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Abstract

This paper is a reflection on an ethnographic moment that occurred as I sought the narratives of male sex workers specific to London, Ontario, a mid-sized Canadian city. Here an informant effectively queered my inadvertent erasure of men-who-sell-sex-to-women during the initial phases of fieldwork. In order to understand what happened, I explore the important role of reflexivity to negotiate productive misunderstandings that occurred and to illuminate the assumptions I made. To provide a contextualized account of the phenomenon of male sex work ultimately requires that I move beyond homonormative (or any normative) pre/conceptualizations avoiding and acknowledging the re/production of essentialized categories.

Keywords

Queer theory, sex work discourse, ethnographic reflexivity, interview dynamics, qualitative research methodology, marginalized populations, male sex work

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Researcher Reflections: Queering the Ethnographer, Queering Male Sex Work

Nathan Dawthorne

If as Rubin (1984) suggests, like the non-heterosexual, prostitutes are a criminal sexual population stigmatized on the basis of sexual activity, then men who sell sex to men (MSSM) are a doubly outcast group (286). Public discourse regarding sex work is a territory which is starkly heteronormative, reinforcing gendered stereotypes, naturalizing heterosexual behavior and avoiding men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM) and other realities in a queered world where sexual behaviour does not always coincide with sexual identity categories. As I work towards a PhD in Anthropology, I have been conducting semi-structured interviews (following Ethics Review Board approval in May 2014) with male sex workers (MSWs) from London, Ontario, a mid-sized Canadian city. I aim to provide a contextualized account of the phenomenon of male sex work (MSW) and to explore the use of cultural discourse in personal narratives.

When men sell sex to men, sex work resists the feminist scrutiny of patriarchal exploitation. This is the theoretical structure commonly used to explain the imposition of sexuality or even sexual slavery, upon women and children by normatively heterosexual men (Dorais 2005). My research has the potential to challenge the privileged rhetoric of certain lobbyists and so-called advocates that ignore and distort the voices of “prostitutes;” to queer a one-size-fits-all approach to laws and social services practices, to advocate an awareness of the diversity of lived realities, while respecting the complexities of human lives beyond imposed categories. To achieve this queering requires an attention to hermeneutics; a constant interpretation, a questioning of the meanings of social and discursive

action we encounter and bring to the interview (see Sherratt 2006). The following is a reflexive analysis of an encounter with a male sex worker who effectively queered my inadvertent erasure of men who sell sex to women (MSSW) during the initial stages of fieldwork. As I explore what happened I similarly illustrate the important role of reflexivity in understanding the unavoidable productive misunderstandings that occur when conducting ethnographic research.

My first encounter with an informant who sells sex to women served as a turning point in the direction of my research. On first appearances I would not have guessed that John (pseudonym) sold sex to anyone; he is a rather heavy-set, gruff-looking man in his early to mid-thirties. (In the interest of transparency I should mention that although John identified as “Black” with other mixed heritage, I am not aware of any overt racial stereotyping that had occurred on my part; the assumptions I made hold regardless of race). From what I had gathered about MSWs from the media, personal investigation, and what I was told in my two prior interviews, those who earn a premium are supposed to look like the hunky guys from the movie *Magic Mike* (Soderbergh 2012), or the so called thin and boyish “twink.” Ultimately, I was sexualizing John based on a predefined homonormative lens that existed before we even met. The truth is that if I was to theoretically buy sex, I was not attracted to him. Despite my training, when he first spoke to me I kept trying to perceive physical signs of any performance of sexuality. This echoes the concept of “gaydar”: a supposed ability that relies on modes of legibility of the stereotyped gay body; that the gay body is taken to scan or feel differently from other bodies (Cover 2004:99). I thought I was perceiving a semiotic code for effeminacy; he was quite soft spoken and did not have the voice of a baritone as I expected. This was an illustration of

gendered sexuality, where stereotyped masculinity and femininity are seen to index specific stable sexual behaviours (see Vanwesenbeeck 2009). By privileging homosexuality (a label where sexual behaviour, orientation and identity merge) as normative for MSWs, I subordinated heterosexuality to homosexuality. At the same time, I invoked a discourse that imposed fixed ways of being a male homosexual (feminine) in binary opposition to male heterosexuality (masculine; see Payne 2007).

When I asked him directly who his clients were, John disclosed that he worked “exclusively with females and especially older women” and described the sorts of services he offered, which did not always entail sex. This absence in itself problematizes the label “sex work.” How is it sex work if sex is not the primary motivation? Further feeding my assumptions (since he had not disclosed a sexual identity), it seemed “clear” that this meant he was hetero-inclined. Here I again conflated behaviour with identity. At one point he had been giving an account of how he had a friend who would drive him to his “appointments.” By having someone else drive him, he felt this would prevent his clients from knowing too much about him. Asked why this anonymity was important, he explained that it was due to his paranoia and an ingrained “street savvy” from when he dealt in narcotics. He then made the point of telling me that he had since “cleaned up his act.” I was curious as to what prompted this turning point and he told me the story of his “going clean” shortly after his daughter was born. One day, John had refused a ride with his friend who disclosed that he was carrying drugs and weapons in his vehicle. Shortly afterward, this friend was arrested. Had John been a passenger he would have been arrested, incarcerated and been away from his new daughter. Here John ended the account by saying; “After such a close call I said to

myself, ‘Well I think I’ll do the straight and narrow’ - well straight... ish.” We both laughed, for different reasons.

