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## Controllable Laughter: Managing Sex Work Through Humour

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article contributes to the sociology of work by analysing the nature and prevalence of humour as a coping strategy in the sex industry. In conjunction with describing six different types of humour observed in the female sex industry, this article establishes humour as a form of 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1979). Evidence from an empirical study of female prostitution in a large British city documents how sex workers consciously manipulate humour as a social and psychological distancing technique. First, humour is adopted as a business strategy where impression management and 'body work' (Tyler and Abbott, 1998) enable individuals to conform to the aesthetic ideal of the 'prostitute'. Second, joking relations shape the emotions aroused by selling sex, manage client interaction and establish support networks with colleagues. They are also a vehicle for defining group membership, dissent and divisions. It is argued that these social and psychological processes are an example of how women in extreme professions perform 'emotion work'. In the case of sex workers, humour contributes to a range of defence mechanisms that are necessary to protect personal and emotional well being.

### **KEY WORDS**

emotion management / friendship / humour / occupations / prostitution / sex work

### **Introduction**

**T**his article draws on, and contributes to, three areas of sociological thought. First, it addresses the functions of humour as a coping strategy in the workplace, and in particular, in occupations that deal with intimate

body contact. This discussion is framed around six types of humour identified in an ethnographic study of female prostitution in Britain. Building on studies from the sociology of work, I argue that women who sell sex manage their work, in particular their relationships with clients and each other, through joking relations. Second, I argue that female sex workers engage in 'emotion work' through humour, to protect themselves from the pressures of selling their bodies in an illegitimate and often dangerous environment. Humour is an aspect of their 'working identity', especially the task of performing the 'prostitute' role. Third, humour acts as a window into the dynamics of female friendships in the sex industry and possibly into how women's support networks are formed in other professions. However, humour also symbolizes conflict, competition and divisions. These themes are discussed with reference to existing literature and my own study.

Humour has been identified as a symbolic resource used by occupational groups to define beliefs, behaviours and values (Zijderveld, 1968). Palmer (1994: 62) condenses the theoretical literature on humour to suggest that the role of jokes is to relieve anxiety and fear, breach inhibitions and act as a 'safety valve' for difficult subjects and feelings. Professions that deal with sensitive issues such as death, trauma and health use humour as a coping strategy. Moran and Massam (1997) report that emergency workers use humour as a positive strategy to reduce tension, reinterpret events and re-frame distressing episodes.<sup>1</sup> Alexander and Wells (1991) conducted a study on police officers involved in body handling after the Piper Alpha oil rig disaster in 1988 and concluded that 'black' humour contributed to the officers remaining relatively unscathed from the body recovery mission. It is not only people who work in extreme professions that rely on humour to keep emotions in check. Coalmines, departmental stores, schools and industrial shop floors are environments that utilize humour as a strategy to cope with difficult relationships and conditions.<sup>2</sup>

This article reports on an extreme profession – prostitution – where bodily contact is intense, direct and commodified. Women who sell parts of their body and sexual acts for money establish mechanisms to perform physical, emotional and interactional tasks of acting the 'prostitute' role. Other studies identify how sex workers adopt defence mechanisms as pragmatic, symbolic and psychological distancing methods.<sup>3</sup> However, the prevalence of humour as a distancing mechanism has been largely overlooked. In this article I use empirical data to illustrate how humour is an important social and psychological process for sex workers that determines occupational identities and routines. First, a few notes on how humour caught me by surprise.

## Methodological Note

This article draws on a ten-month ethnographic study of female prostitution in Birmingham, UK, during 2000 and 2001, for doctoral studies. Access was gained through a sexual health organization (the Safe Project) that was well

established within the sex work community.<sup>4</sup> The study consists of formal taped interviews with 50 sex workers (45 worked from indoor establishments while only five currently worked on the street), three female owners of establishments and two female receptionists. However, much of the evidence here comes from over 1000 observation hours in saunas, brothels, women's homes and on the street, conversing with a further 175 sex workers. Much of the details presented in this article are from observations rather than verbatim comments because of the specific difficulties of recording joking relations that rely on several interactions, body language, signalling and localized knowledge and context.

The original aims of the research explored the perception of risk amongst sex workers and the strategies they create to manage occupational hazards. This focused on women's experience of violence, arrest, harassment from protesters, stigmatization and criminalization. A central objective was to explore the social processes that impact on personal relationships and private lives. Findings contribute to an understanding of how women manage hazards through strategies of screening, protection, secrecy and emotional management (Sanders, 2002). Humour was not studied directly and only noted as a significant sociological process after revisiting fieldwork experiences, re-reading interview transcripts, fieldwork notes and my personal diary without the initial hypotheses in mind. Follow-up discussions with participants and gatekeepers enabled clarification regarding the nature and extent of humour.

