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Intimate Labour and the State: Contrasting Policy Discourses with the Working Experiences of Indoor Sex Workers

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Abstract
Drawing on an interview-based study with indoor-based sex workers of different genders in Great Britain, this paper explores the disparity between dominant policy representations of sex workers and the working lives of people selling intimate services. I argue certain policy discourses reinforce narratives of vulnerability and coercion when discussing female sex workers and responses to perceived 'problems' of prostitution and neglect the needs of male and transgender sex workers. I contrast messages in policy discourses with the experiences of sex workers across indoor sectors. My study found considerable diversity in working experiences, influenced by factors such as work setting, personal circumstances and aspirations. While some people may view sex work as a short-term option, for others it represents a longer-term career. For some, sex work may offer greater job satisfaction and control over working conditions than other jobs available. Nonetheless, external constraints sometimes make it difficult for them to work safely. I argue state discourses fail to reflect the diverse experiences of sex workers and undermine their agency, perpetuating disrespect and excluding them from human and labour rights. I suggest the need to consider policy approaches shaped according to varied circumstances and settings, drawing on the expertise of sex workers.

Keywords Sex work · Prostitution · Labour relations · Policy · Stigma · Recognition · Diversity

Introduction

There has been considerable debate in recent years in the UK and more widely concerning the regulation of sex work. State policies have tended to perceive prostitution as a 'problem' to be addressed, and debates on the appropriate policy approaches continue to be presented in terms of two opposing feminist narratives, which can broadly be summarised as prostitution as a form of violence against women, versus the sale of sexual services as a form of legitimate work (Kilvington, Day, & Ward, 2001; Comte, 2014). While a growing body of research evidence from around the world demonstrates that sex work has many different forms and sex workers are diverse, not only in terms of gender but also in relation to their personal backgrounds and circumstances, policy representations have tended to be constructed on the basis of narratives of vulnerability and coercion, related almost entirely to women in the sex industry (Carline, 2011). In part, it may be argued this results from outdated and narrow conceptualisations of sex work, male and female sexuality and patterns of sexual consumption (Sanders & Campbell, 2014). As I suggest here, policy representations also relate to a form of 'misrecognition' of sex workers which denies their agency and leads to their exclusion from basic labour and human rights.

Drawing on research with sex workers of different genders in indoor sectors in Great Britain, this paper builds on earlier studies to consider diverse transitions into and within the sex industry and sex workers' views on conditions in different settings compared with occupations in other sectors. I explore the disparity between dominant policy representations of sex workers and the experiences of people who sell sexual and emotionally intimate services, including independent workers based alone or in collectives and workers in managed premises such as brothels or massage parlours. My analysis of opposing conceptualisations of sex work and their relatedness to policy formulation is influenced by theories of misrecognition, misrepresentation and social justice propounded by Nancy Fraser (2009) amongst others. These theories can provide an alternative framework for discussing commercial sexual services, moving from binaries of coercion versus choice, to consider the contexts in which people make decisions to engage in sexual labour and their rights as

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citizens to express themselves and be heard in the political arena. As context for this article, I first consider broader factors framing engagement in sex work, before outlining recent policy trends, particularly in Europe and the UK. Drawing on the voices of sex workers from my research to illustrate their diverse working experiences, I contrast these with messages from dominant policy discourses, before discussing how contemporary policy debate might usefully be reframed in terms which foreground notions of social justice and recognition.

Background: Factors Shaping the Organisation of and Transitions into Sex Work

While the regulatory and policy backgrounds are relevant considerations when discussing markets for sexual services, it is also important to situate studies of sex work in the context of broader labour market changes (Bruckert & Parent, 2006). With increasing globalisation of production and markets, there has been a growing demand for flexible and disposable labour, which has exacerbated economic disparities (Kalleberg, 2009). Commercial globalisation, poverty and inequality have also resulted in a flow of migrant labour, particularly into service industries, in both formal and informal economies in Western states (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002). At the same time, cultural, socio-economic and demographic changes in Western societies have led to a growth in demand for personal and care services, with increasing commodification of intimate labour which was once provided on an unwaged basis in the home (Zelizer, 2005; McDowell, 2009).

