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## Male Sexual Scripts: Intimacy, Sexuality and Pleasure in the Purchase of Commercial Sex

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines empirical qualitative data on men who buy sexual services from women who work as escorts and in massage parlours. It investigates that men give to sexual experience, their desires for intimacy and their experience of the commercial boundaries. This article argues that there are problems with initially making the distinction between normative and non-normative sexual relationships where commerce is present. The sexual scripts of the 'regular' male client are compared to heterosexual male sexual scripts, arguing that commercial sexual relationships can mirror the traditional romance, courtship rituals, modes and meanings of communication, sexual familiarity, mutual satisfaction and emotional intimacies found in 'ordinary' relationships. The findings suggest that general understandings of sex work and prostitution are based on false dichotomies between commercial and non-commercial relationships. Nuanced understanding of the micro-relationship between the sex worker and regular client beyond a structural analysis can be applied to a policy framework that reinforces responsibility in the male client role.

### **KEY WORDS**

commerce / intimacy / male sexuality / sex work / sexual scripts

## **Introduction**

**A**lthough much has been written and researched about the change in sexual attitudes (Scott, 1998), relationship formation (Bauman, 2003; Giddens, 1992) and sexual behaviour (Wellings et al., 2006) in contemporary society, the implications of changing sexual scripts have not been examined in relation

to men's involvement as purchasers of commercial sexual services. Bancroft (2000: 11) explains how sexual scripts are adopted by men and women as styles of interaction around sexual behaviour. The script is a set of shared conventions based on mutual dependency and sets out the boundaries and roles that determine control, power, initiation, pleasure and so forth. In the West, heterosexual scripts in courtship and sexual interactions have entered a state of transition, beginning in Victorian times and taking on significant changes since the 1960s (Haste, 1992). Sexual codes of behaviour that traditionally socialized men and women into different roles when initiating and developing sexual and intimate relationships have departed from the postwar template set out by the ideology of 'romance' and 'love' (Illouz, 1997).

It has been argued through the concept of 'plastic sexuality' (Giddens, 1992) and theorizing on 'liquid love' by Bauman (2003) that relationships in modernity are somewhat fluid, offering a fragmentary sense of sexuality and 'love'. The changes in sexual scripts have brought with them conflict at both an individual and collective level. On an interpersonal level, misunderstandings about behaviour and intentions, coercion, unsafe sexual practices, and confusion over whether new or old scripts are 'in play' create frictions and difficulties in relationships (see Bryers, 1996). At a social level, the creation of new roles, rules and sexual scripts unsettles the socially shared expectations about the cultural environments, values and behaviours that inform sexual behaviour and the acting out of gendered roles. For men, anxieties over sexual scripts are not necessarily a resistance to role change or a lamented effort to cling onto expectations of the alpha male. The narratives of heterosexual men show tensions between the desire for emotional versus sexual intimacy and also tensions between emotional and sexual immersion versus the fear of emotional vulnerability (Wyatt Seal and Ehrhardt, 2003).

The dynamics between these changing sexual scripts, the expansion of the commercial sex industry and the complexity of relationships between sex workers and their clients can be understood in the context of broader sexual script transformations. This article makes sense of empirical qualitative research with men who regularly buy sexual services from the same women who work as escorts and in massage parlours. The overall aim of the article is to examine the meaning of 'being a client' through the eyes of those men that define themselves as 'regular' clients of the same sex worker[s] over time. A central question is whether the sexual script amongst male clients in the commercial sexual relationship differs significantly from that of heterosexual men seeking conventional relationships. Although patterns and findings from non-regular clients are used in this article, the evidence here is taken largely from 28 (from a sample of 50) clients who described themselves as 'regular' visitors to the same sex worker(s). In this article I argue that there are similarities in the acting out of sexual scripts, and in the processes of sexual engagement and emotional desires, satisfaction, and vulnerabilities between men in conventional and commercial sexual relationships. I explore the relationship between intimacy and commerce and evaluate its implications for our cultural understanding of male experiences of commercial sex and finally, I argue that sex work and prostitution are understood,

particularly in policy, through false dichotomies that distinguish commercial and non-commercial sexual relationships as dissonant.

