance. In the case of a traditional heterosexual encounter, the woman then becomes this audience. As Farvid and Braun (2006, p. 304) posit, "with sexual performance framed as central to both the male ego and masculinity... it also paradoxically positions women as 'powerful' and as having the ability to cause 'sexual anxiety' by pointing out men's sexual inadequacies." This study shows how this phallogentric discourse of sex as equal to a man's sexual

performance is taken up men, leaving them feeling “vulnerable” to women’s judgement, real or perceived.

Similarly, Frank (2003, p. 72) theorises that men find strip clubs alluring because they provide a “fantasy of sexual potency” while also providing “a certain protection from vulnerability that other arenas, including the bedroom at home, may not”. At these strip clubs men could fantasise about, and to some extent engage in, erotic encounters with women, but because they were not allowed to remove their clothes or have sex with the dancers, they were neither at risk of having their bodies or physical performances appraised by the women, nor were they responsible for the women’s pleasure (Frank, 2003). Narratives such as Richard’s show how paying for sex also offers a “fantasy of potency” and “protection from vulnerability”: a man can engage in an erotic encounter with a woman, but, because he has paid her, he can do so without running the risk of being rejected by her after sex. Because a woman’s rejection after sex is understood as a direct reflection of a man’s poor sexual performance, removing the risk of rejection from the sexual encounter protects him from feelings of undesirability and inadequacy.

Paid sex as a safe space to deal with sexual difficulties

Pott’s suggests that the “hard on” is the essence of male sexuality in our society (2000b, p. 87). The erection is constructed as a male sexual health concern through a variety of discursive fields including medicine, sexology, psychiatry, as well as popular culture. The hard, strong erection is deemed “normal”, “natural”, and indicative of a “healthy” and successful male sexuality. Similarly, the failure of the penis to erect fully is constructed as a medical condition, as unhealthy, dysfunctional, and abnormal. A lucrative medical industry for diagnosing and treating these medical “problems” supports and is supported by this medical discourse (Potts, 2000a).

Participants' narratives generally revealed how central "the hard on" and sexual performance was to their understanding of desirable male sexuality. However, for men who had experienced difficulty with achieving or maintaining erections (which four men I interviewed specifically spoke about), the idea of sexual performance was particularly threatening and anxiety provoking. In the excerpt that follows, Grant speaks about his experience of struggling with erections:

About two years ago... I started to experience what I thought was erectile dysfunction and this is a big worry for a man. Not only because it brings his entire conception of his virility into question, but I started to worry about if my heart was working well if my circulation was okay, if my overall health was okay... So, I was seeing [a regular sex worker] and it was such a relief to engage in really athletic wild sex with her. I remember one time I was almost crying with relief. I thought I had a heart condition or something and she would just show up and everything would work beautifully. A couple times it didn't and of course I didn't really feel guilt - she actually felt worse about it than I did... I have to say it was a relief. I know it sounds dirty but if suddenly your body stops working it's frightening. I was so worried about it one time that I actually went down toward the massage parlours and just had crazy sex on the floor with this one girl and she assured me everything is totally fine. I think I must have tipped her five hundred Rand. So I think that's another big part of it. You start to worry about your body and how a woman reacts to your body and what you can do with it is a big deal and it's part of being human as part of a man's conception of himself. It's obviously not the most important thing, but there's no question that it's important. Look, think about it, if you are a man and you have a girlfriend or you are having a sexual relationship with somebody you know well, this is something you are likely to keep secret from her. And the bottom line is, it's massively humiliating to try to impress your girlfriend in bed and nothing happens. Obviously your girlfriend will be understanding but she's going to wonder whether there's something wrong with her, she's going to be hurt and ultimately she's not the one to solve the problem because of course your ability to get an erection directly influences her ability to enjoy sex so there's massive

pressure to please her and that of course makes everything much worse. (*Grant, 46, Instant messenger*)

Grant understands his difficulties with erections in terms of a medical sexual health discourse. He speaks about his fear that his “erectile dysfunction” was indicative of a “heart condition”, poor circulation, or just poor “overall health”. These discourses of compromised health are then juxtaposed with the “athletic” sex he was able to have with the sex worker.

