

To do or not do, that is the question: A male sex worker's perspective

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Abstract: What are tomorrow's challenges for social and health work with male sex workers? In this case study, I have followed one young Swedish male sex worker at different venues; at a brothel, an escort agency, and his private business. The aim of the study is to investigate ways to enhance health equality for male sex workers, despite the discrimination and stigmatization they face. The case study spans more than ten years, with eight semi-structured qualitative interviews, informal conversations, ethnographic fieldwork, and access to the respondent's personal diary. The collection of data, coding, and analysis of the material were interrelated processes. The theoretical positions used to analyze the material were based on the cultural historical activity theory. The key finding of the study, without any attempt at generalize, is that there is a reciprocal connection between the structure of the external sex working activity and the internal experience of ownership (capacity of agency) by the young man. Depending on the degree of his agency, his consciousness of and ability to cope with vulnerability altered. He struggled all the time with the question: to do or not to do sex work. The findings show that we have to rethink new and different approaches to HIV/health prevention, especially the use of Internet, depending on the sex-working activities. The study concludes that we have to gain a deeper understanding of the complex and contradictory nature of male sex work in the light of a life trajectory.

Keywords: Male sex worker, HIV, male rape, activity theory, social capital

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Introduction

This paper reports findings from a case study about a young man, Ethan (pseudonym), selling sex. The aim is to gain insight into a male sex workers lifestyle and an understanding of him as a person over time in relation to health service and social work equality. Research on male sex workers is sparse, compared to that on female sex workers, even though male sex work has increased in recent decades. Deviance was the focus for the first wave of research (1). The next wave's focus was on the sexual orientation of the male sex worker, where the distinction between the masculine heterosexuals and the effeminate homosexuals altered how they were understood and governed. The outcome was male sex workers as a public health concern, which facilitated the process of regarding them as a social problem (2). Now health and cybersex are

on the agenda (3,4). However, most research up to this point has been quantitative; hence, this qualitative case study attempts to fill the gap. There are differences between the research looking into men working in streets and bars, so-called “hustlers,” and those who focus on men who work indoors, known as “escorts.” Different from those with a middle-class background who work indoors, men working on the street seem to live a more marginalized life on the edge of society (5,6). The number of male and female sex workers are similar, but for boys and girls ages 12 to 25 years who have received money or other reimbursement for sex, studies from the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, and the United States show a higher number for boys, sometimes twice that for girls (7). The notion of “male sex worker” will be used for the purpose of this study as an umbrella term for transactional sex, instead of the more stigmatizing term “prostitute” (8).

The phenomenon of people selling and buying sex and the sex trade industry has been high up on the public agenda in Sweden. There is a wide range of perspectives on the phenomenon of sex workers. Despite this, it is possible to distinguish two major themes in the discourse. The first is the sex worker as a victim – where she/he is regarded as an individual with limited control over her/his own life and the sex-selling trade. On the other hand, there is the situation where the sex worker is in charge of her/his own life and own business. The present study assumes male sex workers to be both victims and agents. Second, most studies base their perspectives on either the environment or the personal character of the sex worker. The present study takes its point of departure from where these two perspectives meet – in the reciprocal interrelation between the person who sells sex and the sex-selling activity. Additionally, it discusses the notion that when individuals feel in charge of their life, they are more likely to take care of their health and their social and economic future.

The context

The brothel is located on the second floor in a light-yellow five-story building at the outskirts of the red light district in a major European capital. At the street level, next to the locked door, there is an intercom for entrance. Before the client is admitted into the large apartment with dark red wallpaper, he is examined through the fish-eye. In the dim light, there is a central bar, and some young men on the threshold of adulthood sit around tables or stand along the wall. Different pornographic films are shown on the TV monitors placed strategically around the establishment. While the client has something to drink in the bar, he is able to talk to some young men; others will approach him and some young men will look busy. After negotiations, the client chooses the young man he wants. For the sex service, a fixed price is paid to the bartender, and the brothel will pay the young man later, minus their expenses, a 40/60 split. Then the client will be taken to small private room upstairs, basalt furnished with a bed, chair, and TV. Afterward the client can tip the young man some pocket money. They will leave the room together, and if everything is okay, the client can leave through the front door, which is opened by the bartender or the doorman. In order to work at a brothel, the young man must ask the owner, and after they have agreed on a share of money, he will be allowed to work at the place.