The research covered both the street and off-street sex markets.<sup>5</sup> Humour was observed across all markets but usually in collective establishments where several women work together. Humour was not as evident amongst women working alone. However, a jocular atmosphere was not always obvious in collective environments. Only after several months of visiting saunas and flats, sometimes on a daily basis, could I arrive unannounced without the health professionals as chaperon. Because of this familiarity, I observed how the establishment was organized and how relationships developed and changed. It was in these informal instances of socializing with the workers, managers and sometimes owners, that humour became evident.

On reflection, it was not only the occupational setting that was an arena for joking relations. When I tagged along to parties and birthday celebrations, where women's personal lives and professional roles merged, humour was visible as an important tool for defining different aspects of their identities. However, during the fieldwork the performance of humour in private was not explored. Consequently, there is no concrete data on whether humour is a defining feature of respondents' social identities although this remains an important research question.

My field diary clearly notes when humour became apparent:

Today I was propositioned by a client. It has taken three months to happen but now it has, it opened my eyes to much more than expected. I was sitting in Foxy's, with Emma and Belinda.<sup>6</sup> We had been there since 10 o'clock without any clients visit-

ing, when one of Emma's regulars arrived. Even though I had not seen him before I could tell he was a regular by the casual nature of the greeting. The man came into the lounge and sat opposite me on the sofa and proceeded to chat about the weather. This all seemed normal until I noticed that both Emma and Belinda had gone out of the room and were upstairs watching on the CCTV that was firmly focused on the customer and I. After a long awkward silence he confided that he always 'tried out' the new girls, even though Emma was his regular and if I was free, would I mind seeing him in the jacuzzi room. As planned, I made excuses that I was just a friend and not working. I could hear raucous laughter from the girls upstairs as they listened and watched on camera. Minutes later Emma came down to rescue me and took the client to a room. Belinda came downstairs laughing at my embarrassment, assuring me that it was all on camera to show the manager and the other girls when they came on shift. The confrontation with a client that I had anticipated since I started visiting saunas had uncovered something else. The women had used my status as a 'non-sex worker' to provide their fun and games. (Fieldwork Diary, August, 2000)

This anecdote from my personal diary is an example of many incidents where respondents made the researcher the 'butt of the joke'. Exploring the joke with Emma and Belinda afterwards was as revealing as the experience itself. Emma reassured me that she would not have 'set me up' with a 'stranger' but had hand picked that particular client because she knew he would proposition me but also would not be agitated by my refusals. It was clear that the participants concocted the awkward situation but equally wanted that situation to be controlled by them, so they could observe me, as I had observed them. Showing the recorded incident to other workers both in my presence and when I was absent enabled respondents to explore my character and ability to take a joke. Capturing my interactions on camera was not unlike the taped interviews the women had shared. This reciprocal recording attempted to balance the relationship between the researcher and respondents, as one woman remarked 'to make sure you are the same as us'.

I became the source of jokes, practical gags and funny stories often involving personal questions to test my character and opinion. Regularly, women would jest about my capacities to be a sex worker, my intrigue in prostitution and use my student status as a target for jibes about financial desperation. Other workers persistently requested that I observed them providing a service. This was because they wanted to shock, amuse, and include me, but also demonstrate the clinical sex they described. Through jocular banter, women made sense of my presence and their agreement to be involved in the research as we both found ways of feeling comfortable in unfamiliar surroundings. However, the humour directed at me did not remain static but shifted as I became included in private jokes and coded language (described below). Moving from an 'outsider' to acceptance in their private workspace was a process articulated through their witty, sarcastic command of turning everyday interactions into jest. It was only then that women revealed their personalities, life circumstances and everyday work routines.

## Humour in the Sex Industry

There have been hints from other studies on prostitution that humour is an important organizational feature (see Downe, 1999; O'Neill, 1996: 22). O'Connell Davidson (1995: 4) highlights how 'Desirée', an independent sex worker, establishes a close bond with her receptionist through humour, as well as showing contempt for clients:

Above all else, Desirée relies upon humour as a means of distancing herself from the clients, the work and the stigma. When her favourite receptionist is there, an almost continual flow of extremely funny one liners are exchanged between them, and their jokes savagely ridicule the clients and the hypocrisy of contemporary social attitudes towards women, sex and prostitution. Desirée also copes with boredom by playing practical jokes over the telephone and by devising comic schemes for money making or entertainment.

