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# **‘GETTING PAID FOR SEX IS MY KICK’: QUALITATIVE STUDY OF MALE SEX WORKERS<sup>i</sup>**

Aidan Wilcox and Kris Christmann<sup>ii</sup>

## **INTRODUCTION**

As with its female counterpart, male sex work (MSW) has generally been regarded as deeply problematic, either because of negative societal attitudes to the selling of sex or the prevalence of psychosocial and economic problems amongst those attracted to MSW and the attendant health risks and dangers encountered whilst engaged in it. While the phenomenon of female sex work has received a great deal of criminological scrutiny, there has been comparatively less attention paid to male sex workers (MSWs). The research which we report on in this chapter aimed to further our understanding of the motivations of MSWs, the risks they face, their engagement with support agencies and their intentions for the future.

### *Aetiology of Sex Work*

Sociologists, psychologists and psychiatrists have taken different approaches to identifying the ‘causes’, or factors predictive, of men’s involvement in sex work. This earlier discussion tended to view male sex work as a ‘pathology’ (Coombs, 1974) and identified a range of predisposing psychological factors, including: low intelligence; learning difficulties; emotional disturbance; sex role confusion; and oedipal fixation.

More recently attention has shifted away from this individual pathology approach towards those social and situational factors believed to underlie the motivation to sell sex. These studies emphasise that MSWs tend to have multiple problems including; a disrupted family life; a broken home (Harris 1973); experience of abuse and neglect by parents (Boyer 1989); poor parental role models (including approval of sex work); deprived socio-economic backgrounds, delinquent peers; poor school attendance (Coombs, 1974); isolation and alienation; and problematic alcohol and drug use (Morse et al 1992). More generally, any decision to sell sex also involves what Ian Shaw and colleagues (1996) refer to as ‘a mix of coercion and comfort’ factors such as; developing an independent personality; the desire to gain adult attention and acceptance; along with the experience of negative labelling.

The question arises as to how a person moves from conformist member of society to sex worker. John Scott and colleagues (2005) note that the stereotypical image of a MSW remains one of a coerced psychopathological misfit who has been sexually abused as a child and is desperate for money. Their work in Australia has increasingly come to challenge such a view, arguing that the two dominant discourses of epidemiology and socio-pathology have tended to over emphasize ‘problematic male sex populations’ (street prostitutes) at the expense of other relatively unproblematic male sex populations (independent escort). For instance, Victor Minichiello and colleagues (1999) report that non-street workers tend to be better educated; report fewer financial problems; are likelier to see sex work as a long term occupation; are more prone to engage in safer sex; and feel more comfortable with sex work than do male street workers.

### *Characteristics of MSWs*

According to research by Peter Aggleton (1999) and Donald West and Buz de Villiers (1993) not all MSWs can be characterised as psychologically unstable, desperate or destitute. Whilst this is not to discount the experiences of those MSWs who have suffered child abuse, homelessness or whose addiction problems drive their sex work, it is to accept that the profile of MSWs is diverse and that contextual factors need to be taken into account when explaining involvement. Minichiello et al (1998) argue that the visibility and ease of research access has in the past tended to skew

the categories of MSW used for research, the effect of which has been to exclude the context of sex work as an organised economic activity (although the same authors caution against romanticised narratives which suggest a less exploitative relationship in male sex work than female sex work).

The picture that unfolds from these studies is that the intrinsic nature of sex work is not necessarily oppressive and that there are different kinds of worker and client experiences which encapsulate varying degrees of victimisation, exploitation, agency and choice (Minichiello et al, 1998), themes which are explored later in this chapter.

In defining what a MSW is, we have chosen the broad definition offered by Livy Visano (1988) who defines sex work as an occupation where a sex worker is hired to provide sexual services for monetary considerations, thus allowing for more transient involvements, as well as including those who sell sex to females and couples (as some of our participants do).

