

# Ethnography

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## The meaning of the purchase Desire, demand and the commerce of sex

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**ABSTRACT** ■ Feminists and other scholars have debated theoretically what exactly is being purchased in the prostitution transaction and whether sex can be 'a service like any other', but they have scarcely tackled these questions empirically. This article draws upon field observations of and interviews with male clients of commercial sex-workers and state agents entrusted with regulating them to probe the meanings given to different types of commercial sexual exchange. Manifested by client arrests and re-education, vehicle impoundment, stricter laws on underage prostitution and the possession of child pornography, recent state efforts to problematize male sexuality throughout the USA and Western Europe have been developed alongside an increasingly unbridled ethic of sexual consumption, as evidenced by soaring demand for pornography, strip clubs, lap-dancing, escorts, telephone sex and 'sex tours' in developing countries. By situating commercial sexual exchange within the broader context of post-industrial transformations of culture and sexuality, we can begin to unravel this paradox.

**KEY WORDS** ■ prostitution, masculinity, desire, commodification, intimacy, sex-work, gentrification

*Suddenly, the car takes off. We're moving again, but I'm not quite sure who we're following. Apparently, a woman has gotten into the car ahead of us with a 'date' [in the vernacular of commercial sex, paying customers are referred to as 'dates' or 'tricks']. We proceed at full speed about a block or two, over train tracks, to a deserted stretch of territory with few cars or people. Indeed, the area is completely barren save for a few abandoned warehouses. Despite the gleaming California sunshine, the atmosphere is tense.*

*Everything happens in a flash. In mere minutes, it's all over, we slam the brakes on, and two of the officers hop out. They motion for me to join them.*

*The other members of the Street Crimes Unit are already on the scene. They have stopped a blue Chevrolet truck and handcuffed the driver, a large but trembling man who is trying to be obsequious in spite of being terrified. Two of the officers have their guns pointed towards him. In addition to the arresting officer, the sergeant and another policeman also surround the suspect. Meanwhile, the female officers beckon the passenger, Carla, from her seat and begin to talk to her.<sup>1</sup> They are trying to get her side of the story so that they can use it as evidence. Carla is high on drugs and rather weary, but still lucid. She is apparently one of the numerous street prostitutes whom the officers know by name, having been arrested repeatedly during the ten or so years that she has been working. But today she is not the main focus of their attention.*

*I hover in the background, absorbing the drama of the surrounded man, the drawn guns, the momentary displays of power and fear. My heart pounding, I try to listen, feeling vaguely guilty about being a part of this. The arresting officer delivers a rapid-clip, tough-guy, made-for-TV monologue:*

*I want you to tell me what happened. . . . Remember, we've spoken to her so we know. . . . What were you thinking? . . . Did you use a condom? . . . No? So you came in her mouth? . . . Did you even look at her? Did you see that disgusting shit she has on her hands? Now it's all over your wee-wee. . . . Do you have a wife or girlfriend? Now you're going to go home and give whatever you just got to her. Every man's thought of it, but you don't need to take chances. Next time you're feeling horny, why don't you just buy some porn and jack off?*

*Before releasing their detainee, the officers issue him a written citation and a court date.*

\* \* \*

*Much later that same evening, I arrive at a famed 'erotic theater' with a friend, tired but intrigued. The theater has a reputation for being one of the*



most upscale of the 14 legal sex clubs in the area, where striptease, lapdances, and in recent years, 'hand jobs' and 'blow jobs' are widely if unofficially available for purchase. We wade through the small crowd of Asian businessmen standing outside and make our way to the entrance. A middle-aged man with glasses politely takes our money (\$45 each) with no perceptible surprise that we should choose to come here – even though we are obviously the evening's only female customers. A basket of condoms sits prominently by the door.

Again in straightforward fashion, an employee proceeds to give us a tour and to describe the various shows. The rooms have names like the 'VIP Club' and the 'Luxury Lounge'. The premises are dimly lit but clean, orderly, and rather spare. The floors are bare yet spotless. We head over to the main stage in the back room, where a young, tanned and toned woman in a sparkly thong bikini is doing a dance to the accompaniment of strobe lights and disco. She twists and turns, gyrates and thrusts, opens and closes her legs. Her featured partner is a long, silver pole that protrudes upright from the floor. As the male customers watch the show, I watch them. They crane their necks to get a better view of the dancer. All of the seats are filled and it's standing room only. 'Imagine coming home to that', gushes a 40-something white man in a dark business suit and red tie to one of his colleagues. The performance concludes with the dancer making her way into the audience and sidling up to individual customers, who caress the surface of her body and push \$20 bills under her garter.