My research identifies six types of humour amongst sex workers who work together. First, and most prevalent, private jokes are used to ridicule clients. Second, coded jokes flow between sex workers in the presence of clients. Third, stories and anecdotes of personal disclosure are framed in jocularly and jest. Fourth, humour is a strategy to resist harassment and verbal aggression from community protesters. Fifth, humour is a source of communication with professionals, and finally, humour signifies conflict and group membership.

### Private Jokes

The most frequently observed form of humour in the sex industry was jokes told in private that mocked the client. The private nature of joking cultures has been identified amongst emergency workers: 'Humour was reported to be an important tension reducer during and after operations. For those whose duties were relatively public, humour tended to occur when the workers were together and out of public view' (McCarroll et al., 1993: 212). Sex workers make fun of clients' physiological features, sexual performance and fantasies. Women jest at the reasons why men buy commercial sex, society's attitude to prostitution and stereotypes of 'the hooker'. Private jokes are derogatory, offensive in content and aim to ridicule the client behind their back. Jokes are shared with colleagues, managers and receptionists but invariably the sex worker is the creator of the joke and the joke remains within the group. The most severe jokes are only shared between workers and told face-to-face (not over the telephone or written down).

Collinson (1988) studied the interrelationships between humour and masculinity in a factory setting and found that the psychological survival of manual workers was achieved through jokes. To cope with the alienating work environment of the shop floor, jokes focused on sexual capacities and the male role as breadwinner. The language used in private jokes between sex workers has a crude quality similar to that Collinson noted amongst male manual

workers. In saunas, the joking culture involves uninhibited swearing and rudeness, sexual gestures and outrageous mockery. This vulgar language can be contrasted to the polite etiquette employed when interacting with clients. This tone and language is opposite to the meek, passive and feminine front adopted when entertaining clients.

The meaning behind much of the private joking is a reversal of sexual stereotypes, depicting the male as the weak species following base sexual desires, while the female is the strong, controlled, hard-working provider. Sex workers insult men, as clients and generically, as cunning, untrustworthy, selfish and perverted characters driven by their 'need' to have sex:

All men are wankers it is to the greater or lesser degree. (Krystal, working premises)

They are all dirty perverts. (Lisa, sauna)

Sex workers adopt masculine traits through sexualized gestures, obscenities and perpetual mocking of the male sex drive. To manage client contact, women hijack traditional masculine joking characteristics of sexual innuendo, gregarious mockery and endless sneering. Masculine joking traits are a form of resistance against the stigma of prostitution and the lack of recognition and legitimacy of sex work and can be sharply contrasted to the expected mannerisms and vocabulary of women.

### Coded Joking

Coded joking between sex workers happens in front of clients but without them realizing. An example of coded joking is when sex workers adopt a sympathetic, submissive 'front', when in fact they are patronizing and mocking the client to make colleagues laugh. Sex workers often use a 'front' that appears friendly, customer orientated and submissive. In these situations the women are laughing behind the clients' back, smirking at their antics and spreading gossip about their sexual performance through a coded language that signals humour to colleagues. Experienced sex workers who are well versed in their acting role can adopt many different forms of coded joking.

Coded joking was frequently observed in saunas and working premises during the normal routine when the client is introduced to a room. While he makes himself comfortable, the worker leaves the room to prepare herself, take him a drink and secure her money. On several occasions, when workers left the client in the room, they would fall about laughing, telling colleagues the strange behaviour, appearance or requests of the client. The worker would make excuses to send others into the room so they could see for themselves. This happened when a client was trying on female clothes, wigs and makeup and when another client was preparing bizarre sexual aids. On one occasion, the service was delayed while the worker calmed down from laughing after returning to the room to find the man had swapped his suit for a Santa Claus outfit!

This form of joking usually takes place through facial gesticulations and hand signals. When two women work together providing a service for one client, humour is a pragmatic tool for completing the transaction swiftly. Lara and Adele explained how the 'lesbian show' they offer provides opportunity for slapstick comedy by faking sexual excitement and acts. They said that they trick the client by performing in such a way that he believes their excitement is real. Inevitably, this produces the desired feeling in the client and the service is completed in the minimum time. Unbeknown to the client, routines are constructed using codes and signals to symbolize actions and intentions. Often, at least one if not both workers are facing away from the client, allowing the woman to poke fun while continuing the transaction.