### **RESEARCH AIMS, METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

The study on which this chapter reports explores the experiences of MSWs in Kirklees (West Yorkshire) and neighbouring areas. Specifically, it aimed, through interviews with MSWs, to investigate a number of broad themes including the socio-economic backgrounds of MSWs, their motivations for entering sex work and attitudes towards it, their sexuality and the risks of the work.

The male sex industry is largely hidden which makes it very difficult to estimate the size and boundaries of the population. The industry is also characterised by differentiation between those who primarily work indoors (either at home or in a sauna) and those who work on the streets. It is important, therefore, to consider the extent to which the current sample is representative of the wider population of sex workers.

Not knowing any MSWs personally, we were somewhat at a loss where to start. Serendipitously, an article appeared on the BBC website<sup>iii</sup> describing the murder of a MSW, which named two magazines carrying adverts for male escorts. Having located a number of interviewees through these publications, we then asked our first interviewees where else they advertised, and they suggested a magazine popular with gay men, and a national tabloid. We were also directed to a number of internet sites where escorts advertised. In total, we identified a potential sample of 43 MSWs. Of the 28 MSWs we were able to contact,<sup>iv</sup> nine were willing to participate in the research within the timescale of the fieldwork (interviews took place in August and September 2006).

Conducting the research in a sensitive and ethical manner was a prime concern, and the research was designed accordingly. All participants were informed about the purposes of the research both verbally and in writing, and it was made clear that they could withdraw at any time.

It is important to acknowledge that the small size of this exploratory study of MSWs means that generalisations to the (unknown size of the) wider population of MSWs cannot reliably be made. Secondly, due to the way in which participants were recruited (through advertisements for escorts/massages) all of those interviewed were 'indoor' sex workers. Our research, cannot therefore, shed any light on the experiences of 'outdoor' sex workers (commonly known as 'rent boys'), which other studies suggest is likely to be very different (e.g. Connell and Hart, 2003). However, we believe that our sample is broadly representative of the indoor male sex industry in the region. Unlike Judith Connell and Graham Hart's (2003) study of MSWs in Edinburgh, for example, our sample included those who worked mainly with couples and females as well as those who worked only with males, and also included a transvestite sex worker.

## MALE SEX WORKER PROFILES

The nine MSWs who participated in this study ranged in age from 19 to 45, with an average age of 34 (see table 1 below). All were white and in terms of sexuality six described themselves as homosexual, two as heterosexual and one as bisexual. One of the homosexual interviewees worked as a transvestite.

All but one of the MSWs had held some form of paid employment prior to entering sex work. For some, their involvement in the labour market was only sporadic or irregular, in part due to difficulties in adjusting to employment on leaving total institutions (armed services, church, and prison). Others had white collar, professional or business occupations and one had a university degree. The common factor was dissatisfaction with their working lives, which was instrumental in leading them into sex work.

A sharply contrasting picture emerges when examining the differing childhood and family relations among the MSWs. The majority of MSWs reported either having broadly unexceptional or happy childhoods, as one remarked:

Eddie: Just a loving, caring normal happy family, believe it or not. No problems. There was nothing that kind of stood out. You'd go home, there'd always be food on the table, we'd always be clean, we were always in school, we always went to mass, we did all the normal things, there was no hidden secrets...It was just a good time, a perfect childhood.

However there were some notable exceptions to this. Two respondents reported regular physical abuse perpetrated by their parents, one of which included instances of severe neglect and violence:

Chris: I was shop lifting to feed myself because I had to [...] I mean days and days without food. Lost my front teeth when I were seven because my dad just hit me in the face when I took chocolate out the fridge, I had to put my two front teeth in my gum and by the time I woke up in the morning they had been bent right back, [...] I'd had a red hot poker shoved on me but this is all before I was ten.

As result of the neglect and violence he went into local authority care, an experience which he found to be enjoyable (saying 'I'd recommend it to anyone'). Three MSWs reported fractured family relationships, primarily due to their families not being able to accept their sexuality. Family rejection accompanied by death of family members meant that the three had no further contact with their immediate family. None of the MSWs reported any instances of sexual abuse and only one MSW described growing up with a drug using parent.