Many of the customers are extremely young: under 25, perhaps under 20, white, baseball-capped and sporting casual attire. These contingents have clearly come in groups. The 30- and 40-something, suited white businessmen seem to comprise another category, and also cluster together in groups of three or four. Then there are the loners – again, typically under 50 years of age, predominantly white, with a sprinkling of blacks and Latinos. All are able-bodied, of average looks and builds. By mere appearances, they certainly belie the stereotype that the sex industry is geared towards older men who cannot find partners.

In a room called 'Amsterdam Live', a central stage is encircled by a sunken ring of little cubicles, each partitioned off from the performance area by fine, black mesh curtains. This design allows the heads and bodies of the customers to protrude through to the stage, and for the women to protrude back through to the booths in the other direction. A surrounding wall of mirrors above the cubicles means that each customer can see every other customer, as well as the performers. Two young, beautiful women come out, both with gleaming, waist-length hair and very high heels, naked but for black and white midriff corsets which leave their breasts and genitals exposed. They perform a highly choreographed and stylized sex act together, kissing and licking. Then, despite an earlier staff person's admonishment



*that body parts must remain within the booths, the women come over to each booth to ask if anyone would like a 'show'. Both of them soon descend into the dark cubicles where they are grasped by eager hands, momentarily disappearing from our line of vision. (Fieldnotes, San Francisco Bay Area, May 1999)*

\* \* \*

Feminists and other scholars have debated theoretically what is 'really' purchased in the prostitution transaction: is it a relationship of domination? Is it love, an addiction, pleasure? Can sex be a service like any other?<sup>2</sup> But they have scarcely tackled this question empirically. This article draws upon field observations of and interviews with male clients of sex-workers and state agents entrusted with regulating them to probe the meanings ascribed by different types of consumers to commercial sexual exchange, and to situate such exchanges within the broader context of post-industrial transformations of culture and sexuality.<sup>3</sup>

I begin with the two paradoxical ethnographic images above. The first describes the new and growing phenomenon of the arrest of heterosexual clients of female street prostitutes, an unprecedented strategy of direct state intervention in the expression of male sexual desire. In the late 1990s, for the first time ever, US cities such as San Francisco and New York began to boast arrest rates of male customers which approached those of female prostitutes, reversing a historical pattern that feminists have long criticized (Pheterson, 1993; Lefler, 1999).<sup>4</sup> The second takes us to a local 'erotic theater' where sex acts are consumed – legally, and to some extent, culturally – as unproblematic instances of sexual entitlement and male bonding.

In Western Europe and the USA, recent state efforts to problematize heterosexual male desire – rising client arrests and re-education via diversion programs such as 'John School'; vehicle impoundment; stricter domestic and international laws on the patronage of underage prostitutes and the possession of child pornography – have occurred in the face of an increasingly unbridled ethic of sexual consumption. During the last 30 years, demand for commercially available sexual services has not only soared but become ever more specialized, diversifying along technological, spatial and social lines. The scope of sexual commerce has thus grown to encompass: live sex shows; all variety of pornographic texts, videos, and images, both in print and on line; fetish clubs; sexual 'emporiums' featuring lap-dancing and wall-dancing; escort agencies; telephone and cyber-sex contacts; 'drive-through' striptease venues; and organized sex tours of developing countries (Kempadoo and Doezema, 1998; Lopez, 2000; Weitzer, 2000a). Sexual commerce has become a multi-faceted, multi-billion-dollar industry, produced by and itself driving developments in other sectors of the global



economy, such as hotel chains, long-distance telephone carriers, cable companies and information technology.<sup>5</sup> Just as the availability of hard-core pornographic films on videocassettes led directly to the introduction of the home VCR, pornography on CD-ROM and over the internet has been responsible for the acceptance and popularization of these new technologies (Schlosser, 1997; Lane, 2000). According to Internet research firms, a full one-third of the people who surf the Internet visit a pornography site (typically during workday hours) and, as late as 1997, almost all paid content sites on the web were pornographic (Learmonth, 1999; Prial, 1999; *The Economist*, 2000).