The gay escort service

Another way to sexual service is through different kinds of gay escort services. GES (gay escort service) is an international business located in the major European capital where the respondent lives. These businesses always operate through a website, but in this case there is only outdoor service. On the website the clients are able to choose, as from a menu, among different categories of men, who are shown in more or less nude photos. If he wants to see more erotic photos of the man, he must buy a log-in code. The client can select his preferences for age, ethnicity, sexual preference, and whether he wants an insertive partner (top), a receptive partner (bottom), or a partner who works both ways (versatile) in anal sex. There are different ways of ordering an escort, a “rent-boy,” but in Ethan’s case the operator phoned, telling him that a client had chosen him.

The escort will be picked up by a taxi and driven to the client’s home, which will be the first time the escort sees his client. The client pays the agency directly via the Internet, and again the client can tip if the service was good. In order to get work, the young man has to apply to the operator, who will check him out. Also, the operator determines whether the young man is trustworthy, so that he does not give the firm a bad reputation. Many escorts make a contract with the agency, which means they have agreed in advance to the sex work they will be offered. In order to be sure that the young man can perform whatever is required of him, the operator/staff sometimes has sex with the presumptive escort during the recruitment process.

Case study

The case study, with its strengths and limitations, was chosen as the research strategy to investigate a part of the individual’s life cycle (9,10). The data is based on eight semi-structured qualitative in-depth interviews that lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. By the use of open-ended questions, the respondent was given the opportunity to expand his thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Especially in the field of agency depending on different venues of sex work, stigmatisation, entry and departure points and how these affect his need for health service and social work. The questions revolved around the nature of risk and protective factors that he faced during his life trajectory and what personal action competencies he acquired or lacked and how the majority of society could include him. The first interview was given in 2004 as a part of a study about honor-related violence against young people because of their sexual orientation. At that time Ethan, 20 years of age, had started to sell sex at the brothel. The next formal interview took place in 2009 as a part of a study about young people and HIV. From 2009 the interviews took place annually up to 2014, all revolving around the topic of sex work. Together with these interviews, informal conversations about what he was doing over the period took place, as did ethnographic fieldwork at different sites where he sold sex, e-mail conversations, and access to his diary during his first two years of selling sex. The interviews covered a wide variety of issues relating to his individual life story and his sex work. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analysis of the material was interrelated with the processes of data collection and coding. The respondent has given informed consent to all his material.

Theoretical considerations

I will briefly introduce a few main concepts in order to understand the cultural historical activity theory as a theoretical framework used in this single subject

design (11). An important factor is that an individual does not meet other people or her/his social context directly; they are mediated through human activity. An individual develops through those activities, where activities are an endless process of movements, changes, remodelling, and development. Throughout a person's lifetime she/he expands the number of activities she/he is part of, by consciously or unconsciously "stepping into them" (12). In all of the everyday activities an individual "steps into," she/he has experiences, and through these experiences she/he build her/his self-image and personality. In this dialectic relation, collective development always precedes individual development.

When a person "steps into" an activity, the society, at the same moment, makes its "settlement" in her/him through its different activities systems. The interpersonal relation in the activity becomes intrapersonal, and by doing so an individual internalizes the activities. Vygotsky claims that a person's cultural development appears twice: first on the social level and then on the individual level (13). To understand a person, there has to be an understanding of the activities the person is involved in and has participated in previously; "human practice is the basis for human cognition" (14). Through the interplay between the demands of a person's sociocultural activities and a person's processes of capacities and skills she/he uses to meet these demands, an individual gains "personal action competencies" (12) to act in a certain way and to meet the demands of various contexts. It is in this reciprocal perspective that I have analyzed my findings.

