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Sexual and psychological aspects of the lives of male sex workers in Prague

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Disertační práce bude nejméně pět pracovních dnů před konáním obhajoby zveřejněna k nahlížení veřejnosti v tištěné podobě na Oddělení pro vědeckou činnost a zahraniční styky Děkanátu 1. lékařské fakulty.

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Abstrakt

Hlavní město České Republiky Praha je oblíbenou sexuální turistickou destinací pro muže, kteří vyhledávají sexuální služby mužů. Nabízení sexuálních služeb je zde pokládáno za trestný čin a v porovnání se zeměmi západní Evropy nabízejí mladí muži své sexuální služby za nízké ceny. Tento kvantitativní výzkum si klade za cíl identifikovat některé demografické a osobní charakteristiky těchto mladých mužů v sexuálním průmyslu. Na jaře 2011 eskorti přes internet ($N=20$) a muži nabízející sexuální služby v barech a klubech ($N=20$) vyplnili anonymně dotazník. Výsledky poukazují na to, že zatímco muži nabízející sexuální služby v klubech mají za sebou problémovou minulost a často nabízejí své služby v sexuálním průmyslu za účelem ekonomického přežití, je v Praze větší skupina sexuálních pracovníků - eskortů přes internet, kteří pocházejí ze zázemí typického pro průměrnou Českou mládež. Výsledky testů osobnosti ale zjistily, že se obě skupiny prokazují silnou asociální povahou v porovnání s běžnou Českou mládeží. Výsledky výzkumu o duševním zdraví (úzkost a deprese) poukazují na to, že práce muže jako sexuálního pracovníka sama o sobě nesouvisí s jeho zdravým psychickým stavem, pokud se neoznačí za homosexuála. Označení se za heterosexuála souvisí s vyšší mírou užívání návykových látek. U těch, kteří se označili za bisexuály bylo zjištěno, že trpí významně větší mírou úzkosti klinického rozsahu a je více pravděpodobné, že pravidelně užívají tvrdé drogy a to především metamfetamin. Jsou popsány skutečnosti pro výzkum sexuální identity a její dopad na studii mužů pracujících v sexuálním průmyslu společně s návrhy na intervenci, která by těmto mužům pomohla, kdyby změnili zaměstnání. V závěru je popsán sociokulturní kontext, který je důležitý pro pochopení činnosti sexuálních pracovníků.

Abstract

Prague, the Czech Republic is a popular sex tourism destination where sex work is decriminalized and young men offer sexual services at low prices relative to countries in Western Europe. This quantitative survey aims to identify some of the demographic and personality characteristics of these young men in the sex industry. Internet escorts ($N=20$) and sex workers in bars and clubs ($N=20$) completed the survey anonymously in the Spring of 2011. The results show that while sex workers in clubs often have troubled pasts and were forced into sex work in order to survive, the larger groups of sex workers in Prague is made up of internet escorts who have backgrounds which are not atypical for the average Czech youth. Personality test results however revealed both groups to have strong asocial characteristics in comparison to other Czech youth. The results of the measures of mental health (anxiety and depression) indicate that simply working as a male sex worker per se has little relationship to the healthy psychological functioning of these young men, but only in the case where they identify as homosexual. Identifying as a heterosexual is associated with a higher level of substance use. Those identifying as bisexual however reported suffering significantly levels of anxiety within the clinical range and were more likely to regularly use hard drugs, mainly methamphetamines. Implications for the study of sexual identity and its impact on research with male sex workers are discussed as well as plans for interventions to help those who would change their line of work and the importance of the sociocultural context in the understanding of the sex worker.

Introduction

The Czech Republic after the fall of communism has become a sex tourism destination (Golgo, 2003). It is fueled by a society which is tolerant towards sexual issues, an economy which until today pays relatively low wages relative to countries in Western Europe and a thriving pornography industry which promotes Czech sexuality to the world. In particular, the gay pornography industry focuses on films with actors rarely older than 18 or 19 years old, but often appearing much younger (Marritz, 2007) which attracts many sex tourists seeking sex with men, in particular younger boys. Sex work is currently decriminalized in the Czech Republic, meaning it is not a crime for individuals to offer sexual services if they are over the age of 18. Although, pimping or the selling of sexual services by a third party is illegal, both the age requirement and the prohibition on pimping can be difficult to enforce in practice.