These contradictory social developments reveal a tension between sex-as-recreation and the normative push for a return to sex-as-romance, a cultural counterpart of which can be found in the simultaneous emergence of Viagra and '12-step' treatments for masculine sexual addiction. 'Sex' as cultural imperative and technical quest, now freed from the bounds of emotionality and romance, and the casting of non-relationally bound erotic behavior as a pathological 'addiction' are products of the same place and time. My goal in this article is to unravel this paradox.

Some have attributed recent attempts to reform male sexuality to the gains of second-wave feminism, and even described a shift in social stigma from the seller to the buyer of sexual services (Kay, 1999). Yet the influence of larger, structural factors has been neglected in most discussions. In fact, state interventions in (a typically lower-class tier of) male heterosexual practices, and the re-gendering of sexual stigma in certain middle-class fractions can both be linked to some of the broader transformations that produced the burgeoning demand for sexual services in the first place. In the industrializing 19th and early 20th centuries, the 'wrong' in prostitution was seen to reside in the female prostitute herself,<sup>6</sup> and in the classical writings of social science, prostitution as a social institution was portrayed as the supreme metaphor for the exploitation inherent in wage labor (Marx, 1978[1844]; Engels, 1978[1884]; Simmel, 1971[1907]). In the late 20th century, however, with the shift from a production-based to a consumption-based economy, the focus of moral critique and political reform is gradually being displaced: the prostitute is normalized as either 'victim' or 'sex-worker',<sup>7</sup> while attention and sanction is directed away from labor practices and towards consumer behavior.

In what follows I first sketch a brief genealogy of the academic and political discourses surrounding male sexual desire and consumer demand that have developed over the past century. I next take the reader to a variety of settings in which commercial sexual consumption takes place, in order to explore the meanings and motivations that contemporary clients ascribe to their own activities. In the final section, I contrast these framings with recent attempts by state agencies to reshape demand in the wake of a booming and





**Figure 1** In recent years, sexual commerce has expanded beyond prostitution to encompass a broad range of sexual products and services, as this web advertisement for a San Francisco 'sex emporium' illustrates.

diversifying sexual marketplace. My discussion throughout is based upon 15 in-depth interviews with male sexual consumers, 40 in-depth interviews



with male and female sex-workers, a review of local sex newspapers and other print and electronic media, and ethnographic fieldwork in sexual markets carried out in six northern California and Western European cities over the course of five years.<sup>8</sup>

### Explaining commercial sexual demand

Like that of social policy, the scholarly literature on prostitution has typically grasped the varied phenomena of sexual commerce through a narrow focus on the etiology, treatment, and social symbolism of the female prostitute. Although the purity crusaders in the late 19th century United States sought to problematize male sexuality, their campaign to replace the prevailing double standard with a single female standard that would be encoded into state policy met with little success (Luker, 1998). After the Progressive era,<sup>9</sup> far less social or scholarly attention was paid to prostitution as functionalist and psychoanalytic theories reinscribed the double standard and rendered prostitution not only unproblematic for the male clientele, but structurally integral to the institution of marriage (Davis, 1937; Greenwald, 1958).<sup>10</sup> In the 1970s and the 1980s, both the sociology of deviance and feminist theory saw the prostitute (but not the client) as a symbolically-laden precipitate of larger social currents. Although some second-wave feminists critiqued the lack of attention to male clients (McIntosh, 1978; Høigård and Finstad, 1986; Hobson, 1990), as well as the sexual double standard that underpinned it, it is only during the last decade that a body of empirical literature has emerged with a sustained focus on male sexual clients.