## Sexual Scripts in Commercial Sex

It has been established that some sex workers who are in control of their work and surroundings often plan and 'act out' the sexual script to work in their favour to gain maximum profit and control (see Brewis and Linstead, 2000; O'Connell Davidson, 1996, 1998; Sanders, 2005a). The sexual script is part of a wider routine wherein the sex worker and the client each adopt their separate 'roles' which are played out in the commercial interaction. The sex worker's role has been well documented: how she performs with her body (Murphy, 2003, Ronai and Ellis, 1989); the standardization of the sexual service (O'Connell Davidson, 1995); the use of emotional labour as part of the service (Egan, 2003; Kempadoo and Doezema, 1999; O'Neill, 2001: 89); the 'manufactured identity' acts as emotional work and private identities (Sanders, 2005b); and how lesbians use their sexuality to sell sex to men (Shrage, 1999). Sexual scripts are performed by sex workers as a dynamic process where identities and roles are not static (Epele, 2001), but instead are 'fractured constructions of the sexual self' (Hubbard, 2002: 366) performed in different spaces and for different purposes. The testimonies of sex workers reveal how some of the commercial sexual scripts rely on conventional gendered roles but others reflect role reversals such as the woman as sexual initiator, experimenter, and dominator (e.g. see Sex Worker Testimonies Annadale, 2005; and Daniels, 2006).

Although we are fully aware of what motivates men to buy sex (see for instance Campbell, 1998; Holzman and Pines, 1982), what we know of the male client role is less detailed (see Bernstein, 2001). Frank (2006: 133) describes the strip club customers she knew as 'performers' who acted out their own identity and sexuality in their role as patrons of a lap dancing club. Egan (2005) describes how the clients respect the rules of the dancing interaction, pay the right price, show signs of affection and whisper the appropriate appreciations, loyalty, humanity and even 'care' as they romanticize about the fantasy-based relationships they have with dancers. To investigate the complexities of the male sexual script in the commercial sex relationship, Frank's (2006) concept of 'clienthood' is one that needs expanding and developing beyond the inevitability that men who buy sex will only act out political, economic and social inequalities in their sexual behaviour and are bound by their own structural positions during the micro-relationship with sex workers.

## The Study

Drawing on the tradition of the 'sociology of stories' (Plummer, 1995), the study focuses on the sexual stories of male clients which are at the heart of the individual sense of self, and at the same time reveal complex social relationships and the shape of sexuality in late modernity. The broad research question was to explore 'socially

produced stories in the social contexts of people's [male clients'] everyday lives' (1995: 13) in order to explore how men experience the sex industry, interact with the sex markets and experience sexual services in their everyday lives (Sanders, 2008). Questions were framed around the nature of the sex industry, secrecy, stigma, law and policy, emotions and networks, sexual scripts and client conduct.

Relying on contacts in the sex industry from a previous ethnography (Sanders, 2005a), men were recruited through internet message boards where clients, sex workers and third parties congregate. Sex workers and clients I had already interviewed advertised the project in their own networks, resulting in 457 email inquiries to take part in research between June 2004 and January 2006. After assessing the potential participants for their suitability in relation to the objectives of the project and negotiating the interview process, 50 male clients were interviewed in total. Interviews were conducted face to face in 37 cases and 13 were over the telephone either because of geographical distance (three of these were overseas) or because men preferred to remain entirely anonymous.

The sample was generally made up of middle-class white men. The average age was 45 years with a range of 22–70 years. Forty-two of the sample described themselves as White British, while four stated they were British Asian. The remaining four participants were White Irish, British-born Canadian, Australian and Italian. Eighteen participants were married and a further seven were in long-term relationships. Twelve men said they were single, four were widowers, and nine stated they were either divorced or separated. Only seven men did not have any formal qualifications: 34 had a higher education degree. Occupations were predominantly professional including a lawyer, a pilot, and several men involved in teaching or academia, engineering, banking, media, sales and IT.

The sample was varied in terms of the length of time men had experienced of the sex industry: the average number of years' involvement was nine, with a range of between one and 33 years. The average expenditure on sexual services per month was £170 with a range of between £45 and £500. Only two of the 50 participants said they currently purchased sex from the street-based market, although a further eight men said they had done this in the past but had stopped for a range of reasons such as concern about disease, drugs, the police and experience of robbery. The majority of the sample (32 out of 50) visited both massage parlours and independent escorts who operated their own businesses; seven others only went to parlours and nine only saw escorts (six in their own home and three in either a hotel or the sex worker's apartment). The quotes below are verbatim from the interviews and a pseudonym, age, marital status and occupation of the participant are stated. Elsewhere (Sanders, 2006, 2008) I have reflected on the emotional labour of researching the sex industry and the specific dynamics of age, gender, and class between a female academic and men who buy sex.