The way in which Grant makes sense of his erectile problems also reflects the phallocentrism that dominated many participants’ narratives. Jackson (1984, p. 44) uses the term *coital imperative* to capture the way in which dominant, phallocentric discourses construct the erect penis penetrating the vagina as the only legitimate form of sex, leaving little room for the imagining of sex without penetration. Grant understands his “erectile dysfunction” as extremely threatening to a man’s masculinity as it “brings his entire conception of his virility into question”. The “massive pressure to please” that Grant describes is indicative of how women’s sexual pleasure is also understood according to these phallocentric constructions of heterosexuality. The woman’s enjoyment of sex (and her subsequent orgasm) is understood as being reliant on the man’s ability to penetrate her. This phallocentric understanding of women’s sexual pleasure remains dominant in society despite women reporting masturbation, oral sex, and other kinds of sex that does not involve a penis penetrating a vagina, as equally and often more pleasurable than penetrative sex (Gavey, McPhillips, & Braun, 1999; Jackson, 1984; McPhillips, Braun, & Gavey, 2001).

Ussher (1997, p. 328) highlights how threatening erectile problems are to masculinity by arguing that “male impotence or erectile problems is a serious matter, particularly in a culture where the penis, and successful achievement of intercourse, is

how 'sex' is defined". Having penetrative heterosexual sex is largely how masculinity is defined in our heteronormative society. In this discursive landscape, when a man is unable to penetrate a woman he is therefore both desexualised and emasculated (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gavey et al., 1999; McPhillips et al., 2001; Potts, 2000b). It is thus hardly surprising that Grant describes his failed erections as "massively humiliating". On the one hand, the man and his penis is privileged within heteronormative discourses and positioned powerfully as the penetrator and the provider of pleasure. On the other hand, it is precisely this phallogentric construction of heterosexuality that puts men under "massive pressure to please" women, rendering men feeling vulnerable to women's appraisals of their performance and making women seem dangerous and threatening to their masculinity.

Paid sex thus provided some men with a non-threatening context where they felt safe to engage in sex despite their potentially emasculating sexual difficulties. Participants described the dynamic between themselves and sex workers as different to their relationships with their wives or partners. In the excerpt above, Grant explains that failed erections are so humiliating that he keeps them a secret from his partner and they become unspeakable and unknowable in her presence. Conversely, for Grant paid sex is as a space where he can openly, and without fear, acknowledge his "problem". Here the sex worker not only has sex with her client, but also accommodates his specific sexual and emotional needs. The emotional demands placed on the paid encounter is reflected in Grant's emotive language as he describes his inability to have erections as "frightening" and himself as "almost crying with relief" when he does achieve an erection with the sex worker. Grant's narrative is also a story of becoming, one where, through the paid sexual encounter, he becomes sexually competent and virile once again. Reinstating Grant's masculinity, by ensuring him that "everything was totally fine" with his sexual performance, is part of the emotional labour that the sex worker provided.

Farvid and Braun (2006) suggest that, when it comes to sexual dysfunction or inadequacy, the male ego is often constructed as fragile, and something that should be protected. They show how, in the case of male sexual dysfunction, offering men support and reassurance that they are sexually adequate is part of the emotional work that women in heterosexual relationships do. However, this study suggests that some men choose to turn to sex workers rather than partners to have these emotional needs met. These findings build upon a body of knowledge that recognises the emotional labour that sex workers perform (Bernstein, 2001; Huysamen, 2019; Milrod & Weitzer, 2012; Sanders, 2012).