In the past 15 years a small but growing number of qualitative studies of client behavior have been undertaken by a new generation of feminist social researchers.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, building on Kinsey's influential – if methodologically flawed – work (1948), as well as heeding feminist calls to render male sexual clients visible, quantitative researchers have begun to correlate men's proclivity to visit prostitutes with other socio-demographic patterns. Analyzing data from the 1993 University of Chicago National Health and Social Life Survey, researchers Elliot Sullivan and William Simon found factors such as age cohort, military experience, education and racial/ethnic background to be statistically significant predictors of commercial sexual purchase (Sullivan and Simon, 1998).<sup>12</sup> Commercial sexual proclivity has been shown to vary systematically with a variety of attitudinal dispositions, including 'socio-emotional problems', as measured by reported feelings of emotional and physical dissatisfaction, feeling unwanted and sexually unsatisfied, and, most interestingly, by 'not hav[ing] sex as an expression of love' (Sullivan and Simon, 1998: 152). It has also been correlated with a 'commodified' view of sexuality, as measured by number of sexual partners, use



of pornography, and the belief that one needs to have sex immediately when aroused (Monto, 2000).

Finally, client behavior has increasingly been featured as a key component of broader qualitative studies on commercial sexual exchange (Høigård and Finstad, 1986; McKeganey and Barnard, 1996; Flowers, 1998; O'Connell Davidson, 1998). Drawing upon field data and interviews, these scholars have generated typologies of clients and consumer motivations. Whereas research on female prostitutes has been driven by questions of etiology (how did she get that way, why would a woman do that?), this research highlights differences between men, but typically takes their status as purchasers for granted. The primary motivations identified by these authors include clients' desire for sexual variation, sexual access to partners with preferred ages, racialized features and physiques, the appeal of an 'emotion-free' and clandestine sexual encounter, loneliness, marital problems, the quest for power and control, the desire to be dominated or to engage in 'exotic' sex acts, and the thrill of violating taboos. While provocative and insightful, this literature has often failed to explain client motives with historical specificity, or to link these motives to social and economic institutions that might themselves structure the relations of gender domination implied by many of the explanatory categories above. In general, typologies are presented as if based on distinct attributes of a transhistorical and unwavering masculinity. Two notable exceptions to this tendency are recent works on client behavior by anthropologist Anne Allison (1994) and sociologist Monica Prasad (1999).

In *Nightwork*, an ethnography of a Tokyo 'hostess club' where beautiful young women serve businessmen drinks and light their cigarettes, keep the banter flirtatious, and make their bodies available for groping, all at corporate expense, Allison draws on Frankfurt School theory to argue that 'the convergence of play and work and player and worker, supposed and presupposed by the institution of company-paid entertainment, is a feature of any society progressing through the late stages of capitalism' (1994: 23). According to Allison, the nightly participation of Japanese businessmen in the *mizu shobai*, or erotic nightlife, as well as their emotional distance from their wives and families, epitomizes this historical trend. Meanwhile, in 'The Morality of Market Exchange', an article based on phone interviews with male sexual customers which engages the classic distinction articulated by Karl Polanyi and Marshall Sahlins between market and pre-market societies, Prasad argues that the prostitution exchange contains within itself a form of morality specific to mass-market societies. Her interviews reveal that:

[c]ustomers conduct the prostitution exchange in ways that are not very different from how most market exchanges are conducted today: information about prostitution is not restricted to an elite but is widely available; social settings frame the interpretation of this information; the criminalization of



prostitution does not particularly hinder the exchange; and whether the exchange continues is often dictated by how well the business was conducted. In short, according to these respondents, in late-capitalist America sex is exchanged almost like any other commodity. (1999: 188)

Noting that her interviewees 'praise "market exchange" of sex for lacking the ambiguity, status-dependence, and potential hypocrisy that they see in the "gift exchange" of sex characteristic of romantic relationships', Prasad goes on to conclude that, in the 'fervent free-market 1980s and 1990s, romantic love might sometimes be subordinated to, and judged unfavorably with, the more neutral, more cleanly exchangeable pleasures of eroticism' (1999: 181, 206).

Unlike many treatments of sexual clients, the contributions of Allison and Prasad situate sexual consumption within the context of an expanded and normalized field of commercial sexual practices. Their analyses begin to reveal a shift from a relational to a *recreational* model of sexual behavior, a reconfiguration of erotic life in which the pursuit of sexual intimacy is not hindered but facilitated by its location in the marketplace.<sup>13</sup>

### The subjective contours of market intimacy

I'm by myself a lot, used to it, but sometimes I crave physical contact. I'd rather get it from someone I don't know because someone I do will want more. You get lonely. There's this girl right now I'm seeing. I like the attention. But that's it, in a nutshell. I find [prostitution] exciting, kind of fun. It's amazing that it's there. More people would participate if it weren't illegal. A lot of frustration in both sexes could be eliminated. (Don, 47, house painter)