### **Being a Regular Client**

It is evident that a significant number of men who buy sex fall into the category of a 'regular' client in contrast to being a 'repeat' client who consistently engages

with the sex industry, but utilizes different markets, venues, locations and sex workers. From the sample of 50 men, 28 defined themselves as currently a 'regular' client of one sex worker or more. A further four interviewees said they had been a regular client in the past. A regular client visits the same sex worker (sometimes several sex workers) and builds up some form of relationship over time. Becoming a 'regular' client may last for a few months or years, and when the relationship ends (because the sex worker retired, for instance) the pattern becomes habitual and the same sexual script is acted out with another sex worker. Sex workers often prefer to have regular clients because it reduces the risk of a problematic transaction triggered by aggression, rule breaking or non-payment. However, as Frank (1998) has highlighted for erotic dancers, sex workers invest more emotional labour in regulars as the relationship must be sustained and the client 'satisfied' on many different levels.

The quotes below sum up a familiar pattern whereby men are 'regulars' to a small number of sex workers over a lengthy period of time but occasionally visit new sex workers:

I mean occasionally I do go and see someone new but I actually don't do it very often. In comparison, I would say probably maybe one in six, one in eight, is a new person. Probably less than that actually now, whereas the majority of times are with regulars; ladies that I see anywhere between you know, a year and – the longest one I think – there is two that I've seen for about five years. (Ron, 51 years old, teacher, separated)

The same pattern of being a 'regular' is evident amongst men who visit the same massage parlour and become a 'regular' to the same sex worker:

There's usually just one I just see more often than the others but there's a couple of others but it's usually the same one. Shall we say that I know lots of the girls but there is always a special one that you go back to. (Ross, 54, engineer, single)

Men become regulars for similar reasons that men are attracted to long-term conventional relationships. Regulars demonstrated everyday sexual scripts as the pattern takes on that of 'ordinary' heterosexual dyads. Steve, a 47-year-old IT specialist who is divorced, expressed how 'monogamy' featured strongly in his interactions in the sex industry: 'For the past two years I have only seen the same girl. I wouldn't see anybody else now. I am monogamous in my perversion.'

Non-regular clients in the sample appeared to be different from 'regular' clients in both their motivations to seek out commercial sex and the commercial relationship dynamics. We know the appeal of a non-emotional and non-committed relationship (see Plumridge et al., 1997) and the desire for sex with different types and many different women (Mansson, 2006) are motivators for some men to seek commercial sex. These desires manifest in the type of sexual scripts that non-regular clients adopt, marking them out from the traditional sexual scripts I discuss in this article. There are differences in the sexual scripts that men adopt, therefore this article does not argue that all men who buy sex adopt commercial sexual relationships characterized similarly to that of conventional sexual relationships, but that for men who are 'regulars' there is strong evidence to support this pattern of behaviour.

## Performing the Male Client Sexual Script

The study highlighted five key features of the traditional male sexual script that are also prominent in commercial sexual relationships between regulars and their 'special' sex workers. The role of communication, courtship rituals, sexual familiarity, the desire for mutual satisfaction, and the development of friendship and emotional connections were important for regular clients.

### The Role of Communication

The organization of the escort industry now dictates that most men arrange to visit independent sex workers via computer-mediated communication such as email and through mobile phones. For those who are regulars to women who work in parlours, the exchange of mobile numbers is common. Communication is not always reduced to a practical tool for making arrangements. Email, telephone and text conversations were noted as a general feature of regular commercial relationships between sex workers and clients. For male clients, after the initial meetings have taken place, communication develops as part of the relationship and becomes a key vehicle for maintaining the relationship and keeping 'rapport':

I think rapport is important in any relationship, you know. Okay it's a business relationship but if you look at it like that, as the client you want to know that you are dealing with someone who would want to deal with you again. Having a friendly email now and then doesn't hurt. (John, 58, sales, divorced)

For the client, the content of communication with the sex worker goes beyond the superficiality of 'small talk' to appear as a more in-depth, preferably mutual disclosure of thoughts, ideas and conversation. Men described how they 'knew' a lot of details about the sex worker, including her real name, life history, family circumstance, even perhaps her lover or husband. Paulo, a 54-year-old property developer who had been married for 25 years stated: 'I mean there is one girl I know, I know her name and I know where she lives and things like that and I ask about her family and she asks me about my family but it's all as a working relationship.' This sense of 'close association' that has been connected to intimacy (Jamieson, 1998: 8) is experienced within the boundaries of the commercial transaction. Email, phone and text messages were all used as modes through which courtship was exercised, boundaries were explicitly or implicitly negotiated and contact was maintained in between visits:

I've known her for nearly two years and we've probably exchanged several hundred emails in that time. I probably only see her every couple months but in the meantime we still communicate a lot about a lot of different things and talk about all sorts of stuff that are completely unrelated to the punting side of it. (Terry, 68, lawyer, married)

At times, intense communication was sometimes confusing for the client as strong emotions began to develop which caused suspicion and confusion. George, a 58-year-old IT specialist, describes a three-year relationship he had with a 35-year-old parlour worker:

I mean we had something like 600 text messages between us in a year. You have to try and decide whether somebody is really interested in you or whether they're just treating you as a customer who needs to be, you know, led on, if you like.

For some men, where emotional intimacy appears to be pushing the boundaries of the commercial, their emotions exposed them to vulnerabilities. Clients received different levels of emotional sustenance from the continuity of communicating outside the sexual event as this normalized the relationship and provided some resemblance and familiarity of ordinary courtship, flirting and friendliness. For some men there was confusion over the boundaries of the relationship whereas others performed their own relational work in confining their emotions to the commercial context.

### Courtship Rituals

It has been identified that some men are attracted to the temporal relationship available through commercial sex because of the lack of emotional attachment, the ability to suspend 'normal' expectations of the male sex role and the type of relationship that is free from societal norms and rituals (Atchison et al., 1998). However, regulars were less inclined to be motivated by these features of commercial sex, but instead sought out sex workers with whom they could develop a more in-depth and holistic type of relationship.

I like to be able to connect with people. The sex is nice but sometimes it's nice to actually just have a chat and these girls are pretty intelligent women and you can actually engage them in conversation as well ... You don't have to be the person that you are for the rest of humanity ... I have had a few dodgy relationships in the past and I am not in any hurry to get into one but I get that intimacy now through the few girls I see. (Daniel, 41, teacher, single)

Seven men described how they sought out sex workers who worked as escorts and were prepared to engage in public social activities such as theatre, dinner and trips abroad. The amalgamation of the traditional courtship ritual of buying gifts and entertaining the woman were important symbolic experiences:

I have gravitated towards those who are good socially who you can take into a restaurant and not feel embarrassed but feel rather proud at the envious glances of the other chaps and you know carry on a good conversation on a wide range of subjects and just enjoy it. The sex, it's an important part but it is very much only a part. (Terry, 68, lawyer, married)

In commercial sexual relations men do not have to fall into the traditional sexual script and take on the 'burden' of being the sexual initiator. Sex workers, for their own reasons of safety, time management, emotional management strategies and profit, usually take the lead in the sexual act, reflecting the changes in wider society of 'female initiated sex'. In this sense, the commercial sexual interaction is not necessarily a sexual conquest (something that normative heterosexual men may pursue) but can instead be an emotional conquest that produces the desired emotional connections for the client: 'When you see

them for several months some of them become almost friends ... you do care about them and you hope that their interest in your well being is true as well.' This quote (Dean, 34, Sales, Singles) demonstrates a desire for the authenticity of the emotional relationship, hoping that the sex worker will experience some level of emotional intimacy whilst acknowledging there are complexities with mutual intimacy in the commercial setting.

### Sexual Familiarity

Although having sex with different women was desirable for others in the sample, for the 28 men who defined themselves as 'regulars', sex with a 'stranger' was unattractive. The reasons they became regular clients was because they sought familiarity, comfortable interactions, and sexual and emotional security:

I don't actually like having sex with strangers very much. Sex is obviously quite an intimate act and it feels a bit funny just walking in with somebody you have never met before. Having sex with them and then walking out again. While seeing someone regularly it feels more like a proper human interaction. (Andy, 31, sales, long-term partner)

Achieving sexual pleasure and emotional intimacy from commercial sex appeared to be entirely dependent on building up a continuous, steady relationship. The desirable type of relationship was that which mirrored the stages of sexual intimacy of conventional relationships, where sexual trust and confidence in sexual acts developed over a period of time. Patrick, a 39-year-old working in social care with a long-term partner, commented on the sexual intimacy that was a product of sustaining and building a trusting relationship:

I prefer to build up a trust. I find that if you build up a trust you get more of a girlfriend experience and you allow each other to do many more things. Your sexual enjoyment progresses like it would in a marriage in a way. Instead of just going and doing 'the kiss, booby, suck, sex' you are more sensual because you wouldn't be rushing it. You would be spending more time on foreplay. You would find different types of things.