Hall (2007a) provides an overview of the situation for male sex workers in Prague in his ethnographic study on the exchange of sex for money in young Czech men. Little has changed since his report; sex workers have for the most part been driven from the street and train stations by police, and so they offer their services mainly in bars and clubs which cater specifically to sex workers and their clients, or they offer their services via internet portals for male escorts. Police control of the bars has also limited the number of underage sex workers, but not eliminated it. This is particularly problematic among internet escorts where there is no age verification process required to create an online advertisement.

Government health officials have estimated among all sex workers in the Czech Republic, 5% are males (Mann & Tarantola, 1996). Male sex workers in the Czech Republic have already been the topic of qualitative research (Hall, 2007b), and film documentaries from the Polish

director, Wiktor Grodecki, such as *Not Angels But Angels* (1994) and *Body Without a Soul* (1996) as well as the fictionalized film *Mandragora* (1997). Other interesting case studies of young male sex workers have also been assembled by a leading Czech journalist into the book, *Your Son the Prostitute* (Vlašík, 2009). To date however, quantitative research has only been devoted to the study of female sex workers, (Zikmundová & Weiss, 2003; Zikmundová & Weiss, 2004). No quantitative research has yet addressed male sex workers in the Czech Republic.

Hypotheses and Aims of the Project

One purpose of this study was to compare the experiences of both internet escorts and sex workers who offer their services in bars and clubs, and add to the growing body of research on sex work in the Czech Republic. Another aim of the research was to investigate what role sexual orientation or sexual identity plays in the lives of sex workers.

Our study also sought to provide some quantitative confirmation that there also exists a higher incidence of bisexuals among male sex workers (MSW) than in the general population. If so, based on previous research regarding bisexuals in general, we sought to investigate if there also exists a higher incidence of psychological distress in the form of mood or anxiety disorders among bisexuals in this uniquely sexual work environment.

Our study further aimed to investigate the psychological effects on the mental health of sex work of these male sex workers in general. For many young men, this type of work is a means of survival and it is seen as easy money so it is attractive not only to homosexuals, but any young man who finds himself in financial difficulty, whether gay, straight or bisexual (Bar-Johnson & Weiss, 2014a). Past research has not tended to present results of mental health in terms of sexual orientation or identity, so this was another aim of investigation for our study.

Materials and Methods

This paper is based on data from a mapping project by the Sexology Institute of the 1st Medical Faculty of Charles University to apply a quantitative research approach to the study of male sex workers in Prague, the Czech Republic, supplementing the previous qualitative research on the subject. Anonymous surveys were completed by 40 male escorts and sex workers over a period of 3 months beginning in 2011.

The survey contained several demographic questions including sexual orientation, sexual behavioral reports with their partners as well as with casual sexual partners, or one night stands, modeled after a national study of sexual behavior (Weiss & Zvěřina, 2001) and their experiences as sex workers (type of sex work, years in the business, number of clients per month, average wages, any cases of violence with clients, etc). We also included in the survey battery, the TCI-R personality test, using the validated Czech translation (Preiss, Kucharová, Novák & Stepánková, 2007). We measured depression using the Czech version of Beck's Depression Inventory (validated by Preiss & Vacíř, 1999) and anxiety symptoms using the Czech version of Zung's Self-Report Anxiety Scale (validated by Filip, 1997).

Recruiting of participants took place in two phases, one method for internet escorts and a second for sex workers in bars and clubs. To reach the internet escorts, the principle investigator visited the largest gay escort website in Czech Republic on several occasions at various times of day, and using a profile created on the website, contacted the escorts to offer them the possibility to participate in the study for which they would be paid. Of the approximately 200 plus profiles on the site, 30 were selected using a random search of profiles and then screened to be sure they

had had at least one client in the last 30 days. Of the 27 eligible for the study, 20 completed the survey for an overall response rate of 74%.