These social and economic shifts have implications for contemporary intimate relations and markets in sexual labour (Bernstein, 2007). For example, national labour policies, together with a contracting welfare state, may be linked to the decision of some women to enter sex work rather than lower paid, often precarious alternatives in the mainstream economy (Bruckert & Parent, 2006). Moreover, the demand for personal services in Western economies has created opportunities for migrant women, not only in domestic and caring work but also within the sex industry (Agustín, 2003). Intimate exchanges are increasingly woven into international tourism, where participants in local hospitality and informal economies negotiate unequal structures and develop relations with tourists which blur the boundaries between intimacy and labour, raising questions about definitions of sex work and sexual rights (Cabezas, 2004). Developments in digital technologies have also played a significant role in enabling direct communication between sex workers and clients, leading to new spaces and organisation of intimate encounters (Constable, 2009; Sanders, Scoular, Campbell, Pitcher, & Cunningham, 2018). Bernstein (2007) argues there has been a transformation in parts of the sex industry, with customers pursuing a form of emotional genuineness as part of the paid sexual transaction that she terms 'bounded authenticity'. This relates particularly to indoor sectors, where emotionally intimate encounters have increasingly become normalised (Brents, Jackson, & Hausbeck, 2010; Walby, 2012). Nonetheless, there are global and sectoral differentials in markets for sexual labour and it is important to develop a greater understanding of the policies and practices which help to shape the organisation of the contemporary sex industry.

While the varied trajectories of women, and sometimes men, into sex work have been explored elsewhere, there have been relatively few comparative studies considering the experiences of sex workers of different genders across diverse indoor sectors. Some recent studies (e.g. Bowen, 2015; Benoit, Ouellet, Jansson, Magnus, & Smith, 2017) have explored transitions of sex workers in off-street sectors in Canada. Others (e.g. Sanders et al., 2018) have researched the working experiences of sex workers of diverse genders in certain indoor sectors. These studies have noted that, while lack of alternatives and economic constraints may often be motivations for engagement in sex work, some people may actively decide to sell sex in preference to other employment options, for a range of reasons. Some scholars have suggested that while there may be certain aspects differentiating sex work from other service occupations, there are strong arguments for treating commercial sex as a form of work and for setting analyses of labour processes and workplace relations in sex work in the context of broader social and economic trends (e.g. Brents et al., 2010; Hardy, 2013). Labour market theories related to formal and informal economies thus have relevance for studies of transitions into and from sex work. For example, Benoit et al. (2017) apply an occupational choice framework to consider the decisions people make to enter the sex industry and the relationship of individual agency to structural factors. They argue that the socio-economic opportunities and constraints influencing labour market transitions more generally may also be related to the multiple factors framing entry into sex work. Moreover, the diversity within the sex industry also has implications for the ways it is regulated (Pitcher, 2015; Benoit et al., 2017).

Policy Discourses on Prostitution and Sex Work

As has been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Sanders & Campbell, 2014), states have used various mechanisms to regulate sex work, including full or partial criminalisation; legalisation involving specific forms of licencing; and decriminalisation, which removes criminal penalties from adult sex work and regulates it similarly to other businesses. While the distinctions between these regulatory frameworks are not always clear, each of these approaches has implications for the organisation of the sex industry and for people who sell or

purchase sexual services, as well as third parties involved in management or other activities associated with the industry (McCarthy, Benoit, Jansson, & Kolar, 2012). In Great Britain, where the study discussed here took place, both the legislative context and policy discourses had significant impacts on working practices, as will be explored later in this paper.