Patrick mentions the 'girlfriend experience' (GFE) here which is a term used on message boards and chat rooms in the sex work community to refer to a sexual and social experience with a sex worker that mirrors that of a conventional relationship. The 'girlfriend experience', which usually involves kissing, caressing and other sensual acts (rather than brief sex acts), is sought by many men, and is met with triumph and congratulations on message boards when a client reveals he experienced the 'GFE'. Contrasts were made between the commercial sexual experience where men experience sex workers as emotionally distant during the sex acts, to other experiences of 'natural' chemistry and sensual curiosity:

If it's a situation where it develops quite sexually naturally, then you sort of explore each other's bodies. But if it's where for obvious reasons the girl is just doing a job and isn't sort of connected, it is cold ... If you're not getting much of a response from the girl then you feel bad. (Craig, 38, sales, singles)

Wanting to experience some level of emotional connection that is reminiscent of the intimacy and emotions that are usually desirable in a conventional heterosexual union are an important driver for male clients to visit the same sex worker repeatedly. The role of mutual sexual satisfaction is evident in the male client's sexual script.

### The Desire for Mutual 'Satisfaction'

The manipulation of femininity and sexuality which is performed by some entrepreneurial female sex workers, with the objective of delivering the desirable female image required by paying customers, establishes that performance of mutual satisfaction (on many levels) is complex but often contrived by the sex worker (Sanders, 2005b). The sex worker usually does not receive sexual pleasure from her clients (see Weinberg et al., 1999). Despite the reality of sexual services as 'work' (Sexual labour) rather than pleasure for the providers, the literature documents a strong discourse amongst male clients regarding their desire to 'give' sex workers pleasure. Referred to by Plumridge et al. (1997) as 'the myth of mutuality', clients present an inflated and exaggerated ideal of the sexual interaction: 'I know it was satisfying to her. Trust me it was more satisfying to her than it was for me ... I'm just glad if being with me can satisfy someone because in a way that validates me as a male' (Alan, 59, retired, divorced).

The desire for mutuality is intrinsically functional in men's individual sexual stories and tied closely to issues of self esteem, sexual performance, and body image. Enabling and ensuring the client feels certain emotions during and after the commercial scenario affirms the 'sex work' element on the woman's part. The acting out of mutual pleasure by the sex worker is part of providing the 'good service' and the emotional intimacy that regulars want. Integral to men's own sense of performing as an adequate sexual partner, providing pleasure to the sex worker was often a mark of a 'compatible' sexual relationship. Older men who had sexual dysfunctions were also keen to have mutual 'pleasure' as one of the outcomes of engaging in commercial sex: 'I do have problems, it doesn't always work and I don't always get satisfaction. So knowing that I can give pleasure, that is ultra important to me' (Liam, 70, retired academic, widowed).

Some men realized that 'faking it' on the sex worker's part was just part of the service. Ross (54, engineer, single) had been visiting the same parlour for three years: 'Some of them are very good actresses shall we say. Even if you think they have enjoyed it, you obviously can't take it totally to heart but you do believe that you are both "there" and they do enjoy your company.' Men often convinced themselves that the experience was mutual or that there was some special interaction even though rationally they realized that the sex worker was a professional, doing a job and using all the 'tricks of the trade' to leave her customer physically and emotionally satisfied. The desire for mutual sexual pleasure and the faking of sexual pleasure is not intrinsic to commercial sex, as long-term heterosexual conventional relationships are similarly characterized in this way (Duncombe and Marsden, 1996). Despite the commercial

reality of the relationship, male clients sought more than sexual satisfaction from the sexual and emotional labour of the sex worker.

### Sex as the 'Extra': Emotions, Friendship and 'Connection'

The literature establishes how seeking out sexual services is influenced by the psychological, interpersonal need for intimacy (Xantidis and McCabe, 2000). Lever and Dolnick (2000) found that clients visiting 'call girls' were attracted by the emotional services provided by this 'listening occupation'. For the 'regular', the sexual acts are not the objective of commercial sex but just a component of interpersonal intimacy, charged by emotional intimacy that is achieved through a deep level of communication, courting rituals, and the illusion of mutual sexual pleasure. Matthew, a 39-year-old married teacher, stated: 'I started out doing this firstly for the sex side, but in the end it's certainly the relationship side of it.' Several interviewees commented on the importance of 'trust' as an emotion that produced some levels of security in the relationship, which resulted in quality bodily intimacy: 'The awkwardness vanishes over a period of time. It would, when you meet anyone new. You would trust them. You would develop a degree of interest in them. They would develop a degree of trust in you. There is some kind of bond even though it's not real' (Mitchell, 49, managing director, married).