Case study continued

Ethan was born in Sweden 1984 of parents from various ethnic backgrounds and different religions. As a result, he has an indeterminate Mediterranean and androgynous appearance, which also makes him look younger, something he used in his favor when it came to his sex work. His parents divorced when he was eight, and he continued to live with his mother, who together with his grandmother raised him to become a caring person. Ethan remembers from that time: "I used to pick up my little sister from day care on the way back home from school and then walk to our grandmother's to eat and then take my sister home. Our mother often came home late." His mother had different boyfriends in different periods, but Ethan liked none of them. Quarrels at home forced him to move to his own apartment when he was 16 years, something that taught him how to take care of himself from an early age. His mother and grandmother have always been important to him. However, on the other hand, his father, who had drug problems, "... has been present when it has suited him," Ethan mentions. On his father's side there are kin who live very traditionally, in more or less honor-related societies. Ethan thus experienced a clash in values between them and the Swedish majority society. At the same time, he also learned to respect different cultures and to manage diversity, a skill useful to him later. In school, Ethan felt that the other kids had it better; he knew that his family were neither rich nor poor.

Ethan was eight years old when he was raped by his uncle, an event that still haunts him. He connects negative experiences to the rape and regards it as one reason for selling sex. He has mixed emotions surrounding the event; although it was painful, it gave him a sense of being specially selected. He learned that he got something if he gave something. Ethan also was raped when he was 19 and 25 years old. Ethan recalls, "All occasions were when I was in a place where I could not get out of there or get help quickly enough. I was alone with the man." Looking back he said, "I have not really talked about all this

stuff. I have not so good a perspective on it yet.” Although the experiences were very different, they had something in common—he was to be deprived of his dignity and “It was as if we had a tacit agreement: come quickly, do not hurt me, and leave.”

Ethan has always been very sexually active. He penetrated a boy in his class when he was around 10 years old, he remembers. Shortly thereafter, an unknown boy at a toilet in a park penetrated him, which caused him a lot of pain. Between 10 and 14, he had three girlfriends without having sex with them, hardly ever kissed them, and at 14 he had his first boyfriend for about three months. They had oral sex and petting, no anal sex because of the bad memories from the park. Ethan was bullied and did not attend high school frequently, even though he liked some of the subjects. Instead, he hung out with friends, but never took part in any criminal activities. He “came out” as gay in high school after he mobilized some friends to support him. Although expressed in other words, these are early examples of his ability to organize, to be in charge, and to use his social skills.

At the age of 14 Ethan consciously sold sex for the first time. Cruising for friends on a gay-community site on the internet, he was offered remuneration for sex from a 40-year-old man. It sounded interesting, and he wanted to try it out. In return for the sexual encounter Ethan got €200, a bottle of liquor, and a carton of cigarettes, which encouraged him to continue meeting the man every second week. Drawing on this experience, he began strategically to sell sexual services now and then in return for money and gifts, and by doing so he acquired negotiating and social skills and proficiency in the sexual activities clients wanted.

At 20 years of age he found an 18-year-old boyfriend; after a couple of months together, they planned to travel around Europe. In order to raise money, they hosted private sex shows at Ethan’s place, where men could watch when he and his boyfriend stripped and had sex together. The idea came up, Ethan notes, “partly in conversation on the chat with what customers demanded, and partly in conversation with what my boyfriend wanted to do.” The boyfriend favored doing shows rather than having sex with customers. Ethan recalls that he enjoyed doing the peep shows, which underpinned his desire to feel attractive and unique. But the sex work was for another cause, getting fast, easy money for their joint trip.

He settles down through sex work

Travelling around Europe during the summer, they ran out of money when they were visiting a major capital. Ethan made the decision to send his boyfriend back to finish school in Sweden while he himself stayed on alone to try his luck; “I’m on an adventure trip,” he writes. At the youth hostel, with only €50 in his pocket, he opened a gay map and found a gay brothel just around the corner. He took the opportunity at once. Ethan described his first encounter:

So I went up there and rang the door and went inside. There was a hysterical tall transsexual from Poland in the bar, who was called NN, and a bunch of boys from all over the world. They looked very strange at me. So I talked to him at the bar and said I wanted to work. He looked up and down at me and said I could start that night. And then I had some customers that night there. And all of a sudden... Well that’s good. So I continued with it a month, until I got a job.