I feel guilty every time I cheat on my wife. I'm not a psychopath. I try to hide it as much as possible. I had a non-professional affair once. It was nice, and intimate, and I didn't have to pay! But I felt more guilty about that, messing with someone else's life, even though she knew I was married. You don't ever have to worry about that when you pay for it. I'm conservative by nature, but I believe in freedom of choice. If a woman wants to do it, more power to her! She's providing a service. I'm not exploiting her. Exploitation would be finding some hot 25-year-old who doesn't know any better and taking her to lunches, then to bed. (Steve, 35, insurance manager)

My wife has never understood my desire to do this. I have no problem with my wife. We have a good sexual relationship. There's a Vietnamese restaurant on 6th and Market that I love, but I don't want to eat there every day. (Rick, 61, data processor)



I started seeing escorts during a time when I didn't have many venues to meet women. I felt isolated. My friends had moved away, and I was lacking motivation. It's more real and human than jacking off alone. My first preference was to pick up women for casual sex. Since that wasn't happening, I got into the habit. It was so easy. (Dan, 36, research analyst)

Amidst the disparate themes that animate the accounts that clients gave me of their motivations for purchasing sexual services runs one counter-intuitive thread. As Monica Prasad and Anne Allison found, for increasing numbers of men, erotic expression and the ethos of the marketplace are by no means antithetical. Indeed, contemporary client narratives of sexual consumption challenge the key cultural opposition between public and private that has anchored modern industrial capitalism.

Theorists of gender have sometimes regarded the recent growth of the commercial sex industry as a reactionary reassertion of male dominance in response to the gains of second-wave feminism (Giddens, 1992; O'Connell Davidson, 1998) or as compensation for men's economic disempowerment in the post-industrial public sphere (Kimmel, 2000). In such scenarios, the role of commercial sex is to provide the male client with a fantasy world of sexual subservience and consumer abundance that corrects the real power deficits that he experiences in his daily life. While not disputing such accounts, I would like to suggest that men's quest for market-mediated sexual intimacy is guided by an additional set of historical transformations.

Compensatory arguments of the sort put forth by O'Connell Davidson, Giddens, Kimmel and others rest upon the implicit premise that commercial sex caters to needs that would preferably and more fulfillingly be satisfied within an intimate relationship in the private sphere of the home. Yet for many sexual clients, the market is experienced as enhancing and facilitating desired forms of non-domestic sexual activity. This remains true whether what the client desires is a genuine but emotionally bounded intimate encounter, the experience of being pampered and 'serviced', participation in a wide variety of brief sexual liaisons, or an erotic interlude that is 'more real and human' than would be satisfying oneself alone. The platitudinous view that sexuality has been 'commodified' – and by implication, diminished – like everything else in late capitalism (e.g. Lasch, 1979) does not do justice to the myriad ways in which the spheres of public and private, intimacy and commerce, have interpenetrated one another and thereby been mutually transformed, making the post-industrial consumer marketplace a prime arena for securing varieties of interpersonal connection that circumvent this duality.

For many clients, one of the chief virtues of commercial sexual exchange is the clear and bounded nature of the encounter. In prior historical epochs, this 'bounded' quality may have provided men with an unproblematic and readily available sexual outlet to supplement the existence of a pure and



asexual wife in the domestic sphere. What is unique to contemporary client narratives is the explicitly stated *preference* for this type of bounded intimate engagement over other relational forms. Paid sex is neither a sad substitute for something that one would ideally choose to obtain in a non-commodified romantic relationship, nor the inevitable outcome of a traditionalist Madonna/whore double standard. Don, a 47-year-old, never-married man from Santa Rosa, California, described the virtues of the paid sexual encounter this way:

I really like women a lot, but they're always trying to force a relationship on me. I'm a nice guy, and I feel this crushing thing happen. Right now, I know a woman, she's pretty, nice, but if I make love to her, she'll want a relationship. But I'm really used to living by myself. I go and come when I want, clean when I want. I love women, enjoy them, they feel comfortable around me. I've always had a lot of women friends. I flirt and talk to them, but I don't usually take the next step, because it leads to trouble!