Tales of men's 'first encounters' with a sex worker were tinged with embarrassment and nervousness. These tales explained the intense desire displayed by several respondents to avoid the process of finding a compatible sex provider. The data suggests that because 16 of the 28 regular clients were aged over 50 years, the need for familiarity particularly motivated older men to maintain a relationship with one sex worker:

When you see a working girl regularly I think you get to know a person a lot better. I think you feel much more comfortable with them. I feel secure and they feel secure, because at the end of the day you know, in a first encounter, there is a frisson I think the word is, but at the same time there is a great deal of uncertainty and you know, both parties are sort of sizing up each other if you'll excuse the pun. But there is a lot of uncertainty. You don't know how it's going to work out and so on. And once you get to know a person it's, you know, so much better. (Tom, 60, social care, widowed)

Defining a regular relationship in terms of friendship was common: 'It's important to see the same girl. I still see one of the girls regularly, I mean every week. We're friends' (Alan, 59, retired, divorced). Emotional closeness was explained as a consequence of a compatible sexual relationship by Murphy (28, sales, single): 'I would say within the kind of confines of a paid-for relationship we're reasonably good friends. We get on with each other and we do talk about each other's problems and she talks about the problems she has with other girlfriends and I sort of talk about other stuff to do with what's going on in my life.' Commercial relationships were often compared to those in the conventional world:

They get used to you and you get used to them and it cuts out a lot of the preliminary – I mean you generally talk about everything in the world. So it's more

like meeting an old friend and having sex with them. And we just put the world to right. They all have their problems and you know, we talk about our life and our family and things that are going on in our life; work, your family, holidays, cars, whatever. (Jeff, 57, senior management, married)

Some men explained how emotional support had been gained through relationships with sex workers that resembled the emotional support from a spouse or close friend:

I mean certainly at the moment I am getting support because last year my father died and one of the girls was very kind to me and helped me get through it. She was there for me and even helped me with the funeral. (John, 58, divorced, sales)

Plumridge et al. (1997) draw the conclusion that the 24 clients of massage parlours they interviewed had exaggerated ideas about the genuineness of the depth of friendship and emotional mutuality. However, without research that compares the views of 'friendship' or 'intimacy' from accounts of *both* sex workers and clients, the extent to which experiences of friendship, trust and emotional closeness are exaggerated remains only speculation. Whilst sexual pleasure experienced by clients of sex workers is usually not mutual, relationships of trust, friendship and other normative relations may be genuine and mutual, reflecting strong features of non-commercial relationships.

## Discussion: The Regularity of Commercial Sexual Scripts

Becoming a 'regular' is a complex emotional process which entails the male customer adopting the client script. This script involves traditional forms of commitment, behaviours and emotions that mirror those of conventional romantic, intimate relationships. Interviewees described behaviours that were similar to 'partner-seeking courtship' where the goals are to develop emotional relationships through different levels of intimacy. Many of the men in my sample who were looking for intimacy, companionship and social interaction alongside sex developed sexual scripts that fitted their ideas of why they visited sex workers, their needs and their justification for buying sex as acceptable to themselves. Their scripts fed into their identities and the 'stories' they told of commercial sex, putting subjective meaning onto the commercial transaction.

For many men who are involved in commercial sexual relationships with sex workers, the lived experience of the relationship is not that different from other relationships. Normalization techniques transferred from other relationships develop the meaning of the sexual interaction: using symbolisms such as those of friendship, lovers, intimacy and the preference of mutual satisfaction suspends the reality that these intimate relations are only temporary commercial moments. Despite clients experiencing various levels of deep and meaningful relationships, whether or not they are authentic or mutual, their experience and behaviour is not necessarily an expression of sexual hostility where sexual scripts are influenced by the desire to harm, humiliate or degrade (O'Connell Davidson, 1998: 140–4).

Elsewhere I report how the clients generally did not want the sex worker to be vulnerable, in danger, at risk, coerced by pimps, at the mercy of heroin or crack cocaine, or experiencing poor working conditions and greedy parlour owners taking a large chunk of their earnings (Sanders, 2008). Equally important to the clients' narratives were the sexual scripts of the sex worker. Men described how they wanted the script of the sex worker to be that of an independent entrepreneur who had choice and control, even liked her work and her clients, and sometimes, particularly with them, received sexual pleasure, trust, loyalty and friendship.