Notwithstanding the vastly differing experiences of family life and upbringing, none of the MSWs reported having close family relations. Three had no contact with their families due to earlier physical abuse and neglect, or because of their family's hostility to their sexual orientation. Whilst the other MSWs were not estranged from their families, none had told their family members of their involvement in MSW. Although five of the men had criminal convictions, in most cases these were not recent, and none had been received as a result of their involvement in sex work. In the table below, some of the characteristics of sex workers are summarised.

Table 1. Male sex worker characteristics

Name <sup>v</sup>	Age	Sexuality	Physical abuse	Sexual abuse	Ever in care	Housing	Criminal convictions	Age at involvement	Length of involvement
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Andy	45	Homosexual	No	No	No	Owner occupier	No	36	9 years
Britney	36	Homosexual (transvestite)	No	No	Yes	Owner occupier	Yes	24	12 years
Chris	43	Bi-sexual	Yes	Yes <sup>vi</sup>	Yes	Unknown	Yes	10 & 40	2 years
Dave	26	Homosexual	No	No	No	Private rented	Yes	19	7 years
Eddie	42	Homosexual	No	No	No	Owner occupier	No	24	18 years
Frank	32	Heterosexual	No	No	No	Private rented	Yes	29	3 years
Graham	26	Heterosexual	No	No	No	Private rented	No	25	6 months
Harry	19	Homosexual	Yes	No	No	With partner	No	15	4 years
Ian	38	Homosexual	No	No	No	Owner occupier	Yes	19	19 years*

\*with a nine year break from age 24-31.

As can be seen, the men we interviewed had a wide diversity of backgrounds, in terms of upbringing, experience of schooling and work and relationships. In the next section we explore in more detail the reasons why these men became involved in sex work, the nature of that work, the level of their commitment to sex work and their plans for the future.

## MALE SEX WORK – MOTIVATIONS, INVOLVEMENT AND LEAVING

### *Motivations*

Reasons for involvement in female sex work have been explored by many researchers, and factors include coercion, poverty, prior physical or sexual abuse and drug use (e.g. Edwards, 1991, Bagley and Young, 1987). However, there is no reason to suspect that motivations for MSWs will be similar; indeed the evidence from our interviews is that they become involved for very different reasons.

It is notable that none of the MSWs cited coercion of any form as a reason for involvement. Neither did any of the MSWs have pimps. Although Chris, Harry and Ian had current partners, it did not appear that the partner played a coercive role in the decision to become a sex worker. Frank had once had a relationship with a female escort, but again there was no coercion in his decision to enter sex work, instead it merely confirmed him in a choice he had already made.

Britney, the transvestite sex worker had been brought up by his mother until the age of eight (when she died) and he found out in his mid teens that she had been a prostitute. He decided to follow her into the profession, and it was apparent that there was an element of competitiveness in his motivation for sex work:

Britney: I don't want to sound like I'm blowing my own trumpet – but I was really, really good at what I did, but not because I was interested in the money, does that make sense? ... I got a kick out of proving I was better than or as good as the girls.

While money was a motivation for some of the MSWs in our study, for only one was it the main one. For the rest, money was a secondary motivation, behind other factors such as the freedom offered by the lifestyle and the chance to escape from the perceived humdrum of 'normal' jobs:

Andy: It was mainly boredom, oh bloody hell, how long am I going to have to keep doing this. When I was working in London, travelling up and down on the train was the pits...I used to see the other people on the train and think I can't do this for the rest of my life...I was just like 'arghh, not for me!'

There was no evidence that drugs were instrumental in any of the MSWs decision to enter sex work. Only Harry said he was currently using drugs and his drug use did not appear to be the reason for his involvement; although he did admit that drugs were a way of dealing with the stresses of the job.

None of the men in our study said that they had been sexually abused as children (Chris did not consider his sexual experiences at the age of ten as abuse), although two had experienced some form of physical abuse (which in Chris' case was severe).