In recent years in the European Union and some member countries, debates on prostitution and sex work have tended to be polarised between pro- and anti-abolitionist approaches to legislation (Kilvington et al., 2001). Feminists taking an abolitionist stance have sometimes used the state to progress their agenda, with a concurrent shift towards criminalisation of clients or 'users', commonly known as the 'Nordic' model of governance (Sanders & Campbell, 2014). While this legislative approach to sex work has been adopted by several European states (including recently France and Northern Ireland), to date, England and Wales have not opted for full criminalisation of clients, but have taken a partial approach, via S14 of the Policing and Crime Act 2009, which makes it an offence to purchase sexual services from a prostitute 'subjected to force'. Nonetheless, the language framing the drawing up of this offence drew on narratives of 'victimhood' and 'vulnerability', applying these almost exclusively to women (Munro & Scoular, 2012). More recently, the All Party Parliamentary Group for England and Wales on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade (APPG, 2014), took the view that prostitution is antithetical to gender equality and associated it more explicitly with violence against women (Sanders & Campbell, 2014). At the same time, this approach has also gained purchase within the European Parliament, with the adoption of a resolution which views prostitution as an exemplar of gender inequality and tantamount to violence against women (Scoular and Carline, 2014). As Scoular and Carline (2014, p. 609) note, while neither the APPG nor the European Parliament has any binding legislative power, they offer 'important symbolic weight to a neo-abolitionist trend that is spreading across Europe'. The language framing these debates includes repeated emphasis on words such as 'victims', 'vulnerability' or 'desperation' associated with women in prostitution (APPG, 2014, pp. 18, 22, 25) or directly associating prostitution with violence, violation of human dignity and loss of self-respect (European Parliament, 2014). These narratives promote a particular conception of prostitution as gendered abuse and of (women) sex workers as passive victims of male violence and are used to justify a punitive legislative approach to address the problems seen as inherent in all prostitution. Although the focus of legislation is primarily on clients, the evidence shows that sex workers are also detrimentally affected by this regulatory approach (Wagenaar and Altink, 2012; Levy & Jakobsson, 2014).

While neo-abolitionist campaigns often focus attention on legislative change, the language used in these campaigns also serves to promote a moral agenda which reinforces heteronormative conceptions of male and female sexuality (Carline, 2011). As Sanders and Campbell (2014, p. 536) note, there has been a continuance of state control over "sexual behaviours and sexual activities that do not fit dominant scripts for what constitutes 'appropriate' citizenship". Moreover, within these prevailing narratives, the global social and economic changes discussed earlier, which have also influenced developments in the sex industry, have tended to be disregarded (Kilvington et al., 2001; Sanders et al., 2018). Rather than viewing engagement in the sex industry in the context of global economic and labour market trends, policy discourses have frequently drawn on the language of human trafficking and modern forms of slavery, which often become inextricably associated with prostitution in the media and popular narratives (Constable, 2009; Wagenaar and Altink, 2012). These discourses tend to present a simple binary between 'free' and 'forced' labour, 'legitimate' or 'illegitimate' work, with no consideration of the extent to which there may be degrees of coercion and exploitation in sex work or, indeed, other forms of labour (Day, 2010).

Alongside a construction of gendered violence, the neo-abolitionist message is that the sex industry is unacceptable, without exception. This narrative leads to incomprehension that a rational woman would consciously opt to be a sex worker if she had any choice. Men and transgender sex workers are frequently omitted from this narrative, often on the grounds they constitute a minority of those selling sex (Comte, 2014; Pitcher & Wijers, 2014). By this reasoning, sex work as a preferred option for any woman is seen as irrational, which negates its conception as an occupation, whether similar to or different from other jobs. Hence, the focus in much policy is on exiting and 'forced welfarism' (see Scoular and Carline, 2014).