Finally, in the last section of Grant's narrative which follows (separated from the preceding excerpt for clarity) Grant speaks about the "selfishness" that paying for sex "allows" him:

You don't want to go out to dinner with a woman you really like or love and go home and nothing happens. But with a girl you are paying, the dynamic is utterly different. You have the space to say "look I have this problem and I need you to do X Y and Z number to see if this works" and you know she won't exactly be heartbroken if you don't have sex with her and you just pay her for her time. You know she won't even think twice about it. And this goes back to the selfishness you're allowed to have if you're paying for sex. Again, and I don't mean to sound offensive, but if your girlfriend is giving you oral sex for instance and you are not getting a hard on she's going to be annoyed and if you say "listen I need you to keep doing that, I need you to keep sucking my dick for like 45 minutes to see if I can actually get this to work" or you want to really thrust hard in her mouth and she doesn't like that too much then the problem doesn't get solved that's mutually frustrating. I'm not saying that all sex with people you pay is humiliating but it's just a small adjustment that could mean everything for a guy. (*Grant, 46, IM*)

The notion of "selfish sex" emerged as a theme across numerous interviews. Paying for selfish sex, in the context of these men's narratives, meant that men could make sexual

demands of sex workers that they would not make of their partners. To provide another example, Mario (32, IM) told me that he often did not particularly want to engage in foreplay, an aspect of sex that his girlfriend greatly enjoyed, he said, “I don’t always feel for foreplay I just want selfish sex but then I feel guilty. Whereas with a worker it’s a non issue”. Similarly, Piet (55, Face-to-face) speaking of the advantages of paid sex, said, “Selfish advantages mainly, but it’s a sexual outlet for me on my ‘terms’. I can also do it when, how and how often as I like. Basically – ‘my terms sex’”. In a society where discourses of permissiveness, reciprocity, and mutuality are increasingly being constructed as the benchmark for ethical heterosexual sex (Braun, Gavey, & McPhillips, 2003; Gilfoyle et al., 1992), paying for “selfish sex” means that, men can enjoy sex where their own desires take centre stage. However, Grant’s narrative speaks to more than just a disregard for the sex worker’s needs in order to privilege his own; it also points to his willingness to humiliate and dominate her. The word “humiliating” appears twice in Grant’s narrative. Grant first uses it to describe the sense of emasculation and powerlessness that he experienced in his relationship with his partner as a result of his erectile problems. When the narrative then moves on to discuss paid sex, we see how it is Grant who humiliates the sex worker by describing a situation where he could “really thrust hard in her mouth” even though she has communicated that “she doesn’t like that too much”. Thus, we can see how Grant manages his own feelings of humiliation and powerlessness experienced in his relationship by “massively humiliating” the sex worker.

This narrative again elucidates the complexity of the power dynamics that can be at play in the client-sex worker relationship. In the preceding paragraphs, the picture of the sex worker in a position of power as a mature teacher figure emerges in relation to her inexperienced and bashful client/student. However, in men’s discussions of “selfish sex” a different pattern emerges. Here, men understand the client-sex worker dynamic as a

space where they are entitled to make some sexual demands on the sex worker. Perhaps more significant is the finding that these varying positions of power are not necessarily absolutes, and that the flow of power can be complex, multifaceted, and shifting. Grant's story about his erectile problems is perhaps one of the most emotive displays of a vulnerable masculinity in the interview data, as he arrives to pay for sex out of desperation and is at the sex worker's mercy to reaffirm his masculinity. However, the very same narrative also reflects his willingness to sexually dominate or humiliate the sex worker to satisfy his own sexual and emotional needs.

Rather than reproducing essentialised notions of exploitation and victimhood that are often uncritically taken up in sex work legislation and public debates, these findings highlight the importance of recognising the complexity, multiplicities, contradictions, and nuances enveloped within client-sex worker relationships.

Concluding comments: On the production of the desire to pay for sex

This study contributes to the limited academic knowledge on clients through demonstrating how men's motivations to pay for sex are discursively constituted. What constitutes the ideal man in society is shifting, with representations of a "new" more gender-equal man who has access to his emotions becoming increasingly visible and socially desirable. At the same time, the imperatives of male sexual performance still persist, largely unchanged from when Connell and colleagues originally outlined the features of what it meant to be an ideal man in society more than three decades ago (Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 1987). Popular representations of masculinity continue to reproduce the image of the sexually skilled man as ideal, while medical discourses pathologise any man who falls short of these ideals (Potts, 2000a). Today the ideal man

is expected, as he been in the past, to be sexually experienced and skilful, to have a “healthy” sex drive and “strong” erections.