The second sample of sex workers, also contacted in the Spring of 2011, seek their clients in Prague's gay bars and clubs, several of which are exclusively devoted to men seeking paid sexual encounters with men and the young men who provide these services. Terminology differs for this type of sex work, and is often value laden, such as hustlers or rent-boys, so the authors will continue to refer to them simply as sex workers, but in reality, although no longer physically on the street, this type of sex work is in reality a sort of hybrid of 'street work' and 'indoor' work.

The principle investigator, with the assistance of one of the older escorts interviewed from the internet survey, approached the owners of 3 clubs in Prague where the clientele consists exclusively of men seeking paid sexual encounters with male sex workers. These included a nightclub, a hotel bar and a day bar. The investigator visited each site on two occasions always accompanied by the informant, who had been in the business for several years and was known and trusted by many of the sex workers and bar staff. In total 25 sex workers were approached and all agreed to schedule appointments at a later time in order to complete the survey at a location of their choosing, however, only 20 arrived at the meetings and completed the survey, for a response rate of 80%. Based on estimates from the barmen in these clubs, the number of male sex workers currently offering their services in these three clubs combined probably totals around 50 to 75 young men at any given time.

For those who agreed to participate, the researcher allowed the participant to choose a public location to meet in order to complete the survey. All participants chose a café or restaurant and a face-to-face meeting was organized. When the participant arrived, the principle investigator immediately asked them not to provide their real name in order to protect their anonymity. Then a quiet area of the establishment was selected where the participant could have

privacy while completing the survey. The investigator explained the purpose of the survey, answered any questions, and then provided them with the self-administered survey together with an envelope where they were instructed to seal the completed survey when they finished. Upon returning the completed survey, they received a 500 crown (20 Euro) cash incentive for their participation. Participants typically took from 45 minutes to 90 minutes to complete the survey.

Results

Among the internet escorts, the average age of the respondents was 23 years old (with a standard deviation of 3 years), and they had been offering their services for between 2 months up to 6 years. Their earnings from sex work averaged 36 000 CZK per month (or approximately 1 440 Euro) however there was wide variation, from as low as 7 000 CZK (280 Euro) per month to as high as 96 000 CZK (3 840 Euro), seeing an average of 14 clients per month, 80% of whom were foreigners, with the most common nationality being German.

Questions about their personal history did not reveal anything atypical, in fact they were surprisingly average in most respects. Nearly all the respondents describing their childhood as happy, all had completed their basic education with average or good marks and none reported behavioral problems in school. None reported any childhood sexual abuse, however overall, they did report their first sexual experience significantly earlier than the Czech population norms; 15 was the average age reported for their first sexual encounter with both male and female partners, while the Czech norm is 18 years, (Weiss & Zvěřina, 2001). Regarding their sexual orientation 45% reported a homosexual orientation, 40% considered themselves bisexual and 15 % reported a heterosexual orientation. They came from all regions of the Czech Republic, with about 25% natives of Prague, and 15% from neighboring Slovakia.

Concerning the influence sex work had had on their life, a majority were neutral, but 20% reported a positive experience, for example in self-esteem derived from being an object of desire, while another 20% found the influence rather negative and degrading. Perhaps the most negative result from the survey was the incidence of violence against the escorts, with one in five reporting having been physically beaten by a client, and an additional one in four having been forcibly raped by a client, meaning forced into receptive anal sex.

Among the sex workers in bars and clubs, the average age of the respondents was 24 (standard deviation of 4 years) and they had been offering sexual services for a period of between 2 months up to 7 years. They reported average monthly earnings of 21 000 CZK (840 Euros) but with great variation from as low as 3 500 CZK (140 Euros) to as high as 50 000 CZK (2 000 Euro), with an average of 11 clients per month.

Unlike the relatively positive profiles of the internet escorts, the personal histories of sex workers in bars and clubs were consistently more negative, with 45% reporting an unhappy childhood, 20% not completing their basic education, and 25% having had behavioral problems in school. Sexual abuse in childhood was also mentioned by 10% of the respondents. Currently 75% had no or poor relationships with their family, and 25% reported having no permanent place of residence. The majority of the sex workers in clubs reported a heterosexual orientation (70%) and the remaining 30% considered themselves bisexual, no respondent reported a homosexual orientation in any of the bars or clubs. Among the heterosexuals, 64% reported having a partner, but all of the bisexual respondents reported being single.