Ethan’s sex work started this time again by rational consideration and as the main source of economic livelihood in order to pay for the youth hostel, food, and the ability to move around in the city for employment. Later he left

the hostel and lived with some friends and customers, some nights here and some nights there. His life could be described as bohemian, and although selling sex in the brothel was not his main interest, it was his fixed point in life for the rest of the summer. Although this first month he had a feeling of mastery, he also felt abandoned, and he writes in his diary, “Hate my existence. Hate my friends. Hate me. Hate everything.” Working full-time in the brothel gave him both resources and the possibility for building up a network of friends in order to generate returns.

Established himself with the additional support of sex work

After the summer, Ethan was able to rent a small room and was also admitted to study for his future profession. By his experience of staying overnight with some clients, he started to stay for a longer time with some men. One of them helped him not only financially, but with contacts through his social network. Ethan got a job. Work at the brothel shifted to a part-time job when he needed the money. He describes that he felt most secure and experienced and had the most power over his own life when he worked at the brothel. Working hours were flexible, he could choose times that suited his other schedule at the university and his night classes. To be able to choose was a very important aspect in his life.

At the brothel, Ethan said he could choose clients and was not forced to meet with a client whose sexual preferences he could not meet. Overall he had a great tolerance for the ages and appearances of the clients. It was how they wanted him to perform the sex act that made him uncomfortable. He still found it hard to be the receptive one because of his anatomy and the bad experience in the park when he was younger. Instead, the ability to negotiate came in handy; Ethan often got the clients to agree to his wishes instead of theirs. Ethan remembered a particular client who “made me remember how important it is to get hugged tightly – it was important to him. I held him through the act almost all the time. To hug is a big part of what men unconsciously actually pay for.” By this age he had gained an altruistic capacity to put the customer first. There was competition with the other boys all the time to get clients, but he could influence the contest by dress, actions, and different conversation. He gained a sense of mastery in meeting the client’s need, meeting his own preferences, and structuring his work.

Working for GES, Ethan felt like an object with no influence whatsoever—over the client, the kind of sex, or the payment. He said, “I felt I was stripped of all dignity.” He had no control over when the agency called him; he could be interrupted at the university. Ethan says:

One who had me on his website rang me and said, “We have a customer for you,” and so they sent a car. And then I was in the car on the way to the customer. No, it did not work at all. Because I did not know anything. They did the talking for me. I just knew it was a man who wanted this and “remember now that I have said you are twenty years.” So things like that or “remember that you are from Spain”. And I just said, “Oh well?” No, it did not work for me because I was very uncomfortable.

Ethan experienced himself as a commodity being chosen because of factors he was not aware of and could not influence. He was picked up by a taxi, driven to some place unknown, sometimes out of the country and with no contact whatsoever with the client before the sex work. The agency was careful primarily about their own reputation, which included the young man’s safety, because this could affect their reputation employing other boys. His emotional well-being, on the contrary, was not an issue for them. This approach resulted in

Ethan bit by bit losing his willingness to follow his life goals. When he had no control, he felt drained of his power to control himself, like a victim of circumstances. The two outlooks were incompatible, so he left the GES.

As head of his own small enterprise, Ethan felt in charge, in control, and organized. He could present himself as he wished and could describe in detail what kind of sex he could perform or engage in. On the website there were few nude pictures of himself, because clients “could otherwise use them as pornographic material.” He always had an extra phone for client calls so he could chat with the customer before they met at a neutral place. He never took a new client to his home for sex, and in these cases he did not have full control over where they went or what could happen. Even if his friend knew about Ethan’s email conversation, it was not in real time – as it was at the brothel. As a part of this safety awareness, he started to take mostly regulars, instead of occasional clients, and could therefore offer sex in his apartment. It was also “trial and error,” he said, and he mentioned one time that he tried to sell sexual service as a transsexual. A client requested that, and Ethan thought, “What fun!” It took him two hours to do his makeup and to dress up. When the client entered, it took him “...two or three minutes to come,” he got his money, and the client left, “...and I thought, no. Why? Was it worth it?”