Much is lost if we try to subsume Don's statements under pop-psychologizing diagnoses such as 'fear of intimacy', or even a more covertly moralistic social-psychological descriptor like 'techniques of neutralization' (Sykes and Matza, 1957). In Don's preference for a life constructed around living alone, intimacy through close friendships, and paid-for, safely contained sexual encounters, we also see evidence of a disembedding of the (male) individual from the sex-romance nexus of the privatized nuclear family. This is a concrete example of the profound reorganization of personal life that diverse social analysts (Swidler, 1980; Giddens, 1992; Hochschild, 1997) have noticed occurring during the last 30 or so years.<sup>14</sup> Demographic transformations such as a decline in marriage rates, a doubling in the divorce rate, and a 60 percent increase in the number of single-person households during this period have spawned a new set of erotic dispositions, ones which the market is well-poised to satisfy.<sup>15</sup>

An additional advantage of market-mediated sexual encounters was articulated by Steve, a married, 35-year-old insurance manager from a middle-class California suburb. Frustrated that sexual relations with his wife had been relatively infrequent since the birth of their child, Steve had decided to look for sex elsewhere. Although elements of Steve's story invoked the sexual double standard of eras past, his reasoning during our interview betrayed a decidedly new twist. For Steve, the market-mediated sexual encounter is morally and emotionally preferable to the 'non-professional affair' because of the clarifying effect of payment. Though he characterized himself as 'conservative by nature', Steve had incorporated a fair amount of sex-worker rights rhetoric into his own discourse, describing the professional choice of his paid 'service-providers' with tangible awe. Having grappled with feminist critiques of male sexual indulgence as 'exploitative',



he concluded that true exploitation resided in the emotional dishonesty of the pre-market paradigm of seduction, rather than in the clean cash-for-sex market transactions in which he participated.

Other clients were insistent that their patronage of the commercial sexual economy did not in any way result from problems or deficits in their primary sexual relationships.<sup>16</sup> Rick, a 61-year-old data processor from San Francisco, emphasized that his sexual relationship with his wife was just fine, and likened his desire to pay different women for sex to other, less socially problematic consumer experiences: 'There's a Vietnamese restaurant . . . that I love, but I don't want to eat there every day.' Rick's statement may be read as a variant of the classic argument that prostitution is an expression of the male 'natural appetite' – a perspective which, like Steve's above, is of course premised upon a notion of the sexual double standard. As Carole Pateman (1988: 198) points out, in such arguments, 'the comparison is invariably made between prostitution and the provision of food'. Significantly, however, Rick's explicit justification for patronizing prostitutes was less one of essential, biological drives than one of simple consumer choice. Rick's stated preference for variety presumes an underlying model of sexuality in which sexual expression bears no necessary connection to intimate relationship, and in which a diversity of sexual partners and experiences is not merely substitutive but desirable in its own right.

In the same vein, Stephen, a 55-year-old writer from San Francisco, described an exciting and sexually adventurous life at home with his female domestic partner of eight years. He chose to supplement this with once-a-month paid sexual encounters involving female exotic dancers and transgender prostitutes that were 'fun' and 'intriguing'. 'Sometimes it's a really nice contact, how they touch me, how they move, but it's not for something I can't get at home', he explained. Stephen went on to elaborate upon some of his motivations for patronizing prostitutes:

When I grew up, I was younger and shorter than everyone else, convinced I wasn't sexually desirable to anyone. I was two years ahead in school, a total nerd. The notion that these glamorous women want to persuade me to have sex with them is incredible. I understand that it's not because of my looks. I could never get this many women who are this gorgeous to be sexual with me if I didn't pay.

Interviewees like Stephen and Rick challenge the second-wave feminist presupposition that prostitution exists chiefly to satisfy sexual demands which non-professional women find unpleasant or feel inhibited to participate in (Rosen, 1982: 97). If commercial sex is compensation for anything, it is not for something lacking in men's primary domestic relationships. Rather, it is for the access to multiple attractive partners that, in the wake of the historical shift from the family-based 'good provider role' to the unfet-



tered, consumeristic 'Playboy philosophy', many male sexual clients feel that they are entitled to (Ehrenreich, 1983). Within the terms of this new cultural logic of male dominance, clients conjure the sexual marketplace as the great social equalizer, where consumer capitalism democratizes access to goods and services that in an earlier era would have been the exclusive province of a restricted elite.<sup>17</sup>

Here is another man's account of his commercial sexual activity, this time from an Internet chat room for patrons of strip clubs:

I finally got to spend some quality time in the city by the Bay, compliments of my employer, who decided that I needed to attend a conference there last week. So, armed with a vast array of knowledge regarding the local spots, I embarked on a week of fun and frolicking. Unfortunately, I ended up spending too much time with conference goers so I only made three trips to clubs. I had an absolutely incredible time . . .