These dominant discourses around masculinity and male sexuality are clearly reflected in these men’s narratives about paying for sex. Participants openly expressed their desires for emotionality and intimacy, both within their paid and non-paid sexual relationships. Almost all of the men also actively distanced themselves from the violence associated with men who pay for sex, making it clear that they did not engage in or condone violence against sex workers (See also Author 2015). Men’s narratives also repeatedly reflected the social imperatives of male sexual performance.

Failure to meet the ideals of male sexual performance is, to varying degrees, is inevitable for most men; as both Butler (1999) and Connell (2000) suggest, these idealised versions of masculinity are radically uninhabitable positions. It is thus unsurprising that some men, like the participants, might invest in purchasing the sexual skills that would allow them to better approximate these idealised versions of masculinity. If being a virgin feels like a serious hindrance to a young man’s ability to negotiate his manhood, it makes sense that he might value paying for this rite of passage. In neoliberal capitalist society where constant self-improvement is demanded and where medical discourses define any “deficit” in sexual “performance” as requiring treatment or intervention, it is hardly surprising that men might use paid sexual encounters as a means of sexual self-improvement (Potts, 2000b; Taylor, 2005). If a man’s failure to meet the largely unachievable expectations to “perform” during sex is perceived as a reflection of a failed masculinity, it is understandable that a man might opt to have sex in the imagined safety of a paid sexual encounter where his masculinity is not at stake in the same way.

Zaz (1997, p. 303) suggests that “although relatively little detailed historical work has been done on the production of the client’s desire, it hardly seems far-fetched to

speculate that the cultural denigration of chastity (especially among men), the attribution of various disorders to ‘not getting any’, and the equation of a ‘healthy’ sex life with general well-being all serve to encourage prostitution even as the laws deny it”. This study provides empirical support for this assertion that men’s desires to pay for sex are tied into, and produced by, broader discourses around male sexuality in our patriarchal, heteronormative society.

These findings, which point to the discursive origins of clients’ desire, have implications for those looking to influence how sex work operates within a society. Rather than continuing with unsuccessful and harmful attempts to limit and control the sex work industry through the criminalisation of sex work³, it would be more effective to attend to the broader social structures that produce the conditions that shape these industries in the first place. ⁴ In terms of men’s purchase of sex, this paper points to the value of attending to the sites where these expectations for male sexuality continue to be reproduced, targeting them for change (Potts, 2000a). These might include industries that profit from medicalising men’s sexual “performance”, positioning any mode of male sexuality that falls outside of these expectations in terms of dysfunction (Potts, 2000b). It may also include men’s lifestyle magazines, social media platforms, and various other media and online spaces, which take up these health discourses to endorse and reproduce unachievable versions of male sexuality and shame the men who do not meet them (Attwood, 2005; Taylor, 2005).

³ See Platt et al. (2018) for a meta-analysis and systematic review of international research on sex work that shows that criminalisation of sex work is linked to poor physical, sexual, and mental health outcomes for sex workers, thereby highlighting the importance of decriminalisation of sex work.

⁴ While I look at the discursive production of men’s desire to pay for sex, there are very material conditions implicated in some sex working women’s presence in the industry. For a thorough analysis of these social and material mechanisms (such as poverty and harmful immigration laws, border controls, and drug policies) see Smith and Mac (2018).

Building upon research that recognises the emotional work that sex workers do, this paper shows that some men buy far more than just sex from sex workers (Bernstein, 2001; Huysamen, 2019; Milrod & Weitzer, 2012). The findings reveal that some men want sex workers to express desire for them, to hold and contain their anxieties, to be patient and caring sexual teachers, to help address their sexual problems, to bolster their confidence, to facilitate and encourage their sexual exploration and to affirm their masculinities – and all in an environment that feels safe and non-judgemental. In order to develop a holistic understanding of the mechanisms involved in the purchase of sex, we might begin by identifying what it actually is that men pay for when they pay for sex. Understanding sex work in terms of the physical sex act alone ignores the significant emotional labour implicated in the work that many sex workers do, and overlooks one of the features that not only draws some men to pay for sex but often keeps them paying for it.

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