For three of the MSWs, a high sex drive was given as the main reason for their involvement. For example, Frank, a heterosexual ex-services male, used escorting as a means of satisfying his sexual needs:

Frank: Main motivation is me sex, I'm very, very sexually minded. I've been to sexaholics anonymous, I've a very high sex drive, I masturbate a lot...I'm like, say some woman walks in there now, the first thing that comes into my head is I wonder whether she'd be a good fuck, that is the first instinct I have, and it's bad in a way...

Not everyone found it easy to identify exactly what had decided them to turn to sex work. Eddie, who had spent several years in a Christian order, found it hard to pin down what was the turning point for him, as the following exchange demonstrates:

*Interviewer: Can I just ask, sometimes I sit at home bored of an evening. How do you make that kind of leap from, oh I'm fed up, life's not great, to I know I'm going to put an advert in the paper, where does that come from?*

Eddie: I don't know. I think because I needed a new challenge, I think that was probably what it was, it was getting a bit stale. I don't know. I was looking at that question and I thought I won't be able to answer that. I don't know where it came from.

*Interviewer: So you hadn't thought about it before that evening?*

Eddie: No. And it wasn't even the fact that the electricity bill was in and I needed 50 quid, because I was working full time, I had enough money, then I thought to myself, was it just pure loneliness, well no, because I've never really felt that I've been alone...I really don't know, I just thought, let's just do it, see what happens.

Each of the interviewees had different experiences and motivations for their involvement in sex work. Certainly their motivations differ from those typically associated with female prostitution and what stands out is that they described their decisions as being freely made. Even when money was an influence, sex work was seen as an enjoyable activity, and there was no coercion evident in any of the men's decisions. We discuss the notion of agency in more detail later in the chapter. Before that, we turn to the business of sex work: how MSWs meet their clients; what they do; and the dangers they face.

### *Involvement in sex work*

For most of the sex workers, involvement in sex work began either in the late teens (two) or mid twenties (four). Andy, who was the oldest of the participants (46) was 35 when he started. However, for two of the sex workers, involvement began at an early age. Chris (42) said that he had first been given money for sex at the age of 10 while living in a care home:

It happened before then like, when I were ten at [...] which was another kind of allocated centre place, my first night in, there were three kids, 13, 14, and 15 I think they were, well a lot older than me, and they got me to suck their dicks... somebody give me 10 bob, which were a lot of money.

After leaving the home, he stopped sex work, and only took it up again two years ago, with the knowledge and apparent support of his wife. The only other example of child sexual prostitution was Harry who started escorting at the age of fifteen.

The length of our participants' involvement in sex work varied considerably, from six months up to 19 years, although six of the group had been involved for at least six years. All worked within the 'indoor' sex industry, working as escorts/masseurs either from their own homes or visiting clients. None of the MSWs we interviewed worked in premises such as brothels or saunas. In fact, in our search of print and internet advertisements, we found very few such places, and if the advertisements we saw are representative of the indoor sex market, the majority of MSWs are 'sole traders'.

We asked the MSWs how they met their clients and why they chose this method. All of those interviewed used advertisements in the print media, while a few additionally used internet sites. There was general agreement that the internet was less likely to generate business, or that those who did get in touch this way were less likely to be genuine clients. Somewhat surprisingly, two of the escorts said that they sometimes received new clients by 'word of mouth' from existing clients. Unlike the outdoor sex industry, the MSWs in our sample were entirely reactive, dependent on clients contacting them either through their adverts or recommendations. None of them actively sought out clients, for example, by hanging around gay bars or approaching men at hotels.