At the first club, I adjourned to the Patpong Room with Jenny, who asked me what I was interested in. I said that a couple of nude lap dances were on the agenda and I inquired as to her price: \$60 each. Okay, no problem. I forked over the cash. After the two long dances she offered me a blowjob for another \$120. I said that that would be heavenly and handed her the money. . . . It was an absolutely fabulous experience. I spent \$30 on cover charges, \$10 on tips, \$240 with Jenny, and \$300 with another girl named Tanya for a total of \$580. Not bad for just over 2 hours of illicit fun. I'm used to paying that for decent outcall so this was a nice change of pace.<sup>18</sup>

Like Rick and Stephen, this man is un-selfconscious about depicting his experience as a form of light and unproblematic commercial consumption ('2 hours of illicit fun', 'a nice change of pace'). For this client, prostitution is primarily a pampering diversion financed by and casually sandwiched in between a week's worth of requisite, and presumably less pleasurable, professional activities.

Yet the paid sexual encounter may also represent to clients something more than just an ephemeral consumer indulgence. In their article 'The Phenomenology of Being a John', Holzman and Pines (1982) argued that it was the *fantasy* of a mutually desired, special, or even romantic sexual encounter that clients were purchasing in the prostitution transaction – something notably distinct both from a purely mechanical sex act and from an unbounded, private-sphere romantic entanglement. They observed that the clients in their study emphasized the warmth and friendliness of the sex-worker as characteristics that were at least as important to them as the particulars of physical appearance. The clients that I interviewed were similarly likely to express variants of the statement that, 'If her treatment is cold or perfunctory, then I'm not interested.' In web-based client guides to



commercial sexual services such as 'The World Sex Guide', reviewers are similarly critical of sex-workers who are 'clockwatchers', 'too rushed and pushy', who 'don't want to hug and kiss', or who 'ask for a tip mid-sex act'.

Although patrons of different market sectors expressed variants of these sentiments, those who frequented indoor venues enjoyed the benefit of an arrangement that was structured to more effectively provide them with the semblance of genuine erotic connection. For example, interactions with escorts as opposed to streetwalkers are typically more sustained (averaging an hour as opposed to 15 minutes), more likely to occur in comfortable settings (an apartment or hotel room, rather than a car), and more likely to include conversation as well as a diversity of sexual activities (vaginal intercourse, bodily caresses, genital touching, and cunnilingus, rather than simply fellatio) (Bernstein, 1999; Lever and Dolnick, 2000). The fact that street prostitution now constitutes a marginal and declining sector of the sex trade means that a transaction that has been associated with quick, impersonal 'sexual release' is increasingly being superseded by one which is configured to encourage the fantasy of sensuous reciprocity, a fantasy safely contained by the bestowal of payment.

As with other forms of service work, successful commercial sexual transactions are ones in which the market basis of the exchange serves a crucial delimiting function (Hochschild, 1983; Leidner, 1993) that can also be temporarily subordinated to the client's fantasy of authentic interpersonal connection, as the following chat room description of an encounter in a commercial sex club illustrates:

At the club, I had a memorable experience with a light-skinned black girl named Luscious . . . we adjoined to the backstage area for one full-service session during the course of my visits. This time I brought my condoms. We began with the usual touchy-feely . . . I could feel she was just soaking, an indication her moans were not faked. Several minutes later I shot my load and used the conveniently located Kleenex dispenser to wash up. The most unusual aspect of this encounter is that Luscious didn't ask for money up front which is a first for a place of this type. I tipped her \$60.