Wagenaar and Altink (2012) note that contemporary policies regarding prostitution are often driven by 'morality politics'. They define morality policy as dominated by ideology, informed by debates which are frequently emotive and concern issues over which everyone has strong opinions, with scant regard to existing evidence. Moreover, statistics with dubious or unacknowledged provenance may be produced in these debates to uphold a particular viewpoint, reinforcing stereotypes of victimhood and coercion (Carline, 2011). For example, there have been inflated claims regarding the numbers of women trafficked into prostitution or coerced into the sex industry when very young, or broad generalisations drawing on small-scale studies of specific groups of people selling sexual services, which do not reflect the composition and working structures of the current sex industry (Weitzer, 2009).

It is important to note there is a developing body of literature contesting some of the binaries described here, including not only the research studies discussed earlier but robust reports and consultations from NGOs and public health organisations.

For example, the World Health Organization (2012) recommended that countries should work towards decriminalisation of sex work and a series of articles on HIV and sex work in the *Lancet* in 2014 provided evidence that criminalisation and failure to recognise the contractual nature of sex work creates barriers to accessing services (e.g. Strathdee, Crago, Butler, Bekker, & Beyrer, 2015). In 2016, Amnesty International also endorsed decriminalisation as a step towards ensuring sex workers' human rights.[1] While it has been argued that decriminalisation is the most effective approach to ensure the wellbeing and safety of sex workers, it has also been suggested this is not sufficient to address enduring issues such as social stigma and other forms of discrimination (Abel, 2011; McCarthy et al., 2012; Pitcher & Wijers, 2014).

Despite the growing evidence base, more nuanced and multi-faceted perspectives often continue to be ignored in policy discussions and the views of sex workers disregarded in many instances (Sanders & Campbell, 2014; Scoular and Carline, 2014). More recently in England and Wales, the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee (HASC, 2016: 3) has attempted to steer a more 'neutral' approach to language, referring to 'female, male or transgender adults who receive money in exchange for sexual services', acknowledging the evidence discussed above and the highly polarised views on prostitution and sex work. It has been suggested this may be indicative of a broader discourse change in the UK (O'Neill & Jobe, 2016). While the HASC report recommends changes to existing legislation on soliciting and brothel-keeping in relation to sex workers sharing premises, however, to date the recommendations have not been adopted and the report takes no stance on broader legislative models. It is also pertinent to note that policies informed by a moral agenda are vulnerable to shifts in direction according to the moral and political climate (Wagenaar and Altink, 2012).

This political fragility makes it important to continue to develop the evidence base and to amass a solid body of knowledge from small-scale as well as larger studies across different sectors of sex work. It is also crucial that research studies consider the implications of the legislative and policy contexts for the human and labour rights of sex workers. Equally significant is evidence presented by sex worker rights-based organisations from around the world, based on the experiences of sex workers in diverse contexts. While certain campaigns have successfully challenged human rights violations against sex workers, and there are some states, most notably New Zealand, where sex workers' voices have been influential in policy development, these are not typical of many jurisdictions (Sanders & Campbell, 2014). A more inclusive model of social justice which is based on a discourse of rights and recognition and treats sex workers as equal citizens with a stake in any policies concerning them may be instrumental in developing a deeper understanding of the varied experiences of sex workers and the structural and social factors which impact on their everyday lives (O'Neill & Pitcher, 2010). In this context, the theories of Axel Honneth (1995) and Nancy Fraser (2009), which develop a concept of social justice as encompassing at a minimum notions of recognition and redistribution, may provide useful conceptual tools for contrasting dominant state discourses with sex workers' justice claims and studies which present their diverse voices. These theories are outlined later, when comparing the discourses discussed above with the experience of sex workers from the research which is the focus of this article.

Study Methods

The research, undertaken between 2011 and 2014, was a qualitative PhD study exploring adult indoor-based sex work as an occupation. The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews with 40 participants. These included 28 women: 24 were sex workers in independent, agency, brothel and collective work settings and four were former sex workers, now working as receptionists and/or managers of premises. Interviews were also undertaken with nine men and three transgender women, all of whom worked independently. Five independent/agency workers (three men and two women) and two parlour workers were migrants from outside the UK. Eleven participants were aged in their 20s, 16 in their 30s, and 11 aged 40 or over. Two, both parlour workers, were aged 18–19. More than half the sample (22) had entered sex work in their 20s. Participants were recruited through online sex worker networks, escort advertising websites, sex work projects and snowballing methods.