### Personal Disclosure

Stories and anecdotes are a regular feature of the women's communication. Stories shared between several women normally focus on work experiences rather than personal home life. By sharing work-related experiences, women protect their private lives from entering the work setting. Stories framed in humorous mockery were observed particularly amongst street workers. Mandy had worked on the streets for ten years and was the most frequently arrested woman in that area. She was renowned amongst colleagues and professionals for her sense of humour and ability to retell dangerous experiences with raucous hilarity. Mandy retold experiences of violence from clients, quarrels with the police and incidents in court. Violent attacks, efforts to fend off bad customers and competitive aggression between fellow workers were retold using laughter and sarcasm. Downe (1999) explores how female sex workers in Costa Rica use raillery to cope with violence and as a form of resistance to challenge the conditions they face on the streets. Downe (1999: 71) understands the humour used by female sex workers as a resistance strategy to cope with pain and humiliation by re-framing traumatic stories.

Humour, as a form of resistance, was evident when sex workers described how prostitution affected their lives. In a similar fashion to Plummer's (1995) dissection of homosexual 'coming out' stories, a popular story amongst sex workers was 'telling the truth' or 'being discovered'. Of the 55 interviewees, 31 said they kept prostitution secret from their loved ones. Women recounted when their involvement in prostitution was discovered, revealed or disclosed and the consequences that followed. Such powerful personal experiences were often told with bravado, comedy and jest, minimizing the devastating consequences on relationships and family stability. These stories reveal the pressures of being involved in the commercial sex trade and the stigma that affects individuals and loved ones. These personal narratives, as opposed to public narratives concerning sex work, are common exchanges amongst the hierarchy of women who work in different sectors. Humour is significant in how these stories are re-told and remembered, and contribute to everyday support networks by acknowledging a special relationship through personal revelation.

### Resisting Harassment

Humour and ridicule are not only directed at clients. In this study, street workers were the recipients of harassment and scrutiny from community protesters (see Hubbard, 1998, for an account of neighbourhood protests). To manage the persistent intimidation, enquiries and taunts from protesters, women adopt a rhetoric of comedy. 'Gallows humour' was intellectualized as a type of humour that arises in precarious or dangerous situations. Studying the reactions of the Czech people under the invasion of the Gestapo, Obrdlik (1942: 712) notes that amongst oppressed people, in total uncertainty of their lives, joking formed a psychological escape: 'inventing, repeating and spreading through the channels of whispering counterpropaganda, anecdotes and jokes about their oppressors'. Although the street workers' experience of threat and intimidation cannot be compared to those of the Czech people, a similar form of joking enables them to resist the pressures imposed by protesters.

To accommodate the added hostilities of the street environment, workers mock the activists who patrol the streets night after night in fluorescent jackets, donning walkie-talkies and clipboards. They concoct stories about the sexual antics of the protesters and gossip that some of the middle-aged men are customers. Through humour, they brush off slanderous comments and stigmatizing accusations. This unites women against the anti-prostitution tactics of the protesters and motivates workers to remain on the streets.

### Professional Banter

Humour is an important part of the dialogue between workers and professionals. Sex workers frame their experiences in a comic genre as a way of communicating sensitive personal information. Approximately half of the observations took place in the premises of, or alongside, health professionals. The relationships between the professionals and workers was characterized and facilitated by storytelling and banter that perpetually mocked clients, the police, protesters and other authority figures. Outreach workers, nurses, drugs workers, domestic violence and housing officers are made aware of dangerous and difficult experiences through funny stories. Humour becomes a currency between workers and professionals who offer support, advice and advocacy.

### Humour and Conflict

Learning from the criticisms made of Willis (1977; see Collinson, 1988: 184), it is important not to romanticize the sex work culture. It was equally observed how humour contributes to both coping strategies and creating divisions, disagreements and defamation. Sex workers use humour against each other to challenge, incite competitiveness, oust women from establishments, taunt and humiliate:

Some of the girls in the saunas, they are real bitches. (Louise, working premises)

The reality of collective markets is a mixture of comedy and conflict, where humour is a deadly weapon:

Manageresses are bitches because there is so much cleaning to be done and sharking [flirting with customers] going on, it is unbelievable. (Pearl, working premises)

I remember years ago where if you found out that someone was doing it [sex] without [a condom] then you would either run them out of town or give them a good kicking. (Ashley, street)

Humour plays a significant part in expressing dislike and vindictiveness. Divisions and rivalry are born out of competition when individuals break the code of practice. Jokes are used to exclude those who are unwanted in the team or who cause trouble. Stories, gossip and banter are withheld from those who are not accepted into the group. Usually, individuals became aware they were not included in the group and left before being dismissed.