Even when the encounter lasts only minutes, from the client's perspective it may represent a meaningful and authentic form of interpersonal exchange. Clients are indeed seeking a real and reciprocal erotic connection, but a precisely limited one. For these men, what is (at least ideally) being purchased is a sexual connection that is premised upon *bounded authenticity*. As with the above client's invocation of the physical tangibility of Luscious's desire, other clients boasted of their ability to give sex-workers genuine sexual pleasure, insisted that the sex-workers they patronized liked them enough to offer them freebies or to invite them home for dinner, and proudly proclaimed that they had at times even dated or befriended the sex-workers they were seeing.





### Girlfriend For Hire!

So, you've been thinking that you're working too hard, and enjoying it less. You'd have a girlfriend if only you had time. You want someone presentable, fun loving, toned and oh so naughty. I'm like that exquisite condo in Hawaii. Beautiful and serene. Just the person to make you feel like a KING. I provide great memories well after the retreat.

Outcalls available. Serving peninsula and Silicon Valley Incalls by appt.  
Reduced rates for extended assignments.

**Especially yours, XXX**

**(650) xxx-xxxx or email xxxx@aol.com**

**Figure 2** Advertisement from Bay Area web-site. This advertisement both democratizes access to servile women and promises the 'bounded authenticity' that clients seek.

The repeated claims about authentic interpersonal connection are particularly striking to consider in light of the fact the vast majority of sex-workers I spoke with imposed very rigid emotional boundaries between their customers and their non-professional lovers. For sex-workers, the former almost always constituted a thoroughly de-eroticized category of identity that was rarely if ever transgressed. One of the few sex-workers that I spoke with who admitted to occasionally looking for lovers among her client pool said that she had given up the practice of offering her preferred clients 'bargain rates' or unpaid sexual arrangements because it inevitably met with dire results:

They pretend to be flattered, but they never come back! If you offer them anything but sex for money they flee. There was one client I had who was so sexy, a tai-chi practitioner, and really fun to fuck. Since good sex is a rare thing, I told him I'd see him for \$20 (my normal rate is \$250). Another guy, he was so sexy, I told him 'come for free'. Both of them freaked out and never



returned. The men want an emotional connection, but they don't want any obligations. They don't believe they can have no-strings-attached sex, which is why they pay. They'd rather pay than get it for free.

Christopher, a male sex-worker who had also once tried to redefine his relationship with a client, recounted similarly: 'I called a trick once because I wanted to have sex with him again . . . we agreed in advance that it was just going to be sex for sex's sake, not for pay, and that was the last time I ever heard from him!' Critics of commercialized sex may misconstrue clients' desire for bounded authenticity if their implicit point of reference is the modernist paradigm of romantic love, premised upon monogamous domesticity and intertwined life trajectories. Thus, Carole Pateman (1988: 199) asks why, if not for the sake of pure domination, would '15 to 25 per cent of the customers of the Birmingham prostitutes demand what is known in the trade as "hand relief"', something which could presumably be self-administered. Yet as one client insisted, after explaining to me that he studied and worked all the time, and consequently did not have much opportunity to even meet women, let alone to pursue a romantic relationship, 'it's more real and human than jacking off alone'. This client reveals an underlying sexual paradigm that is not relational but recreational, compatible with the rhythms of his individually oriented daily life, and increasingly, with those of other men with similar white, middle-class socio-demographic profiles.

### **The state and the redirection of desire**

*It's 9 am on a Saturday morning. In one of the only occupied rooms of the San Francisco Hall of Justice, I am seated in the back row of 'John School', the city's pre-trial diversion program for men who have been arrested for soliciting prostitutes. The city is proud of its program, and boasts a low recidivism rate of less than one percent for first-time arrestees, who, for a mere \$500, can have their records cleared. There are approximately 50 to 60 men in the room this morning, of diverse class and ethnic backgrounds (three of the men around me are accompanied by translators: one Spanish, one Arabic, one Cantonese).*

*More striking still is that there are nearly equal numbers of arrested johns and media people in the room. By the end of the first hour, I have been introduced to journalists from TV-20, the London Times, and Self Magazine. 'There are representatives from different media organizations here each month,' announces Evelyn, the program's feisty director, to the men. 'I never do this class without media coverage.' In stark contrast to the johns, the media people are predominantly 30-something, stylish, educated women, acutely and evidently fascinated by the spectacle of so many sheepish and*