The interviews explored participants' personal backgrounds and work history, perceptions of current working conditions, relationships with third parties if relevant, job satisfaction and aspirations and their comparisons between sex work and jobs undertaken outside the sex industry. Participants' views on the regulatory context to their work were also sought. While the semi-structured interview topic guide was designed to allow participants to raise issues themselves, certain questions were asked consistently throughout the research, such as those relating to rates of pay, for purposes of cross-comparison. The author of this paper conducted all the interviews, the majority of which were face-to-face, with two email and two telephone interviews undertaken according to participants' preference. Face-to-face interviews were located in mutually agreed spaces, such as quiet cafes or participants' working environments, with certain researcher safety protocols observed, for example logging in with a contact when interviews were completed. The average (mean) time of interviews was 60 min.

[1] www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/05/amnesty-international-publishes-policy-and-research-on-protection-of-sex-workers-rights/. Accessed 30/12/17.

The study drew on grounded theory methods, including commencing analysis in early stages of data collection, with initial open coding and on-going development of categories (see Charmaz, 2006). Simultaneous data collection and analysis enabled the refining of questions and revisions to the analytic scheme as the research progressed. Coding and analysis were undertaken using NVivo 9, with the coding tree, conceptual categories and emerging themes reviewed in supervision sessions. Peer-checking of analysis of a sample of anonymised data also took place in a workshop with other postgraduate researchers. Through the constant comparative method advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967), certain broad theoretical issues emerged from the data, namely individual agency, stigma and respect, the latter relating not only to respect expected of clients but also that requested from the outside world, which often appears to view sex workers as degraded and deviant. The findings below and quotes from participants exemplify some of these key themes. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Findings: Working Practices and Experiences of Indoor-Based Sex Workers

The research findings demonstrate that even within a small sample, there is considerable diversity of approach, personal background, context and working experience amongst sex workers, which may be seen as similar to groups of workers in other occupations. It is important to consider factors influencing work trajectories, aspirations, working conditions and job satisfaction and to set these in the context of the broader work environment. Small-scale research studies can help to challenge the 'otherness' of sex workers portrayed in the discourses discussed earlier and may highlight ways in which state misrecognition impacts on sex workers' lives and working conditions. It is also important, when comparing policy discourses with sex workers' articulation of their experiences, to consider not only working practices but the process of engagement in sex work and personal aspirations, which all point to the relationship of relative agency to context and individual circumstances. In this section, therefore, I discuss key findings from the study under three sub-headings: diverse trajectories; perceptions of working conditions and processes; and negotiation of external constraints.

Diverse Trajectories

The study confirmed findings from other evidence discussed earlier showing varied modes of entry, patterns of re-entry and mobility between sectors. While six participants started their working life selling sex, the remainder had prior labour market experience and displayed multiple work pathways and shifts in status. With four exceptions, participants had worked in various employed or self-employed jobs outside the sex industry, including painting and decorating, catering and service work, clerical jobs, academic and voluntary sector work. More than a quarter (nine women and two men) had left sex work for a period of time, for reasons which included taking up alternative jobs, forming a new relationship or childrearing. Nine participants undertook sex work alongside employed or self-employed jobs in another field, either viewing this as a short-term or longer-term pathway, depending on factors such as their aspirations and job satisfaction. This work included running their own business, customer service work, healthcare, therapeutic massage and office work.