A break in sex work

When Ethan got into the academy he stopped active sex work for a while because he was studying full-time and had student status. During the time Ethan studied, he got involved in HIV-prevention work. There he found a boyfriend who had his roots in Africa and a teenage son back home. After a while Ethan was prepared to make another trip on his life journey, this time to his boyfriend’s home in Africa. They were going to work on HIV-prevention together in the region. Ethan said, “I quit selling sex. Suddenly it became obvious that I could not have a normal love relationship with a man if I did not distance myself from the escort work. How would that look in front of our son?” They could not marry in the boyfriend’s country, so they got married in South Africa, but as a married couple they could settle down in his boyfriend’s village. After a month or so, there was a shift in his husband’s attitude toward him. He became the “wife” and therefore could not have his own money and fraternize with others. It even went so far that after a discussion, Ethan was bruised from being slapped. When Ethan finally ran away it was without anything. All his belongings, even his diaries, were locked in a storehouse. He travelled without money or accommodation back to the city he left in Europe. The circle closed and next phase began.

Return to sex work – want to exit

When Ethan returned he had some personal contacts left and got some working hours, which made him able to pay for his very central and small rented room and food. He felt trapped, he said, without a regular job and with grades not high enough to carry on his university studies. He felt forced to start selling sex again because he had the personal action competencies, which he could mobilize, and sex work was a viable moneymaking option. Back in Sweden he felt that he had even fewer opportunities to manage to live because clients by then were criminalized. This time it was different as he entered the scene; he was not studying at the university and he had no employment besides sex work. Very quickly he was absorbed into sex work, emotionally as well as time wise, which prevented him from seeing his friends and working in “the other world.” In March 2014 he wrote me:

Hans. Why is it so hard to get out of prostitution? One question, I work a lot in the life right now. After my African adventure, so to speak, I have had a hard time getting together a decent living in Europe again. I have used sex work to make it. I have again got to experience what it is to begin with sex work for other work, first, “just that extra money,” when you have a hard time to financially exist. Step by step, I have lost confidence and partly my lifestyle has changed to the point I do not know how I’ll manage to get into the “normal world” again.

It all looked dark for him. When I was finalizing the paper, Ethan wrote that he started to see some friends, got new admission to the university, and took a night class again. All his life he had struggled with the question of whether or not to do sex work. He rhetorically asks: “When is it right, if it can get right and when it’s wrong, if it could go wrong?” Once again a circle in his life trajectory is closed, and a new phase began. How are we going to understand Ethan’s life cycles?

Discussion

Doing a single subject design listening to the story of one person we have to discuss the limitations of the study. There could be a bias of getting too close to the respondent after 10 years and also a bias of the researcher’s own academic development over 10 years, which in some way might affect the process. On the other hand, the time between sessions gave a necessary distance, and age gave time for reflection. Additionally, Ethan may or may not be typical of other male sex workers so the results can not be generalized.

If we let the present case study “tell its own story” (9), four specific but interconnected patterns emerge. First, there is a reciprocal connection between the structure of the external sex working activity and the internal experience of Ethan’s agency or victimization, something that affects his perception of health and well-being. That is Ethan occupied multiple subject positions depending on the social context. Second, the sex selling activities are embedded in the larger structures of society. This orchestrates the norms of and actions in the activity, which makes his sex work shameful, stigmatizing, and invisible. Third, if we use the notion of social capital on an individual level, the nature and scale of his activities constrain the possibilities for him to use his social capital inside the sex trade industry in order to achieve employment opportunities outside sex work. Fourth and finally, if we look at the sex-selling activities cumulatively over time, they have changed from being on a part-time intermittent basis to becoming his main source of income—a full-time emotional occupation. Let us expand the patterns one by one.

Reciprocity

That the venues play an important part of the issues male sex workers face has been recognized previously by many male sex worker researchers (15-17), but not what happens in a male sex worker’s life because of his participation in different sex activities. When Ethan works in the brothel, he must learn to submit to the requirements of that activity in order to remain on the premises. Not only does he learn the demands from his client, he also has to learn the demands from his competitors and the owner, bartender, and bouncer, and the hierarchical order between them (18). In order to meet these claims, Ethan appropriates capacities and skills, he gains “personal action competencies” (12) to help him “survive” in various contexts. These action competencies make him

“capable of acting” and must be understood first in relation to resolving specific tasks. Second, they help him to achieve certain goals. Third, he needs them to satisfy specific needs in specific social and cultural contexts. Every activity has its special requirements. To sell sex at the brothel, Ethan requires some other skills, achieves some other goals, and satisfies some other needs than attending seminars at the university. In order to “survive” in the sex work activities, there are two main choices, either he learns strategies to cope with them or he has to leave.