The main hypotheses suggesting that the Prague sex tourism scene caters to men seeking predominantly younger men and underage adolescents was not supported. In fact, the correlations were near zero when comparing age of the sex workers and the number of clients per month ($r = -.01$) or monthly income ($r = -.07$), and only 10% of the respondents were under age

18. Nor was there any relationship between the length of time working as a sex worker to subjective job satisfaction ratings ($r = -.04$).

The second goal was to investigate the differences in these two types of sex work, Internet escorts versus sex workers offering their services independently in specialized bars and clubs. There were also no significant differences between the groups related to ratings of job satisfaction. Regarding the participants' reported sexual orientation, homosexual sex workers worked only via the Internet, while in bars and clubs the sex workers were predominantly heterosexual. With regard to coital debut, both groups typically reported their first sexual intercourse with women (for heterosexuals and bisexuals) and men (for homosexuals and bisexuals) as beginning in their early teens.

The study also compared the ages and salaries of both types of sex workers using independent t-tests. Due in part to the high variability within groups, there was only one significant difference. The Internet escorts charge on average of 22% more per night than the sex workers in bars and clubs, although the general trend was for Internet escorts to charge more per hour, see more clients and earn more money as well. Most sex workers began around 20 years of age, although our study did find two internet escorts who were under the legal age of 18 at the time of the survey.

Both types of sex workers come from across the country, with approximately 40% from Prague, 50% from other regions of the Czech Republic and 10% from Slovakia. Only one foreigner (a German escort) was encountered during the sampling process; however, both groups of sex workers reported that over 80% of their clients come from abroad. Both types of sex workers indicated Germans accounted for the largest group of clients, but often clients from other countries were reported, e.g. the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, France and the Netherlands.

The comparison of alcohol and drug use indicates that sex workers in bars and clubs tend to drink alcohol and use marijuana more than the Internet escorts, and regarding methamphetamine use, the sex workers in bars and clubs were significantly more likely to regularly use the local methamphetamine, Pervitin. In addition, 15% of sex workers in bars and clubs reported daily gambling (on the video terminals common in Prague casinos and bars), a behavior not reported by any of the Internet escorts.

Also, sex workers in both groups reported being victims of violence on the job, with 15% of Internet escorts and 20% of sex workers in bars and clubs stating they had been beaten by a client, however, the risk of rape by a client (forced receptive anal intercourse) tended to be higher for Internet escorts (25%) than sex workers in clubs (5%). These differences were not significant, however, it is important to note that none of the participants reported the attack to any police or authority figure.

All but one of the sex workers in bars and clubs claimed their HIV status was negative and that they were tested regularly, one respondent reported having never been tested. However 55% did not practice safe sex in private and 15% were unsafe both with clients and in their private lives. Among internet escorts, condom use was the norm, with all respondents stating an HIV-negative status and reporting that they undergo regular testing at least once per year, however 15% reported having unsafe sex with both clients and their partners in private, which is a matter of concern.

All of the internet escorts reported having the legally required government health insurance however for sex workers in bars and clubs, 15% reported that they did not currently have any health insurance, in violation of Czech law.

Regarding the analysis of personality factors, of the seven main Temperament and Character types (Cloninger, Pryzbeck, Svrakic & Wetzel, 1994), only for the dimension of

Cooperativeness was the overall result significantly lower than the population of adolescent Czech males. There overall lower score was derived mainly from the subscales of low *Social Acceptance*, meaning an unfriendly disposition, low *Helpfulness*, indicating an egoistic and self-centered personality, and low scores on the subscale of *Principled*, indicating a willingness to treat others in an unfair way, to lie, manipulate and deceive to serve one's own interests .