For some participants, sex work was seen as a positive decision, whereas for others, it presented a pragmatic solution to individual circumstances at a particular time. In certain instances, sex work represented the least worst option within a limited selection or in some cases a means of survival in response to particular events. The lack of other feasible pathways was a central consideration for five participants, who described their initial decision to work in the sex industry as pragmatic, because it was seen as preferable to low-paid service sector alternatives. For many participants, however, the reasons for considering sex work as a viable occupational route were instrumental and related to their longer-term aspirations, rather than being viewed solely as reactive to circumstances. For example, being able not only to fund studies or an internship but also the flexibility of sex work which enabled them to fit their work around other commitments were reasons mentioned by eight women and five men. Delia and Yulia (in their mid-20s), both migrant workers from other European countries, were financing their education in their home country through periodically working in parlours in the UK. Louise (21), a parlour worker, commented that, compared with previous jobs 'I get a month's worth of wages in a week…I've got more time for my daughter and I'm less ratty. It pays my student fees'. Ruby had her own business in another sector, but the recession was affecting it detrimentally. In order to bring in further funding to sustain her primary business, she debated several options before deciding on sex work:

> I cast my net wide and looked not just at sex work but across the board at what I've got skills at doing….just looked at all of my skill sets and what offered the biggest financial reward. (Ruby, 43, independent sex worker)

For these participants, sex work accommodated their current needs and increased their ability to pursue economic and social goals. While some participants took an instrumental approach to their involvement in sex work and saw themselves continuing in the business only until they met specific objectives, however, others had less clearly defined aims and

remained for longer. For 11 participants, sex work was seen as providing an opportunity to reflect on longer-term goals. For instance, Jemma, an independent escort, found that sex work:

> …gave me the opportunity of financial freedom, time freedom, doing something that I'm good at, that I enjoy doing… it gives me much more job satisfaction and the freedom to be able to focus on my studies, focus on other things… what I'm doing now is a stepping stone for me, to get me capital, and time and brain space to think about other things. (Jemma, 34, independent sex worker)

For ten participants, independent sex work was viewed as a longer-term prospect, particularly in circumstances where alternative options were seen as less favourable, in relation not only to financial but other benefits. Jessica, an independent worker who had previously worked in various manual and service sector jobs, now ran her own sex work business and saw herself as having developed a range of skills associated with her work, including computing and website development, financial management and organisational skills. Her quality of life had improved, due to the financial rewards and also the free time to pursue other interests:

> I can eat good fresh food every day and get as much sleep and rest as I need…I used to get four hours sleep a night and live on crap, because I worked three jobs and by the time I'd paid all me bills and mortgage and stuff I'd have about fifteen quid a week left. (Jessica, 38, independent sex worker)

For participants such as Jessica, sex work represented a positive as well as pragmatic direction, because of the relative freedom, autonomy and job satisfaction it offered compared with previous occupations. As she observed, 'I've got no chance of getting another job I like as much as this where I've got as much control over it and that pays as well as it does'. Nonetheless, for other participants with limited options, sex work was not necessarily seen as a preferred career but as the best of a narrow range of occupational routes available to them. Alexa, who had worked in the sex industry for more than 20 years and now managed a small working flat, observed that:

> …if you haven't got any qualifications, which I haven't, then you are in retail, shops, which pay a minimum wage. So that's what I'd be working for, a minimum wage. If I wasn't doing this. (Alexa, 47, parlour sex worker and manager)

Sasha had not entered the sex industry with a particular goal in mind and reflected that she might not have taken up sex work had her circumstances been different but had consequently found personal benefits from the work which also expanded her future options:

> I feel fine about the job, I don't feel fine about the sort of lack of opportunities that have meant that it's been my best option….but that's a whole heap of other stories. It's given me the freedom to do what I want, which means mostly my education…and looking after myself, you know, mentally and emotionally. (Sasha, 31, parlour worker)

While many participants had become involved in sex work to pursue specific financial goals, three entered the work because they were in financially and/or emotionally vulnerable circumstances at the time. For example, Aisha (19, parlour worker) had a criminal record unrelated to sex work and found herself with very limited job options as a result. She took up work in a massage parlour in preference to low-paid service sector alternatives. Martin had just left home and turned to agency work because he was in financial difficulties:

> And it really was your typical, kind of clichéd first prostitution situation, in that I didn't want to be doing it, I was desperate for the money. (Martin, 39, current independent sex worker)

Despite his early experiences, after which he pursued alternative career routes for several years, Martin returned to independent sex work some years later, when he was more in control of his financial circumstances. The second time when he saw himself as engaging with the work on his own terms and had more autonomy over his working conditions, he found it a more positive experience: '…the difference now, is that I really enjoy it'.