With specific regard to humour in the sex industry, it can be suggested there are three significant functions. First, humour is a strategy of 'emotion work' employed as both a business technique and a psychological distancing strategy to manage the emotions of selling sex. Second, joking relations foster friendship, sorority and group membership. Third, jesting is a means of communicating different types of information within the group and with outsiders as well as re-interpreting life's hardship and the risks of prostitution.

## Managing Emotions

Hochschild (1979, 1983) develops an emotional management perspective that describes how individuals keep emotions in check and argues that, although it is often considered that social rules do not apply to the emotions because they are uncontrollable and passionate, emotions are governed by 'feeling rules'. Hochschild (1983: 7) distinguishes two concepts to understand how emotions are managed: 'emotion work' as an internal process of working on one's own emotions and 'emotional labour' as a behavioural manifestation that manages the responses of others. 'Emotional labour' is the management of feelings to create a publicly observable display of facial expressions and appearance. This concept has been applied to other occupational groups, especially those considered 'women's work' where women employ physical, emotional and sexual labour to perform a service job.<sup>7</sup>

Sex workers use emotional labour to display feelings, appearances and actions during intimate contact with clients in the hope of creating a desired feeling for the customer.<sup>8</sup> Jovial personalities are specifically adopted as part of the 'working identity' and are public displays of emotional labour:

When I open the door I am a different person from who I normally am. You have to be bubbly and confident and chatty even when it is totally false. They are paying

the money so they expect to see a certain type of person but it is not me. (Anthea, works from home)

Most of the women said that at work they adapt their personalities or take on characteristics that are very different from their normal behaviour to attract customers and deliver a successful service. Humour is part of the emotional labour process that enables a worker to act under one disguise with clients while reserving her true personality for her private, domestic life. Sex workers apply impression management to adopt the aesthetic ideal of a 'prostitute' as a conscious business strategy with the intention of creating a desired state in the client so that he will be satisfied and return. For the sex worker, humour is a tactic to promote a swift and passive business transaction requiring the minimum amount of time for the maximum profit.

Sex workers in this study wanted to demonstrate how they manipulate a jocular banter and friendly manner with clients, and between themselves, as a calculated strategy. They adopt the stereotypical image of the 'happy hooker' and the aesthetic characteristics of 'the prostitute', conforming to culturally prescribed norms of femininity as a strategy to attract and maintain a regular client base. Usually this entails adapting physical appearance, dress code, make-up and hairstyle as well as observable personality traits to conform to male expectations. A small number of interviewees considered cosmetic facial surgery and breast implants as capital investments for the role of sex provider.

These strategies echo the literature on gendered bodies and performance at work, in particular, Mauss's (1973) observations of how flight attendants learn to practise 'body techniques' and how women are 'body conscious' in their tasks of serving the public (Tyler and Abbott, 1998: 434). However, unlike flight attendants, sex workers in this study are aware of how they switch between stereotypical images in their working routine and their 'ordinary' characters. As Wellington and Bryson (2002: 940) comment, gendered expectations can be used to a woman's advantage: 'Maybe conforming to a stereotypical image provides a professional with a shield behind which to hide their true identities.' For sex workers, hiding their true personalities was paramount in order to divide the personal from the professional. Adopting a humorous façade that conformed to the 'happy hooker' image was considered beneficial as it concealed the woman's true identity.

Sex workers also engage in humour as emotion work to turn a disgusting situation into something more bearable. Hochschild (1979: 561) describes how a person works on their inner feelings:

By 'emotion work' I refer to the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling. To 'work on' an emotion or feeling is, for our purposes, the same as 'to manage' an emotion or to do 'deep acting' .... 'Emotion work' refers more broadly to the act of evoking or shaping, as well as suppressing, feeling in oneself.

Emotion work is a conscious effort to control, shape and manage unwanted feelings. Lara identifies how humour helps reverse negative emotions:

Some of the situations are so funny that we have to laugh and laugh in order to cope with the fantasies and requests that they ask. There are some men who are so smelly and not nice to be round. So we have to laugh to get through the whole thing. I could tell you so many situations where we have laughed and laughed our way through a service, not with the clients but at the clients. When you are laughing it doesn't feel like such a daunting job when we have a giggle about the clients. (Lara, working premises)

Coded joking and private jests are essential tools to manage negative emotions. This form of emotion work has the specific intention of avoiding the negative consequences of sex work to mental health and emotional well-being.