While learning there will be two effects, Ethan will be a part of the change in the activity and the activity will affect him, as Leontyev wrote: “Acting on the external world, they change it; at the same time they also change themselves” (14). For example, going to the brothel, he writes in his diary: “One thing is certain in any case. I’ll be very stylish and sober.” Ethan starts to change his life in order to live up to the expectations from the brothel and make more money for the brothel and for himself, which is to be active, to take the initiative, and to ensure that there will be a settlement with the client. There is not only a code of conduct; there are other codes, like the dress code, which includes the use of a condom. Despite this, he needs to smoke marijuana in order to get in the mood for the clients and afterward in order to “chill” out.

By contrast, Ethan considered he was treated as an object when working for the GES and this made him feel like one. The requirement structure of this sex-selling activity did not need him to be active, to take the initiative in getting clients, or to settle the agreement with them. It did not enhance his personal skills of being capable of acting. That emotional feeling meant at least two things to Ethan. First, feeling disempowered and hard for him to take in any health care messages because he felt distant to his “objectified” body. Second, he had a hard time transferring knowledge from his everyday life into his sex work venue and vice versa. His body was already “sold” by the agency’s advertisement on the Internet and run by an invisible operator. His work, as he perceived it, was exclusively to perform and deliver ejaculation.

This feeling of being a victim is different between the brothel and Ethan’s private business on the Internet. The structure of the brothel made Ethan feel that he was in charge of his life. How he felt, both physically and emotionally, affected his appearance, and that enabled his sale of sexual services. This increased his self-esteem, something Smith and colleagues (19) also found in their study. Although there were competitions among the boys, there was also support from them and from the visible barman/bouncer. This condition empowered him to make his health or safer sex non-negotiable. Ethan recalls what he learned at the brothel: “Be very consistent with what I like and do not like and to be clear about it”.

It seems like there were watertight bulkheads between his everyday activities and his sex activities (20). Ethan states that he always used a condom while selling sex, so he had the knowledge and practiced it. On the other hand, when he had sex outside his sex work, he was not so conscious about wearing condoms, because these activities with friends have another requirement structure of how to behave. There seems to be a difference in “dress code” – wearing condoms – between Ethan’s “working sex” and his “private sex.” In one activity he kept up his guard, while in others he was off guard, and therefore vulnerable.

Embeddedness

We can perceive the strength of the societal structure when we look upon Ethan’s “adventure” in Africa. Both of the men were gay, both worked in an

equal manner, and they treated each other equally in Europe. When they came to the Ethan's husband's country, the structure of the society, village, and clan forced Ethan into a subordinate heterosexual position, although they were two men. But to "exist" socially within society, they had to be perceived as "husband" and "wife" in order to avoid the stigmatization and shame in the society. In the same way, the sex selling activities are embedded in the society's sexual hierarchy. Many male sex workers are exposed to two of society's major taboos, namely, commercial sex and homosexual activity (7,15). But that is not enough, I argue; they work in the entire sector that is damned by most societies.

Male sex workers like Ethan belong to what Gayle Rubin (21) illustrates as a circle of a "sexual value system," with an inner part of "blessed sexuality" and an outer part of "damned sexuality." This "good," "normal," and "natural" sex means, for example sex that is heterosexual, monogamous, non-commercial, same generation, and without pornography. Any sex that violates these rules, Rubin terms "bad," "abnormal," or "unnatural"—whether it be homosexual, promiscuous, commercial, cross-generational lines, or uses pornography. Male sex work is the outer limit; Ethan, breaks all the rules and he is considered as shameful by society and is likely to feel a strong stigma and discrimination (15); hence, he is encapsulated by silence and invisibility. At the same time, the client and the sex entrepreneurs demand anonymity and discretion (18). For example, Ethan writes about an older man he socializes with: "I'll have to keep up a proper double life. NN for my everyday life and livelihood and (the brothel for) getting my own money, something he does not know about." Ethan is squeezed, thus, between the feelings of being stigmatized as a male sex worker by the society, not being able to use his work experience as references, and not being able to talk about what he is doing to his friends, especially to his mother. It is not the "problem" itself that directly affects Ethan, but it is the attitude mediated through the social context that has an impact on him because he is embedded in society.