The sexuality of MSWs determined what types of clients they would take. Two of the MSWs were heterosexual, and so would not see single male clients. In fact most of their clients were couples, but they refused to have any direct sexual contact with the males (they would however participate in a 'threesome' or let the man watch the escort have sex with his partner). Of the rest, six described themselves as gay (including Britney the transvestite), and their clients were almost exclusively male, although one or two did entertain couples occasionally. Chris described his sexuality as 'universal'. He escorted males, females and couples, and provided the widest range of sexual services.<sup>vii</sup> Although the adverts we saw are carefully worded so as not to suggest that sex is involved (they are in fact typically very briefly worded, for example 'mature male, M62, offers massage'), by definition, all the MSWs offered full sex:

Dave: It makes me laugh sometimes, some of them come along and say they just want a massage and they try to beat the price down because it's only a massage, but they never only want a massage!

When asked about the sexuality of their clients, they were described as 'all shades of the spectrum'. The gay MSWs thought that some of their clients were either bisexual or gay, and a surprising number were said to be married or with female partners. Britney, the transvestite, said that many of his clients claimed not to be gay, a claim he dismissed:

Britney: If I had a pound for every time someone said “well I’m not gay really”, oh fuck-off, no of course you’re not love! What because I’ve got a fucking skirt or something on, you think that means that I’m a woman?

There was considerable variation in the amount of income generated through sex work. Andy, who was the eldest MSW in the sample, charged £60 per session (which might last up to three hours) and saw perhaps five clients a week, generating around £300 per week. Most of the other MSWs earned more than this. Chris, for example, charged £85 for an hour, and £350 for an ‘overnighter’, and typically earned more than £400 a week, while Frank and Graham who both charged around £70 per hour for a minimum of two hours, and several hundred for an overnighiter, said they made in excess of £600 a week. Harry and Ian were the most successful, claiming to make over £1000 per week each. None of the men worked for an agency or pimp, and thus kept all of the money they earned.

As noted earlier, five of the MSWs interviewed had paid jobs other than sex work. Andy, for example, was in the process of retraining as a plasterer, to prepare for the day when his declining sexual stamina would affect his sex work. Frank, who described the sex industry as cyclical, worked as a lorry driver during the ‘lean times’ such as during the summer holidays or after Christmas. Both Harry and Ian ran a successful pet products business, while Chris had a sideline as a gardener. The motivations for these secondary careers differed. In Andy’s case, it can be seen as a way of preparing for an eventual exit from sex work, while in Frank’s case, for example, it was a means of smoothing out income over the year. We next asked MSWs what were their future plans, and whether they wished to leave sex work.

### *Leaving sex work*

None of the MSWs said that they currently wished to leave the profession. Even Andy who was retraining as a plasterer thought he would be doing this for years to come:

Andy: I think it will probably continue, and even if I pull the ad in the [magazine] I think I’d get people ringing me up with ‘are you still working?’ and I’d say ‘oh yes’.

Britney, who described his involvement as ‘treading water’, said that he would be involved, either as an active sex worker or as a ‘manager’, for the foreseeable future:

Britney: One way or another probably forever to be honest. ...recently, I’ve been mingling a bit, taking a day off and helping others set themselves up ...I think I’ll be in it forever, until I drop dead.

All of the others similarly expressed their desire to remain in the profession, and when asked why, stressed the positive factors of the job such as the ‘lavish lifestyle’ (Harry), ‘being my own boss...and obviously the money’ (Graham) and the flexibility of the job ‘you can choose to work two/three hours a week and take it easy, put your feet up’ (Ian).

In order to explore more fully their commitment to sex work, we asked the MSWs specifically what their plans were for the future, and what they thought they would be doing in five to ten years. Harry, Andy, Ian, Britney and Eddie all re-emphasised that they expected still to be in sex work. Andy, who was ambivalent about his involvement, and Britney who was less so, thought they would still be in sex work in five to ten years time due to its addictive nature, as Britney noted:



It's a drug, it's addictive more than anything else because once you get into it it's so hard because even if you stop, and life is hard for everybody, and if you get a big bill for £200 its like oh god, you know you can get back into it.

Both Graham and Chris said that they did not think five to ten years ahead or have any specific plans for the future:

Chris: Don't have none [plans]. Take each day as it comes. We used to plan things, but we don't plan nothing no more, there's too many people we know who's died...every second of every day, people are just dying, why waste fucking time planning things, just get on with it.