Hochschild (1979: 561) describes this type of emotion work as evocation; where an unwanted or inappropriate feeling is the focus of a cognitive process. Sex workers manage their emotions to prevent unwanted feelings (of desire or repulsion) and to ensure that the emotions they experience in commercial sex are sterile, clinical and detached. Participants explain that comedy is a necessary tool to cope with the unpleasant aspects of the job and that jesting tactics alleviate the mental stress of 'doing sex as work'. Humour and ridicule make sex work more palatable and lightens the reality of the work. Downe (1999) understands the use of humour amongst female sex workers as a hidden script to challenge the dominant ideologies of society and to resist stereotypical images of the 'whore'. Aggressive mockery and joking relations are part of a tool kit of detachment mechanisms that enable sex workers to resist the commodification of their personalities and emotions.

The sex industry is a profession that deals with intimate body contact in stressful working conditions. Other studies clarify that in occupations where death and body parts are commonplace, humour helps to relieve distress. In the medical profession joking relations enable professionals to cope with emotional strain, prevent inappropriate feelings, relieve tension and explore taboo subjects (Coombs and Goldman, 1973; Griffiths, 1998; Howarth, 1996; Nelson, 1992; Smith and Kleinman, 1988: 63). Pogrebin and Poole (1988) identify four different types of humour amongst police workers: jocular aggression; audience degradation; diffusion of danger or tragedy; and normative neutralization. Like sex work, these occupations deal with bodily contact, sometimes in perilous conditions that threaten the physical and emotional well being of the professional. Humour is a cheap, easy and relatively effortless strategy that individuals adopt to prevent the dangers of the job limiting their ability to perform.

## Sticking Together

Goffman (1956) reminds us that Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown trained sociologists to look for the meaning of everyday social practice and for the contribution of that practice to group solidarity. Humour is used to create a sense of belonging, to unite group membership, and to boost individual self-esteem and

collective identity. Goffman (1963: 118) explains how performers communicate through a process of impression management that includes a system of stage talk and stage cues. Stage talk is used exclusively between performers to collude secretly, showing contempt for the audience. Jokes, humour, nicknames and stories are aspects of stage talk and part of the dramaturgical tools to protect a group of performers (sex workers) and hide information from the audience (clients). Team collusion is maintained through a system of secret signals that pass information surreptitiously without the audience knowing (Goffman, 1956: 112). Cohesion amongst the sex work community is achieved through a secret code of verbal insults, private and coded jokes in the stage set of saunas, escort agencies and brothels.

Anecdotes and storytelling unite experienced workers with beginners, creating solidarity and a mutual sense of community. Krystal remembers that when she was a novice her experienced colleague used humour to teach skills:

The first time I ever went into the room for a viewing ... it was my mate and she was there giving it all 'oh give me that hard cock' and she had him facing away from us and laughing and making funny signs. We just laughed. We never stop laughing at the punters. (Krystal, working premises)

Sharing jokes and slapstick humour create sorority and camaraderie between workers. As Burns (1953: 657) comments, humour is 'the short cut to consensus'. Debbie and Louise have been working for 20 years, much of that together. During the 12 visits I made to their premises they would be laughing, joking and fooling around. They explained their behaviour was not a reflection of how they enjoy sex work but out of necessity: 'If we didn't laugh so much we would just cry' (Louise, sauna). They were adamant that the only reason they survived prostitution is their friendship, solidarity and strength in coping together. 'We learned to laugh a long time ago, to make it less real and to stop us from hating having to come here' (Debbie, sauna). Maher (2000: 161) also notes that strong friendship networks exist amongst female street workers. Such friendships are cemented through a specific joking relationship characterized by knowledge of their money-making activities.

The solidarity function of humour is particularly visible in large saunas where the turnover of staff is high. Women often work with colleagues they have never met. Raillery, jesting and comedy about clients, men and society's hypocritical views on prostitution create in-group cohesion in a short space of time. Humour is a benchmark of the group's common experiences and risks, enabling new workers to gain insight and learn from others.