Regarding the mental health and sexual orientation of the respondents, We found that the reports of symptoms of mental distress were lower for homosexuals working as MSW; Kruskal-Wallis tests were employed for the 2 main factors: depression and anxiety. For this sample of MSW, a non-significant trend for depression was observed with lower scores for homosexuals, Mean 7.1 (4.8) and higher for heterosexuals 11.2 (9.0) and bisexuals 14.3 (11.6) but the variability within groups was too great to draw firm conclusions. For the significant effect of sexual identity and anxiety, $H(2) = 9.71, p = .008$, further post-hoc Mann-Whitney U tests were employed to compare bisexuals to both homosexuals and heterosexuals using the Bonferroni correction ($\alpha = 0.017$, two-tailed). Bisexuals showed significantly more general symptoms of anxiety than both homosexuals, $U = 14.50, z = -2.96, p = 0.002$ and heterosexuals, $U = 51.50, z = -2.48, p = 0.012$.

Discussion

Our general hypothesis that sex work can have a negative impact on the mental health of the sex worker was not directly substantiated. Although sex workers in bars and clubs were found to have more troubled pasts and more problems with drugs and alcohol than internet escorts (Bar-Johnson & Weiss, 2014a), there was no overall effect of the type of sex work on their mental health. Also the age of the sex worker, the amount of time they have been in the

business or the number of clients they see on average have no relationship to their mental health. The type and amount of sexual activities both in their private life and in their work life were also unrelated to their mental health, suggesting that sex work per se does not play a direct role in the mental health of the sex workers, although the overall level of mental distress was relatively high with nearly half of the overall sample reporting clinical levels of depression and roughly a third reporting clinical levels of anxiety.

In our sample, the majority of male sex workers investigated were not in fact homosexual, but heterosexual or bisexual. Although great care was taken that any man engaged in sex work at the time had a chance to be selected for the study and response rates were high, it is never possible to obtain a representative sample. Therefore we should not draw any firm conclusions about the exact percentages of gay-for-pay sex workers in the Czech Republic, although our percentages are similar to that of previous research on MSW.

Many of these bisexual men reported levels of anxiety which can be classified as moderate to severe, significantly higher than that reported by their homosexual and heterosexual peers. Nothing in the study suggested an alternative explanation for these differences in negative outcomes other than their sexual orientation. The most common interpretation of these results is that these bisexuals are in fact ego-dystonic homosexuals, resulting in increased stress and a negative impact on their mental health.

Another explanation for anxiety in bisexual male sex workers may come from the general theory of minority stress. As homosexuality and bisexuality are viewed less favorably by society, those individuals who identify with these groups have increased stress due to the vigilance necessary to deal with this prejudice. A third possible explanation arose following a post hoc interview with one bisexual internet escort. These sex workers are young men in a period of transition in their own sexual identities, and a transition from a heteronormative identity to one which is deemed much less socially unacceptable by both the general population as well as the

gay community. Our original hypothesis that many of these bisexuals could be suffering from anxiety due to the stress of transitioning to a homosexual identity, but this one case suggests there may also be a subset of bisexual sex workers who are in fact transitioning from a heterosexual identity to a bisexual one. This group of heterosexuals transitioning to a bisexual identity could also account for a portion of the observed anxiety in our study, in the same way as those who are transitioning to a homosexual identity.

Conclusions

The trend in research on male sex workers has progressed through stages over the years (for a complete review see Minichiello & Scott, 2014). Early research focused on pathological characteristics of the sex workers as deviants, later during the AID crisis, as a vector for disease into the mainstream population, and later as a cause of psychological problems. The latest trend has been towards legitimizing sex work and attempting to reduce the stigma of this career option, however, it is our argument, that the research in this new tradition focuses too heavily on the modern economies of American, Western Europe and Asia, and does not take into account the issues of income disparity across developing regions. Male sex workers in Prague have experiences more similar to those in other former soviet countries and in modern Russia, but with fewer social prejudices against them. For the majority of sex workers in Prague, this is not a viable career, nor was there any other realistic option for them when they began this type of work. Once they begin to engage in sex work, they find the lifestyle too attractive to leave until their age or appearance forces them to, as they become accustomed to making good money for little effort.