Graham: Five years time is a hell of a long way away for someone who takes life day to day. It's not sort of something that I think about, the future, to be truthful. Sort of next week, the week after that, is as far as I am concerned.

Only Dave and Frank said that they would hope not to be in sex work in five to ten years time. Dave said he would like to pursue property development, or a career in the creative industries, which would also offer the freedom he desired. For Frank (one of the two heterosexual MSWs) the desire to settle down and have children was creating a tension with his enjoyment of sex work:

I'm at a crossroads now, just short of 33, where if I want a family and settle down, I've got to look at the next few years. If I have a kid at 40, I feel that's too old for me, so I've only got a few years left, or in a few years time I could still want to carry on doing it, who knows?

When prompted to state who or what would help them to leave sex work, both Dave and Eddie said they would also consider leaving if they met the right person. In summary, none of the men were actively trying to exit sex work, and were generally content with their current involvement. For the minority who would consider giving it up in future, only an external event, such as a new relationship, would cause them to reconsider.

## **RISKS AND PRECAUTIONS**

Due to the hidden nature of MSW, sexual encounters invariably take place in locations, such as hotel rooms, or clients' or MSWs' houses, where there are no 'capable guardians', to use Larry Cohen and Marcus Felson's (1979) term. The potential for violence against MSW therefore exists. Research into the extent of violence against MSWs is sparse. However, such research as exists suggests that the risks are considerably lower than for female sex workers, for whom it has been argued that 'sexual and other physical violence is the normative experience for women in prostitution' (Farley et al., 1998: 3). Violence from clients among 'indoor' MSWs is rare. Although outdoor workers face a higher level of violence, this tends to be related to their drug or alcohol use, or homelessness, rather than to the selling of sex *per se* (UK NSWP 2004; Connell and Hart, 2003).

In order to determine the risks faced by our interviewees, we began by asking whether they had ever been sexually or physically assaulted or robbed while working. Only Ian said he had been assaulted (twice); none of the other MSWs had had any experience of physical or sexual assault or robbery, although Andy and Britney felt that they had had some 'near misses'. Even though personal experience of assault was rare, most of those interviewed believed that the profession was potentially dangerous, especially where first time clients were concerned.

Despite the potential for personal danger, most MSWs believed that they were able successfully to manage the risks. Most of the MSWs we interviewed took precautions, and when visiting a client these included letting a friend know where they would be, never turning their back on the client, scouting out the area for extra cars which might indicate there was more than one person in the house, or checking the rooms of the house on the pretext of going to the toilet. For 'incalls' MSWs would try to arrange for a friend to be in the house at the same time, or ensure access to an easy escape route. Ian and Harry, who were partners and worked together, took the most elaborate precautions, as Ian explained:

Ian: I do a tag on him – he is dropped off, the phone is on all the time...The minute his [Harry] phone goes off mine will make an alarm sound.  
...For me there is a panic button in the massage area, set times he is there [Harry] I have literally to open one door and 14 dogs would come through and it is not a thought you would want to cherish and people are very aware of the fact – and they're not small dogs...We swap stories and learn who messed you about and who did this, who did that.

Only Eddie, who entertains in his own home, claimed to take no special precautions, apart from being nice to clients:

Eddie: I've never had an incident where I've had violence or raised voices. I know it sounds hard to believe, but I think it's down to the way you conduct yourself and the way you conduct your business. If you are argumentative or short, or you don't make people feel like it's their hour...that's when you're going to get problems.

Certainly by comparison to female sex work (Farley et al, 1998), or the outdoor male sex market (Connell and Hart, 2003), the risks faced the MSWs in our sample were very low, and generally they were taking steps to reduce the risks to a level which they found acceptable. We return now to explore a central theme in the sex work literature, which is the extent to which one can consider MSWs victims of circumstance in need of help, or rational businessmen pursuing a fulfilling career.