Strong female friendships were observed in all sex markets. Storytelling, particularly 'telling the truth' tales, reveals common consequences of working in prostitution, enabling women to bond and pass on tips for coping with disclosures. Revelation stories reveal significant emotional and personal loss and were retold normally through jocular banter, as a way of reaffirming a special relationship borne out of stigma and secrecy. Sharing information and providing support is not confined to face-to-face contact as sex workers who interact

through the internet also use storytelling to create, maintain and emphasize the camaraderie with their 'virtual' colleagues.

Jokes were not needed in isolated working environments, as there was no one else to share the joke. This suggests that humour has a particular collective function to create a sense of cohesion and common identity. However, this was strictly within the boundaries of work as few women socialized together or even spoke of their lives outside the sex industry:<sup>9</sup>

In the sauna I keep myself very much to myself and I don't socialize with the girls or ever discuss my real life. (Eva, sauna worker)

I know only two other working girls ... we don't communicate as it is a very jealous world. There is competition as we are in a business that is looking for customers. I have got a family. I don't want to associate with other working girls. (Annabelle, working premises)

For some workers, support between colleagues was expected only during work time and space, keeping a strict division between work and private identity.

In Collinson's (1988: 193) study of manual workers, relationships between men on the shop floor were distant despite their collective appearance. In common with the manual workers, sex workers use humour to strengthen their group membership and consolidate working identities, while excluding and protecting their private lives. The concentration of jokes on work topics avoids the reality of dual identities and secret lives.

## Communication

In the sex industry in-group jokes, laughter and stories communicate different types of information. Humour signals friendship, approval, disdain, fear and insecurity. If a sex worker is included in the telling, sharing and enjoyment of jokes it is a sign they are firmly accepted into the community. Being the object of ridicule is also a sign of acceptance as a team member. On the other hand, if someone is excluded from these interactions they are not included in the tight-knit group and this becomes a symbol of mistrust. This was observed in one sauna where a new worker, who was suspected of using heroin, was not included in conjuring up and telling jokes. The other workers engaged in banter and gossip only after she had left the room. Women used in-group jokes to exclude those they considered unsafe because they lacked safety consciousness and flouted occupational norms.

Stories, jokes, rumours and gossip are vehicles to pass on advice, rules, procedures and warnings. Managers and owners use humour as a means of communicating difficult messages. When workers broke the rules (for example smoking cannabis on the premises, taking time out of work, skipping cleaning duties), informal warnings were given in a joking manner, using mockery to imply they were breaching procedures: 'You might impress the punters darling, but you certainly don't impress me with your fancy nails; get and do that

hoovering as there are more from where you come from' (sauna manager to worker).

Humour is an important feature in building a cohesive team environment that takes safety procedures seriously. Collinson (1988: 188) notes that shop floor workers use humour and teasing as a medium for teaching new workers the ropes. The joking culture instructed manual workers on acceptable behaviour and tested their willingness to accept the group rules and norms. In the same way, experienced sex workers ensure that beginners are familiar with safety and screening procedures through funny anecdotes, jesting and mockery. Diffusing risk and the possibility of harm occurs by making light of the threat of violence and robbery, the prospect of using weapons and calling the police.

The joking culture was important to explain or re-interpret risk, misfortune and occupational hazards. Mandy used humour to retell violent attacks and express how she defended herself. Zoe relayed an incident when a client held her at knifepoint. The story was retold in the light of the police remaining unaware of their activities. In both instances, the fear and danger from male clients were minimized and retold as a comedy sketch. Re-framing serious incidents experienced through prostitution can be understood as a process of resisting the narrative of victimhood and defining their own identity as individuals who are in control and able to protect themselves. Howe and Sherzer (1986) explain how humour places misfortune in a frame that enables one to deal with reality and inevitability. For sex workers, laughter forces one to cope with reality and a sense of humour prevents interpreting events with anger, resentment and despair.

## Conclusion

Three themes emerge as significant for the sociological understanding of humour in occupational settings and the nature of sex work. First, humour is a coping strategy when professionals are required to provide intimate body contact through physical, sexual or emotional labour. In prostitution, joking relations are an essential tool to distance oneself from clients, the reality of selling sex and the harsh conditions of the sex industry. Humour is important, not only to manage client interactions, but also to communicate with colleagues and organize establishments. Humour displayed through storytelling, banter, anecdotes and jokes defines female friendships within the sex industry and is a key medium to communicate difficult information and safety procedures. The special relationship between women who sell sex, often in secrecy, is affirmed and strengthened. However, it is equally important not to romanticize the sex work culture as humour can exclude those considered a threat to group safety or occupational norms. Individuals are ousted from establishments by not being included in joking or else being made the butt of a joke.