Here I was trying to read him: “straight” meant something different for both of us. I understood that he was using “straight” in regards to living a law-abiding life from his reference to “going clean.” However, with my research focus in gender and sexuality, the term “straight” elicits heterosexuality. Really, straight could have meant anything. What did he mean by straight-*ish*? Was he was going to tell me about more “illegal” acts he was currently committing? Could this mean he considers sex work to be illegal? Perhaps he was going to disclose some sort of MSM behaviour. With all of these possible meanings, I asked him to explain what he meant. “Straight-*ish*” had to do with some of his old habits and absolutely nothing about his sexuality.

This conversation was a turning point for my research. It finally registered that I *was* interviewing a heterosexual man who sells to women; that regardless of sexuality, these men (and the women who buy) do exist in London, and that I had not prepared myself for it.

Those who are marginal to mainstream Western culture are expected to... resemble and replicate the very banal preconceptions that have been appended to them, a process in which they are expected to objectify themselves in accordance with the already seen and thus authenticate familiar imaginings (Puar 2007:92).

In constructing a manageable typology for my research, I never really expected to have an interview with anyone except MSM. As London does not have a red-light district or any areas where men who sell sex consistently frequent, I began to recruit

MSWs for interviews using online escort advertisements (e.g. Backpage; Squirt; CanadianMale) and MSM geo-social mobile applications and websites (e.g. Grindr; Scruff). The arbitrary decision to move beyond MSM websites to other less known sites such as Craigslist's "therapeutic" services section, as well as to post recruitment posters throughout the city that did not categorize the men based on who they sold to, created an unexpected decentering and the inclusion of MSSW into my study. Although I never intended to exclude these men or elicit regulatory regimes (see Butler 1993:312), providing a "contextualized account of the phenomenon of male sex work" ultimately required that I continually attempt to move beyond homonormative (or any normative) conceptualizations to avoid the manufacture and reproduction of essentialized categories. Reflexivity has allowed me to unpack the discursive sites I re/produce when I make the implicit explicit in my ethnographic writing. This reflexivity speaks to Warner's (1999) conceptualization of "queering", the necessity of a constant re-engagement, a constant questioning of assumptions about the subject (20-21).

I thought that I had already accepted one of the fundamentals of queer theory, namely that sexual identities do not always coincide with sexual behaviours (in this case for money), and that gender and sexuality are fluid and changing. Though I have read (e.g. Pruitt and LaFont 1995) that women do buy intimate services of various kinds from men (and other genders), I did not expect to find any of these men at all. There are a few reasons why: MSSW studies are relatively few in Canada; my familiarity with and initial recruitment on MSM advertisement sites; my apparent association of sex work with "sex." Why did I keep trying to find signs of non-heterosexuality in John when we first met? Why was I so taken by surprise when I met a

MSSW? What can be learnt from my experience? Further reflection has allowed me to confront what happened.

It appears that I fell into a discursive trap that imposed and privileged compulsory homosexual behaviours for MSW interaction. Dorais (2005) reminds us: before any act can be viewed as deviant, and before any class of people can be labelled and treated as outsiders for committing an act, "someone" must have made the "rule" that defines the act as deviant. Deviations from monogamous, heterosexual and procreative relations came from a sexological understanding of reversal that assumed gender roles were natural and that deviation (not acting in controlled normalized manners) was unnatural (Walby 2012). Problematizing deviant (non-monogamous hetero) sexual behaviours produced an intertwining of MSW with the label of male homosexuality in a historically regulatory discourse. If male sex work is already reduced to MSM my repetition of this normative discourse is clear.

The semantic merging of gender and sexuality into the term "sex" also has implications reflecting a cultural assumption that sexuality is reducible to sexual intercourse, typically between male and female (Rubin 1984: 307). The label of "sex work" is inherently political as it encodes particular ideologies and carries with it specific histories and connotations (Milani 2014: 270). Not only does the label "sex" ignore the non-sexual aspects of sex work (e.g. companionship, conversation), if the sex of sex work is already reduced to a heterosexual intercourse, then the associated gendered norms of said acts are implied too. Being less informed about a female sexuality (regardless of its diversity) *in regards to buying sex*, I have also been more prone to draw from a patriarchal discourse where women are less sexual than men (of any sexuality). If I was to truly accept

this I would be reproducing a paradigm where voracious hetero-men would be lining up for any woman; that a woman would never have to pay for sex, because hetero-men *do* impose sexuality on women. Perhaps because of my familiarity with a feminism that embraces female sexuality (and my support for female sex workers), I feel uncomfortable with the way I have been complicit with these ideologies. I fell into a discursive trap that did not allow for heterosexual encounters (or any other). Though academically I knew to queer my assumptions, I had still made them.

