



Victor Minichiello and John Scott (eds)

Male Sex Work and Society

New York, Harrington Park Press, 2014
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reviewed by [Tan Qian Hui](#)

1. In this inter-disciplinary volume, *Male Sex Work and Society*, Victor Minichiello and John Scott gather together seventeen articles organised around four broad themes: 1. examining male sex work across socio-historic contexts; 2. unpacking the representations that surround the marketing of male sex work; 3. shedding light on social issues and (sub)cultures in male sex work and 4. locating male sex work within the contemporary context of a global capitalist framework. In general, this informative and comprehensive collection adds to a nascent but growing scholarship striving to fill a lacuna on the sexual objectification and consumption of male bodies. .
2. The editors begin by establishing that male sex workers, by virtue of their job and 'deviant' sexual practices, are doubly stigmatised in society. They then proceed to trace the contours of male sex work across time (from the past to the present), cultures (including but not limited to western ones) and on a variety of scales (from the global to the local). By drawing on a 'polymorphous paradigm' (p. 264) of sexual labour, the editors and authors demonstrate that a range of occupational arrangements can be made for the commodification of sexual services, which is likely to be conducted for a variety of reasons (financial remuneration, self-determination, the realisation of one's sexual identity etcetera). In a bid to (re)conceptualise sexual encounters beyond the private sphere as well as to rethink sex work as being solely that of women's work, the editors have skilfully synthesised a large amount of material from diverse fields such as anthropology, criminology, public health, history and psychology.
3. Consonant with what is now a well-developed literature on female prostitution, the editors and authors place much emphasis on problematising the pervasive tropes of male sex workers as victims and vectors of disease. More specifically, by disrupting the pseudo-dichotomies between oppression-liberation, structure-agency, pain-pleasure, heterosexuality-homosexuality, among others, they have complicated an overly simplistic social script pertaining to men, sex and work. They have also captured the 'erotic and physical nature of [the] subject matter' (p. ix) to some degree by including imageries of men selling sex in material and virtual space (p. xix). Notably, these (hyper)sexualised and racialised men are differently positioned in a hierarchy of attractive bodies (at the top are those who are muscular, lean and hirsute, see p. 115).
4. Plugged into a broader scholarship on emotional and affective labour, contributors such as Mary Laing and Justin Gaffney (p. 262) posited that within such sexual economies, there is a continuum between counterfeit intimacies and the cultivation of more authentic romantic feelings (see also pp. 169 and 299). But to what extent are male sex workers adept at nurturing a client's sense of

emotional dependency on themselves in order to encourage repeat visits? For this reason, the authors could have extended their discussion on the competencies of sex workers in manipulating their own emotions and that of others and in so doing, defy stereotypical views of men as 'invulnerable and unemotional' beings (p. xxi).

5. Additionally an examination of male sex workers who are bisexual or 'gay for pay' challenges neat demarcations between the homosexual-heterosexual divide as their patrons may include gay men, straight men and women. More specifically, it has been reported that men form the majority of their clientele and these workers may have sex with men without necessarily identifying as homosexual. Such considerations open up opportunities for a more complex analysis of sex work beyond a binary logic undergirded by heteronormativity and homonormativity. Certainly, the editors have acknowledged that an exchange between two men does not make male sex work inherently less exploitative than female sex work (p. xvi). In this regard, traditional gender theories of prostitution have fallen short in the situation where the buyer and seller of sex are of the same gender (p. xv). Consequently, this intellectual project could have benefitted from a more sustained engagement with a queer epistemological approach striving to subvert stable, monolithic and reductionist accounts of (non)normative sexualities (see p. 71).^[1] Moreover, whereas transgender sex work has been mentioned by a few authors, this is done almost as an afterthought, often in a perfunctory manner (for example see p. 367). Typically, the chapters lack an in-depth discussion on how the erotic subjectivities of transgenders may be similar or different from that of their cis-gender counterparts.^[2]
6. Sex work has been construed as a 'feminised practice' (p. 43) Yet, surprisingly little has been said about how these men negotiate such forms of feminised labour that would require them to not just present a façade of servility but to also willingly yield themselves to being sodomised on the job. What are some of the concrete ways in which the boundaries between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities are blurred? This could have been more explicitly foregrounded in the empirical material. Further, whereas the authors have expounded on the selective performance of machismo that would allegedly appeal to potential clients, more can be said about the practices that these sex workers may have adopted so as to retain not just a semblance of a masculine self but also a sense of empowerment.
7. In the concluding chapter, the editors presented a brief outline of at least three possible areas for future research. First, they call for an attendance to how age intersects with other identitarian categories to influence the experiences of sex workers and their clients. Second, from a public health perspective, there is a pressing need to more fully comprehend the motivations for unprotected sex and whether these motivations are driven by culturally specific notions of masculinity (p. 464). Lastly, while efforts have been made to humanise male sex workers and for them to 'speak' through the text, the editors recognise that the clients of these sex workers have been glossed over, particularly female ones (p. 465). What would the power dynamics between a (perhaps younger) male sex worker and (perhaps older) female client be like through the theoretical lenses of post-feminism?
8. Overall, despite its limitations, this book has provided timely insights on an emerging phenomenon which has definitely contributed to a more nuanced understanding of male sex work beyond its current mould. It would serve as an invaluable resource to academics and (under)graduate students interested in gender, sexuality and the political economy of prostitution.

Notes

^[1] See also Mary Laing, Katy Pilcher and Nicola Smith (eds), *Queer Sex Work*, London: Routledge, 2015; Peter Aggleton and Richard Parker, *Men Who Sell Sex: Global Perspectives*, London: Routledge, 2015.

^[2] See [Jarrett Davis and Glenn Miles](#), 'More than gender: Looking at the vulnerabilities and resiliencies of transgender sex workers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, *Sixth Annual Interdisciplinary Conference on Human Trafficking 2014*, Paper 4,

online: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/humtrafcon6/4> (accessed 28 August 2015).

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