The blurring of the distinction between commercial and non-commercial support networks is evident as the details of sex worker and client relationships are explored from the viewpoint of the client. Examining the experiential stories of men who engage in relationships with the same women over a period of time identifies not only the 'need' that commercial sexual services fulfil, but also challenges the status of commercial sex as 'deviant' and vastly different from other forms of relationships. The authenticity of these experiences of emotional connections is complex as sex workers often engage with clients through the boundaries of 'work' and provide services based on professionalism. Men purchase what Bernstein (2001: 402) describes as 'bounded authenticity' through a 'neatly-bounded commodity' where emotions, closeness, sexual satisfaction and pleasure can be met. This article has demonstrated that for some regular clients there is a convergence between commercial and non-commercial relationships. Although the commercial relationship is initiated differently, over time the relationship with a sex worker can take on the characteristics of non-commercial relationships. Conventional sexual scripts found in commercial sexual relationships provided strong evidence to suggest that all relationships are based on a continuum. There is a spectrum from wife, mistress and courtesan to the brief and often 'one-off' interaction in street-based sex work. The role of commerce is interwoven in all of these relationships but to varying degrees and is manifest in conventional and non-conventional ways.

### **Conclusions: Intimacy, Commerce and the Moral Order**

Zelizer's (2005) thesis, that emotional and bodily intimacy can be achieved through commerce and that there is not a necessary corrupting factor when the two spheres merge, can be applied to further understand commercial sex and intimacy. All kinds of intimate relationships are formed in our everyday lives that have a commercial basis: take for instance the personal trainer and trainee; beautician and client; counsellor and patient; lawyer and client; childcare worker and parent. In these examples there are obvious power differentials that constrain autonomy, create dependency and an imbalance of resources, options and knowledge. These acceptable roles and relationships that are defined by commerce and intimacy are institutionalized and guarded by professional codes of conduct, contracts and laws. The doctor-patient relationship is protected by

protocols, professional codes of conduct and official bodies that monitor, check and investigate complaints of boundary breaking. The structural relations of power that are built into all intimate commercial relationships are most starkly visible in the gendered sexual relationship where sexual services are exchanged for money. The sex worker–client relationship is rarely protected by the safeguards of official contracts, institutional regulation or legitimacy in law, exposing the relationship to misconduct, exploitation of power differentials and abuse. Yet the exchange of intimacy through a commercial sexual relationship is not necessarily corruptive, abusive or an expression of male hostility. Others argue that the man who uses his privileged economic and racial power to buy control over sex workers through sexual scripts of domination does nothing more than objectify and dehumanize women who sell sex as sexual ‘Others’ (O’Connell Davidson, 1998). Such accounts of male power as the only interpretation of the commercial sexual liaison are privileging one view of the commercial sexual exchange over others that demonstrate that the micro-relationship between the sex worker and client can be reflexive of everyday emotional and physical intimacy without corruptive consequences. Instead, findings from this study of the normalcy of commercial sexual relationships support Bernstein’s (2001: 397) recreational model of sexual behaviour where ‘the pursuit of sexual intimacy is not hindered but facilitated by its location in the marketplace’.

Berger’s (1963) mantra ‘things are not what they seem to be’ is applicable to understanding the relationships between men who buy sex from regular sex workers, intimacy and sex dynamics. Transitional male gender roles and sexual scripts (Simon and Gagnon, 1986) produce a lack of certainty about performing heterosexual masculinity. Male clients’ narratives show tensions between their desire for emotional sustenance and sexual intimacy. Men who are not receiving this combination in their conventional relationships look to commercial relationships that provide a certain amount of security, trust and familiarity so that emotional and bodily desires can be pursued. These uncertainties perhaps act as a ‘push’ factor for men to find romance, intimacy and (guaranteed) sex through commercial relationships. These possibilities are made known through a vibrant internet-based sex work community that allows men to communicate on intimate matters and learn about commercial sexual etiquette (Peng, 2007).