Our study did not support our main hypothesis, that sex work can be directly associated with mental health problems. Our findings do suggest the issue of sexual identity is an important issue to consider when looking at the mental health of male sex workers. This is important for social service organizations in order to address the needs of male sex workers in general, as well as the understanding that a bisexual identity can be a simple predictor of other problems when working with these sex workers individually. Although many of the sex workers in the study reported levels of symptoms which would qualify them for diagnosis of depression or anxiety, for homosexuals and heterosexuals engaging in sex work in the Czech Republic, problems with psychological health are not as prevalent as for those who consider themselves bisexual.

Regarding the normalization of sex work among male sex workers in the Czech Republic, it is worth commenting also on the current situation in the bars and clubs, which according to the escorts has improved in recent years. In the past, these bars were known as rather dangerous places to visit, the sex workers were often beaten or threatened by the club owners, and were subject to frequent police raids in the late 1990's mainly to control for underage boys. Now, most clubs are under new ownership and the owners take greater care to be sure boys under 18 do not enter. In addition, most of the bars have removed the casino style slot machines reducing the temptation to sex workers with cash on hand, and one barman informed me that he was instructed by the management not to admit any sex workers who appear visibly under the influence of drugs, in particular, methamphetamines. These changes have improved the situation of male sex workers, who no longer seek clients in the dangerous train station, but now have a safer environment to engage in their business, however their work conditions remain in great part at the whim of a few, mostly foreign, club owners. This does however, seem to suggest that the decriminalization of prostitution, combined with enforcement of laws against child prostitution and pimping, has had a rather positive effect on the conditions for male sex workers.

Regarding sex work as a whole, the Czech Republic has been and will likely continue to be a destination for sex tourism and more should be done for the health and safety of both male and female sex workers. Although many of them support the legalization of sex work in theory, for the system to work, it would be necessary to exert some influence on the demand as well. It seems that the most effective legislative changes would involve both a clear and easy system for sex workers to become legal entrepreneurs with all the health and social benefits of working legally but also to deter black market sex work by making it a crime to solicit sex from an unregistered sex worker. This would provide all the benefits of legalization while avoiding the pitfall of generating more demand and de facto an increase in sex work on the whole. It would also deter young people with an idealized view of sex work from entering this profession without forethought by decreasing the demand for young sex workers who have not been properly registered.

Summary of Main Findings

- The majority of male sex workers surveyed reported either a heterosexual or bisexual orientation. The smallest group of respondents were the homosexual sex workers.
- Early coital debut was reported by nearly all respondents, beginning at around 14 years of age. Childhood sexual abuse was not reported more often than in the general population.
- Most respondents began sex work around the age of 20, for a significant number, this was following their career as a gay porn actor.
- Sex workers in the Czech Republic come almost exclusively from the Czech or Slovak Republics, although the vast majority of their clients are foreigners, indicating that the Czech Republic is a destination for sex tourism, particularly from Germany.

- The majority of sex workers began, and continue, to engage in sex work out of financial necessity, even though most would prefer to find other types of work, few have a concrete plan how to do so.
- Although overall about half of the sex workers were single, a majority of the heterosexual respondents reported a female partner and no bisexual respondents reported any serious relationship. Of those with partners, 60% did not report using a condom for protection with their partner, although all but one (who had not been tested) reported a negative HIV status.
- A few casual sexual encounters outside of work were reported by a majority of homosexual sex workers and some heterosexual sex workers, however bisexual sex workers reported more than double the number of casual sex partners each month over the other two groups.
- Bisexual respondents reported the highest amount of nearly all types of sexual acts both at work and in private with both males and females, indicating hypersexuality in this group.
- Many sex workers were victims of violence or rape by their clients, however none of them reported these incidents to authorities. The risk was higher for Internet escorts than for those working in bars and clubs.
- Sex workers, particularly from the group of Internet escorts, did not differ significantly from the average Czech youth in education, upbringing or personality, and even the workers in bars and clubs are less troubled than the kinds of street workers engaging in male sex work typically found in other cities around the world.
- More than half of the sex workers in general reported symptoms of at least mild depression and anxiety, however a significantly more bisexual sex workers in particular reported anxiety which met the criteria for clinical diagnosis of a mental disorder.
- Alcohol and drug use was reported more frequently by sex workers in bars and clubs, especially the methamphetamines

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