## **VICTIMS OR BUSINESSMEN?**

It is common when explaining involvement in crime to talk about criminogenic risk factors, that is to say, attributes of a person's character or environment which increase the likelihood of onset, frequency or persistence of offending (Farrington, 1997). Common risk factors include impulsivity, parental supervision style, socio-economic deprivation and school factors (ibid). It is argued by some that the existence of such factors *causes* involvement in crime.<sup>viii</sup> Much of the literature on female sex work also tends to stress risk factors, and views involvement in sex work not as a rational choice but rather as an almost inevitable response to perceived negative influences, such as economic deprivation.

To a certain extent, the same can be said of much research into MSWs, at least those studies which concentrate on the 'rent boy' market. Connell and Hart's (2003) study, for example, concentrates on the experiences of rent boys, and explains involvement in sex work partly in terms of coercion, or the negative influence of friends. The participants in our study, who represent the 'sole trader' indoor male sex market, present very different issues. It is true that some of the MSWs in our sample had experienced very difficult childhoods. Chris, for example, had been in care from the age of 10, and from his first night in care was selling sex. Looking at his case from the outside, this would seem to represent a clear case of victimisation, and an obvious 'risk factor'. However Chris' own views on the subject were very different.

When asked if his early sexual experiences while in care were voluntary, he claimed that they were:

No, no, no, if I were forced into something I didn't want to do, I'd had got them, don't matter how many there was. And like, that weren't the first sexual experience obviously but it was in these kind of circumstances, and like the next day, the eldest of them all said he wanted to shag me arse that night and I'm only 10, so he says get a bar of soap, so I got a bar of soap, and he bent me over the bed, and he bottled it. If I knew now what I knew then, I'd have given him some fucking stick for bottling it, but he bottled it. And I never got a sore arse! [laughs]

Thus factors which normally would be seen as harmful – under age paid sex and being brought up in care – were not viewed as such by Chris, and not the cause of his involvement in sex work, which he put down to his high sex drive. As noted earlier, Chris was happily married and was working as an escort with his wife's knowledge and support. Some of the other MSWs had experienced other 'risk factors' including being thrown out of home (Dave) and being made redundant (Frank and Eddie). In none of these cases, however, did these factors seem to precipitate the decision to enter sex work, and certainly none of them saw themselves as victims. Perhaps the exception to this pattern was Harry, who had started sex work at 15, and was the only of the group to be a regular user of drugs. In his case, the decision to enter sex work could be seen as more influenced by circumstances. However, he was also in a stable relationship (with Ian), was financially secure and content with his involvement in sex work.

In terms of the men in our study, the 'risk factor' model appears to lack explanatory power; indeed it is arguable whether the involvement in sex work of the men in our sample should be viewed as a problem in need of a solution. It was striking from our interviews how positive most MSWs felt about sex work. When asked directly what they thought about sex work, all were happy with their involvement:

Chris: I'd do it all day mate! At the end of the day, it's like me getting paid for sex is my kick...Live and let live, I swear to God, if you're not hurting anyone what's the problem, and it won't be hurting me if I got paid!

Given such apparent enthusiasm, it sometimes felt redundant to ask questions such as whether they wanted to leave sex work, or what would help them to leave. Given that it was seen as a rational career choice by many, it was akin to asking successful plumbers what help they needed to leave their professions. There is some support in the literature for this view of MSW as a non-problematic commercial activity. In Sari Van der Poel's (1992) ethnographic research into MSWs in Amsterdam, the occupation was analyzed as a commercial service-oriented business with economic and social characteristics typical of other small businesses.

That the MSWs believed themselves to be in charge of their own destiny is reinforced in their responses to our question about the differences between male and female sex work. Key to this was the physiological differences between males and females; in that for males to perform, they had to want to do it, as Frank explained:

A man, some sort of thought has to go to his penis, there has to be a link between the head and the penis, the woman doesn't have to have any link between her head and her vagina.