He becomes HIV-positive at the age of 22 years by "a fuckbuddy I'd had during a few months," despite his condom use and vigilance. He does not tell anybody about it.

I use my doctor's recommendation. He said, "Do not tell anyone. Do not tell them you're having sex with, unless you want to have a relationship with them." He said, "Just make sure that you have safe sex, no worries."

This is a silent approach that is supported by the discretion and anonymity that characterizes not only the sex trade industry, but also stigmatizes and discriminates against people with HIV, which again hinders social support.

Social capital

In different activities Ethan meets other people and interacts with other environments. In the beginning when selling sex at the brothel, he writes in his diary: "I just need a clean white shirt or whatever, something classic. Should get customers and damn what money I will be making tonight." In the morning he concludes, "Slept really well last night. Feel stylish and competition is down. I'll do it my way." But when Ethan strives upward, he has to concentrate on sex work and has to leave friends in the non-sex activities. Ethan writes, "I'm in a good mood. Was basically offered a job at a gay bar. They were interested in two months ahead. Everything feels better." Because he is in the sex trade, he meets people in these activities, and therefore most recommendations he gets

will be for such activities. On the other hand, only his closest friends know about his sex work; he has not revealed it to his family or others, not even his mother, because he feels it would be so stigmatizing. Therefore, as Koken and colleagues found in their study (15), is he not able to benefit from their support, and covering up his sex work takes massive amounts of energy and time, which is indeed stressful for him.

Lin (22) described the notion of social capital on an individual level as an investment in social relations in order to get reimbursement, along with the resources embedded in the social structure that are accessible and mobilized by goal-directed actions. Following Ethan over time and especially after coming back from Africa, he had access to only a limited number of activities, which were all more or less connected with sex work. At least two factors prevented him from using his experience to get back into “society”; first, sex work is “anonymous” and, second, it is hard to find people, in the society’s “dammed sexualities” who know people and would be able to connect him to employment or study outside the sex industry. His chances are limited when his everyday life consists of sex work activities, like chatting with presumptive customers for hours without result. Finally, in March 2014 Ethan writes:

How do you leave prostitution? Basically, it’s about finding a new job and leaving the old, nothing strange... but still incredibly difficult... much harder than I had with other projects in life. Why is it now that I have had a long period of sex work? I have a harder time being social now than I had before... difficult to trust people and harder to trust that I am good enough to do more than sex. I have successively reduced contact with friends I had before. Partly because I’m ashamed... feel insecure. Without even social networks I have much less chance of finding a new job, apartment ... everything in life is heavy without friends. I feel unsociable in comparison to how I’ve been.

In the quote Ethan describe the process of reducing contacts with friends, which leads to a limited social network, which in turn leads to fewer chances to find employment. He continues: “During the time I had jobs, no problems. I had the confidence and the contacts during my time at the academy. Today I simply do not have confidence or contacts after a tough period in silence.” If his activities could “communicate” with each other, Ethan could take advantage of his social capital in one of the activities to use in another. But because these are separated, there is a “structural hole” between them and no “brokers” providing connections (23). He becomes more and more isolated. He did not benefit from the added value of the other activities. He “got by,” managed to live, but he did not “get ahead” or manage to make a career (24).

Dominating activity

The personality is the sum of all our activities which are organized hierarchically. The dominating activity (maybe not in time or visibility) is the most important to an individual and organizes all the others; some of them precede others. Ethan’s life story encompasses a wide array of entry points, diverse sexual activities, and various venues, which match the findings of Koken and colleagues (15). In the beginning of Ethan’s career in Sweden, sex work was something momentarily for fun and for extra money, but mostly it boosted his self-image. During his second phase living in a major capital in Europe, it become first like “survival” sex work, but then turned into something

on a part-time, intermittent basis, as an economic support for his job and academic interests.