The semantic meanings of the term “sex” were re/produced as I tried to compartmentalize MSW. There was a Foucauldian administrative apparatus at work here, the necessity of constraining possibilities and finalizing individuals to fit in with predetermined ways of knowing the world (see Foucault 2008). As the researcher I was compelled (by academic norms and protocols) to “create” a population of MSW as I delineate who is *in* and who is *out* and project this demarcation onto a generated population in which everyone is ranked and re-ranked, accounted for and included (Puar 2007:159-162). This concept is extremely important, as the experiential observations in research are often seen as *Truths* about a subject population, their identities and realities; a population that may or may not exist as the researcher outlines it. The power I have as a researcher to represent discourses that affect how people are defined is called into question. As individuated subjects, some men may form a homogenous core of a group (MSSM) of the phenomenon of MSW in London. Others (MSSW) may be at its boundaries. In the year that I have been conducting my research this has been the case, as I have interviewed more MSSM than MSSW. However, a narrowly defined conceptualization of male sex work or any phenomenon can be dangerous precisely because it is productive. I should have stayed open to

those on the “margins of the margins,” even if those margins have inverted from expected norms. Here the usually privileged “heterosexual” was relegated to the periphery - until that moment, erased and invisible. In this case I re/produced normative stereotypes onto John which had the potential to completely disrupt rapport building, and limit insights into the topic at hand.

When we treat interviews not as question-and-answer sequences, but as interactive sites for meaning-making, interviewers can no longer be regarded as passive listeners and neutral recorders (Walby 2012:80).

With the term “straight” I experienced what Walby (2012) outlines as meaning generated through interaction, that “one never knows how certain words or gestures might be interpreted and shape the ensuing dialogue”(69). In eliciting narratives, I saw how generalization breaks down. As the researcher I was confronted with my own past (e.g. stereotypes; research interests), as well as the reflexivity of the interviewee (Doucet 2008; Jarvinen 2001). I believe this illustrates Clifford’s (1986) point that all descriptions are necessarily “partial truths”(7), inevitably subjective and incomplete. There is no way of getting at the “complete truth” behind these narratives. In my case, sex work “is not an object to be described, neither is it a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitely interpreted” (Clifford 1986:19). Knowing this as I continue my research, I must be careful only to make claims about narratives, to avoid finalizing individuals and fixing encounters. As these stories are confessions they cannot be treated as truths or universal phenomenon (of culture, society or sex work; see Walby 2012).

Reflexivity allowed me to recognize how my own assumptions shaped the dynamics of the research encounter and has allowed

me to disrupt assumptions of the fixity of categories. Rooke (2009) reminds us that a commitment to queer theory during the research encounter demands an honesty and attention to one's own subjectivity and the performativity of the self. To queer my research means that I must strike a balance between the role of the researcher, the narrated subject constituted by structure and cultural forces, and narratives shaped by broader discourses. This aim reverberates with Crapanzano (1986):

The writer, the act of researching, the act of writing about the research and the resultant writings, all operate within a larger cultural [gendered etc.] and political context in which the writer and his... readers become the 'real insiders' to the single hierarchically superior culture... with the people being researched forever relegated to being 'outsiders' to that superior culture (51-76).

Experiences and events are altered ("un-queered") into generalized narratives which further disconnect them from the rhizomatic process of thought and action in the field. Holdsworth (2004) sees this disconnect partly as a consequence of the act of writing, "the intricate processes and strategies employed to gain knowledge are often only notionally included in the finished product." Rather than seeking to produce a "realistic tale", or even some form of completely self-indulgent confessional anthropology, by moving between reflexive methods and theories, the ethnographic posture of authority can be called into question (Marcus 1986:168). By being careful only to make claims about MSW narratives *in context*, in

the sense of partial truths, I can attempt to address this privilege.

There remain limits to knowing through interviews and narrative research. However, "certain projects and certain sites of research do not lend themselves to knowing subjects, but rather knowing only their narratives," (Walby 2012:57). Participant observation involves gaining access to a community after which the researcher works and lives among the people in order to understand the world through the eyes of those being studied (Bryman 2006). For sex work research, this kind of participant observation is problematic. For example, hiring a sex worker as a client or watching a sex worker "on the job" raises multiple methodological and ethical issues that are beyond the purview of this paper (not to mention they make Ethics Review Boards and academic departments squirm). A different kind of participation is required. A participation with narratives, in my case where I elicit interviewee reflexivity and co-construct life stories, still allows the researcher to grasp an understanding of the world through those being studied and to contextualize the research. It is through ethnography that we are able to pose questions at "the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders," (Clifford 1986:2).

Due to the marginalization of sex workers, heightened moral and political discourse, and general public ignorance, sex work research is already "at the boundaries." Narrative interviewing is not only ethical but how one can write is axiomatic to the methodological process. Reflexivity into what I brought to the research encounter has required a constant re-engagement, a constant questioning of my own assumptions about the subject. By being upfront and open about our realities, even the less palatable aspects, I

have gained insight into ethnographic moments like I experienced with John. This insight has and will continue to allow me to explore and question the power dynamics of the research encounter but also to queer (my own) discursive positionality.

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