It was believed that the physical passivity of female sex workers made them more vulnerable to exploitation or violence. For the MSWs in our sample, sex work

was seen as a choice freely made. It could, however, be argued that the views of participants regarding the extent of their agency, or freedom of choice, is erroneous. If one considers the life stories of the men in our sample, with one or two exceptions, there was something in their backgrounds which served to limit the choices open to them. In some cases, educational failure or personality characteristics meant that their 'choice' to participate in other, more legitimate, employment opportunities was limited. Chris is perhaps the clearest cut example of a 'constrained' choice, in that his lack of any formal education ruled out many professions. It might also be the case that his early sexual experiences, even though perceived as enjoyable, may have been a factor in the development of his high libido, which in turn caused him to enter sex work. The question remains, therefore, whether Chris (and the others) would have made the same decision had circumstances been different. This was not a question we were able confidently to answer. While we do not believe that certain aspects of their backgrounds propelled these men inevitably into sex work, as may be the experience of certain female or younger MSWs, neither was the choice entirely free.

In trying to understand the nature of their decision making, it is useful to borrow from the criminological theory of rational choice theory, as refined by Ronald Clarke (1987). Although sex work is not a criminal activity, the model of decision making has wider applicability. In this, it is held that the decision to commit crime (in this case to enter sex work) is a more or less rational response to attempts to maximise self interest. It is recognised however, that dispositional factors and situational factors serve to constrain decision making by closing off certain options or opening others (Bennett, 1986). In terms of sex work, then, dispositional factors such as sex drive and situational ones such as level of income or the availability of alternative employment options might be expected to influence decision making. From what the men in our sample have told us, we cannot locate them either as purely victims or as calculating businessmen. Instead, it would be more accurate to locate them somewhere in between according to a 'constrained' rational choice decision making.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This exploratory study of MSWs has shed new light on this largely hidden population. The experiences and motivations of the men in our study contrasted sharply with those both of female sex workers and 'rent boys'. The indoor sex market represented by our respondents is relatively stable, self-contained and unproblematic. MSWs were unconcerned about their involvement in sex work, did not experience violence (with one exception) and practised safe sex. The decision to participate in sex work was seen by all to be freely made, and motivations for involvement were not primarily financial. For most, sex work was seen as a career like any other, but with the advantages of flexibility of working practices and variety. Whilst some could imagine situations (for example meeting the right person) in which they would wish to leave the profession, most expected to remain in the profession for some years to come.

It is important to recognise that the current study is exploratory and descriptive. Our sample of nine MSWs is not representative of the male sex industry as a whole. In fact, it clearly excludes the younger, outdoor workers, or 'rent boys'. It is unlikely that the young 'rent boy' is so secure in his position as the men we interviewed. The study does provide new insights into the experiences of the majority of MSWs, that is to say, men who work on their own and for themselves. However, we have more to learn, in particular about the characteristics and motivations of these men and in particular, the degree to which their choices are constrained by background and personal characteristics. Equally importantly, we know very little about the motivations and experiences of the clients of these men. What is it about their backgrounds, for example, which leads them to pay for sex with male escorts? It

is hoped that this study will prompt further research into this area, in particular there is a need for a larger study exploring the experiences of indoor and outdoor MSWs in order to compare these two groups both with each other and with the more thoroughly researched female sex industry.

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<sup>ii</sup> Respectively, senior research fellow and research fellow, Applied Criminology Centre, University of Huddersfield.

<sup>iii</sup> See: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4939502.stm>.

<sup>iv</sup> Almost all the numbers given in the adverts were of mobile phones, and some of these appeared to be permanently switched off.

<sup>v</sup> Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

<sup>vi</sup> Although Chris did not class his experiences at the age of 10 as abuse.

<sup>vii</sup> Chris, for example, said he would be willing to hurt people for money: 'if they wanted me to chop their hands off or anything like that, I know it sounds callous...but I don't see a problem with it, if both parties are happy about it, then fine'.

<sup>viii</sup> There are, of course, other theories of crime, which place less weight on causes such as socio-economic deprivation, and which stress the interaction of decision making, opportunity and capable guardianship (e.g. Cohen and Felson, 1979).