An accompanying ‘pull’ factor is female business entrepreneurs recognizing that their sexuality can be packaged in such a way that they can earn a living from men’s desires that go beyond basic sex acts (Sanders, 2005b). The promise of the purchase of intimacy through commercial sex, such as the highly successful commodity ‘the girlfriend experience’, has re-branded ‘prostitution’ into the conventional parameters of heterosexual romance relationships where bodily and emotional intimacy can be found – at a price. Brents and Hausbeck (2007) note the changing nature of the brothel industries, which show signs of moving from a McDonaldisation of standardized production and consumption to an industry that advertises specialist services, upscaling and chic environments where emotional interaction is as much for sale as sexual services. The

sex industries, in particular independent female entrepreneurs, recognize that the sex industry is not simply about selling sex acts and sexual fantasies but about the emotional needs of male clients as a commodity market. Some parts of the sex industry (escorts, high quality massage parlours and brothels) offer men a 'pick 'n' mix' approach to the traditional sexual script role. Men can choose to adopt a passive sexual script at any point in the relationship (particularly the sex activities), while perhaps preferring to engage in conventional courtship and social romancing. The meanings that men apply to the commercial sexual liaison contribute further understanding as to why the sex industry is perhaps increasing and expanding in size and type to what has been described as an 'unbridled ethic of sexual consumption' (Bernstein, 2001: 389). Women perform emotional labour and intimacy as sex workers and wives, lovers and partners because men desire more than sexual labour.

In the UK policy context the social role of sex work has not been realized or given any legitimacy in law even though sex industries continue to operate. Current prostitution policy in the UK is constructed by making the distinction between normative and non-normative sexual behaviour, acceptable and unacceptable forms of relationships, and the rightful place for sexual expression resting only in state sanctioned reproductive relationships. Policy maintains key distinctions between commercial and non-commercial sex as different from normative behaviour to reduce threats to moral (sexual) order. An advanced nuanced understanding of the dynamics between the regular male client and female sex workers has wide implications for a reinterpretation of contemporary sexuality and the reality of heterosexual relationships, and, in turn, practical implications for policy.

The differences between men who buy sex and those who do not are modest (Monto and McRee, 2005) and their monetary exchanges with consenting women (or men) are not intrinsically harmful (Zatz, 1997). If much of the male client sexual script is derived from convention then these expectations can be a powerful mechanism that can be formally built into the commercial sex contract. Instead of assuming male behaviour and attitudes with sex workers will be harmful, a more positive set of behaviours, desires and interactions can be built on to reduce exploitation, disrespect and harmful (whether intentional or not) consequences. The male client sexual scripts reported in this study suggest that perhaps there is a tendency for men to be respectful in intimate relations as it facilitates their own needs. The manifestation of healthy commercial relationships can be supported and nurtured in the commercial setting whereas contemporary policy pushes the relationship into an underworld of unaccountability and vulnerability where sex workers are left to be victims without control of their environment or work. For instance, where there are no solutions in place to manage street prostitution other than heavy criminalization and policing of both the sex worker and the 'kerb crawler', the relationships between sex workers and clients become increasingly strained. Sex workers are left without protection, bargaining power, freedom to be in designated areas, or capacity to work together, and isolated from support services. 'The 'tackling demand' policy agenda in the *Coordinated Prostitution Strategy* (Home Office,

2006) focuses on removing purchasers of sex through poorly evidenced 'rehabilitation programmes' and deterrence campaigns (see Sanders, forthcoming) which prevent policies that encourage the responsabilization of clients'.

Commerce is but a manifestation of the more general exchanges that occur within human sexual and intimate relationships. Some systems refuse to endorse sex and commerce as a legitimate relationship that should be facilitated, protected or even acknowledged. Other systems take a serious position on the social role of commercial sex and the ordinary characteristics of the relationships, preferring to provide an avenue where these relationships can be established with minimal harm and destruction. The relationships between sex workers and clients can be nurturing, respectful and mutual. This experience of the commercial relationship can enhance the quality of life of men who buy sex (see Sanders, 2007b) whilst at the same time provide sex workers with safe customers who will not breach the contract through sexual misconduct, financial exploitation (e.g. not paying), abusive language, or aggressive behaviour. A system that recognizes the emotional consumption that is integral to some forms of commercial sex and the possibilities for emotional mutuality between sex worker and client could be a framework that distils negative images of women as disposable victims and clients as unruly sexual beasts to be controlled. The current climate of criminalizing men who buy sex (Brooks Gordon, 2005) and the impetus to block a regulated indoor market (Sanders, 2007a) prevent policy intervening to reinforce the male client role as an accountable active participant who has responsibilities to himself, the sex worker, other sexual partners and a wider responsibility to respect women in all areas of society. Policy designed to manage sex work markets should be informed by evidence that understands the micro-relationships that form commercial sex alongside the fluidity of male and female sexualities.

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