Second, humour is an emotion management strategy (Hochschild, 1983). As an example of emotional labour, humour is a calculated strategy to perform

the 'prostitute' role and protect one's own emotions. Sex workers in this study describe intricate and elaborate 'working identities' which conform to male expectations and the aesthetic ideal of a 'prostitute'. Women consciously act into the stereotypical role to satisfy the customer and retain a regular clientele, with the aim of making profit. This performance involves changing physical attributes, dress code, and occasionally cosmetic surgery. However, the most visible and common characteristic of this performance is to display a friendly, 'fun to be with' personality that delivers what the client wants to buy. Performing humour is part of the sex worker's façade of 'body work'. Humour is also an important 'emotion work' technique to make the difficult aspects of selling sex more palatable. Jocular banter between colleagues and with clients is a decisive method to ensure transactions go smoothly by controlling personal feelings and verifying the appropriateness of certain negative emotions such as disgust.

The multi-functional applications of humour in sex work suggest that joking relations are important in extreme professions that require intense physical and emotional labour that potentially threatens personal well-being. Parsons (1951) describes how professionals are expected to develop 'affective neutrality' or what Coombs and Goldman (1973) call 'detached concern', in order to reinforce professional power and distance. Sex workers create distance from clients and selling body parts by using humour to shape the emotions and change negative responses into bearable and appropriate emotions. This study illustrates that humour is an important feature of occupational identities, especially in extreme professions, and is probably equally significant in defining social identities.

Third, this study raises questions in relation to the place of humour in the researcher–respondent relationship. Humour and joking are a reflexive tool that can be used to evaluate the role of the researcher in the process of data collection. This is particularly poignant in an ethnographic setting, where it is easy to be blinded by original questions and skim over important features of social organization and relationships. It was only after completing this study, with time to reflect, that humour stood out as a vibrant sociological process and feature of the researcher–respondents nexus. Then it became clear that humour was no laughing matter but an essential survival strategy in a cut-throat industry.

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## Notes

- 1 Taylor and Frazer (1982) also found that workers involved in body recovery from a plane crash showed little sign of distress. They attributed this to a humorous tactic of imagining the remains were not part of human beings.
- 2 Bradney (1957) identified how staff in a large departmental store use humour to cope with the pressure of sales targets and stress from customers. Pitt (1979: 36) found that coalminers used humour as a way of dealing with working underground in darkness and danger, cut off from the world. In school, Willis (1977) observed how 'piss-taking' and joking were prevalent amongst the 'lads' and that their working-class culture was reinforced by the ability to produce a laugh.
- 3 Hoigard and Finstad (1992) explain how the public and the private worlds of the female sex worker are divided by blanking out techniques, retaining physical boundaries, keeping to time, hiding appearance and avoiding emotional relationships with customers. McKeganey and Barnard (1996: 84) observed rituals based on clothing, make-up and bathing to act in and act out of their role, while Brewis and Linstead (2000: 86) raise the profile of 'soft drugs' to numb the unpleasantness of sex work.
- 4 The Safe project in Birmingham made this research possible and I am indebted to the people of this organization for their support and professional insights.
- 5 Interviewees worked in the following markets: licensed sauna – 23, working from home – 4, alone in flat – 8, shared working premises – 10, street – 5, sauna owners – 3, receptionists – 2. However, it was common for women to have experience of several sex markets: only 7/55 had worked in only one market.
- 6 All names of establishments and participants have been changed to protect their anonymity.
- 7 Emotional labour of 'women's employment' has been described in various occupations: Smith (1992) and O'Brien (1994) identify how nurses perform emotional labour for patients and themselves, Mills (1998) highlights emotional labour in the airline industry while Tyler and Abbott (1998) specifically detail how skills of female flight attendants are naturalized as womanhood. Sharma and Black (2002) demonstrate how beauty therapists engage in emotional labour, while Wellington and Bryson (2002) expose the gendered nature of the image consultancy industry.
- 8 Kempadoo and Doezema (1999) and Chapkis (1997) have already argued that when women engage in sexual or erotic labour in prostitution it should be understood as selling a form of emotional labour.
- 9 Containing friendships within the work environment was noted specifically amongst off-street workers who worked in complete secrecy and travelled a significant distance to separate their work from home. This can be compared to street workers who often lived and worked in the same geographical area, shared childhood memories and were part of each other's personal networks and occupational peer group.

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