I needed money to rent an apartment; I needed to be able to eat and all that. When I got my own first room, which I rented, then all of a sudden it was the same rent every month. It was a bit more of a normal life. Then I worked only in the daytime, so gradually, step by step, it led me to the normal lifestyle. If I didn't have NN-lessons, I would have continued to work nights and sleep during the day. It was actually a giant change.

When his social life functioned with study and work, there was no need for Ethan to sell sex, especially when he met his love and got married. With his prostitution activities, he “kept three different clients for two years, but I stopped seeing others, stopped advertising for work and met no new clients. I had only these three regulars.” In fact, he remained in the periphery of sex work. Until leaving Africa, his life revolved around study and work. After Africa, the predominant activity for Ethan was his sex work, occupying the major part of his time awake, which made him feel trapped as an object without control, as it was when he worked for the GES.

In all of Ethan's everyday activities he “moved into,” he made experiences, and through these experiences, he built his self-image and his personality as someone good and professional. While changing his context, he changed himself. Some self-images are new, some confirm the old ones, and others challenge them. The old image (professional) was instead challenged by the new – “whore.” Through an active and conscious participation in special activities, Ethan was able to “create” himself, and it was in this relationship, between the outside activity and himself, that he found the driving force to develop. But now he felt excluded from the rest of society, so the part-time intermittent sex work became the activity that dominated his life and put all his other activities in order. He is now running his own business and feeling ambivalent: “Now I only use my own website; it is up and running and I am in full control and responsible for myself, I cannot complain. But, I feel unworthy and depressed when I have to be quiet about this – other people would think I'm scum if they knew – I'm a loser who just got a job as a 'whore' – What if mom found out?”

Out of a cultural historical activity theory perspective all these four notions could be themes for future research. Intertwined they could provide a better understanding in order to rethink HIV-prevention for male sex workers and develop a more robust social- and health work with people living in the shadows of society.

Conclusions

This study looks at a single case exclusively – Ethan – it has not elaborated on issues around male sex work and important factors like legislation, gender, ethnicity, commercialization, substance abuse, or exploitation to any great extent. Instead it problematizes issues of agency, categorization, and oppression. First, we can note that the case study supports previously contradictory findings by male sex work researchers. From the perspective of cultural historical activity theory, we have to understand Ethan's life in the light of the intersection between his environment and his personality. He is not a victim of circumstances – he uses them to get ahead – but under some conditions he experiences himself as a victim (2,5). Ethan is an entrepreneur

who breaks from the old and dares to start again (15), although he has no financial resources available. Nor has he access to a collective social capital; however, he manages time and again to mobilize new social capital in the form of a personal network (7). In that way we are able to consider his resilience, “the dynamic process that leads to positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (25), instead of only risk factors. It is not just how he gets exposed, but also how he recovers. All the time Ethan struggled with the question of whether or not to do sex work; thus, he has a variety of entry and exit points to sex work throughout his life trajectory (19), although with different motives and goal.

Second, except for Pfister and colleagues (20), the difference between working sex and private sex, has been little mentioned in previous research. Ethan is more off-guard and vulnerable in his private life. He got raped and became HIV-positive outside the sex work. In the beginning the money from sex work was for another purpose, but in the end the sex work became the main activity, surrounded by decreasing social capital. To make a shift, he needs to develop and sustain a broad variety of relations to people in other activities. Social service is unsuccessful in reaching out to him with offers of assistance. Nor is he offered sufficient educational and employment skills. Two major reasons are that social services and public health programs do not recognize male sex work as an issue and do not understand new technology, like Internet usage, to reach out with a wide range of interventions (3). HIV prevention works particularly well on the Internet; therefore society has to rethink its HIV-prevention strategies. The results of this study indicate that there is not a typical male sex worker. Men like Ethan, who are not in trouble with the police or society, are invisible to social and health services and therefore exposed to social and health inequalities. To gain a deeper understanding that male sex workers can be “both” sides simultaneously. Future research in these areas is needed as mentioned before.

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