The circumstances influencing the trajectories described here were often associated with external constraints and in some cases vulnerability factors, but the degrees of agency exercised also related to individual ambitions and personal resilience. Participants reported a range of transitions into sex work, with no single model of participation emerging, and early experiences were not necessarily reflected in their later engagement in sex work. Moreover, the interview data did not indicate significant gender differences with regards to specific transitions or motivations for participating in sex work. Many of the trajectories described in the research contrasted with narratives of coercion and gendered exploitation and demonstrated the diversity in sex work and how sex workers negotiate their situation at different stages of their lives. Although the sample of migrant workers was relatively small, their diverse experiences also

reflect the findings of other studies (e.g. Agustín, 2003; Mai, 2009) which show that migrants to the UK sex industry have a range of reasons for undertaking the work. The research showed that individual agency is related to different factors, including age, experience, personal preferences, aspirations and also broader structural inequalities which may limit individual actions. Even when engaging in sex work as a reaction to constrained circumstances, participants had frequently considered feasible options before deciding to sell sexual services and all but two reflected on the degree of agency involved in their decision. The study builds on earlier work by Scambler (2007) and Sanders (2007), which categorised pathways into and from sex work and also Bowen's (2015) research, which highlights that engagement in sex work is not always a linear process and that sex workers may have dual jobs. It considers a range of occupational transitions in indoor-based sex work, influenced by aspirations, individual circumstances and structural factors, presenting a typology of pathways encompassing patterns of remaining within as well as leaving the sex industry, with a distinction between short-term and longer-term careers (Table 1). Some sub-categories may overlap: as with other jobs, people may change their attitude to their work during their lifetime and may sometimes leave sooner than anticipated or remain for longer than originally planned. Some may diversify into other sectors in the same industry and others may do sex work alongside jobs in the mainstream economy, as also noted by Bowen (2015).

Perceptions of Working Conditions and Processes in Indoor Sectors

As the study focused on sex work as an occupation, participants were asked about which factors contributed to or detracted from their job satisfaction. A common feature cited by all but two was the economic benefit, particularly because this gave them more time to pursue other interests or fulfil responsibilities. Other main contributory factors were social interaction (noted by 34 participants) and managing the encounter with clients to create a mutually enjoyable experience (23 participants). In all these categories of job satisfaction, no clear gender distinction emerged. There were instances when the factors which mattered most for enjoyment of the work could also detract from it. For example, while social engagement with clients was frequently mentioned as a source of job satisfaction, there were occasions when it could become tiring or stressful. While not wishing to claim that sex work is identical to other jobs, it may be argued there are common features shared by workers in many occupations, including the tensions between personal fulfilment from the challenges of the job and the strains of consistently maintaining a work persona. Independent self-employed workers were more likely than parlour workers to be in a position to turn down or cancel bookings if they did not feel up to working on particular days, although this also related to financial circumstances. As Rachel (30), an independent worker in a collective observed, sometimes the income foregone will present too great a loss and in these situations the worker might have to force him- or herself to carry on working. This is not dissimilar from workers' position in other sectors, however, although Martin noted that in the intimate setting of the sex work encounter, it is 'more difficult to fake it', whereas 'you can fake a smile, if you're working in a coffee shop'. The intensity of the one-to-one encounter in sex work may be more emotionally challenging than in other jobs with a customer focus.

Participants' job satisfaction also related to degrees of autonomy in their work. While this applied particularly to independent self-employed workers, who could in principle set their own terms and conditions, four participants working in parlours also compared sex work favourably with more highly supervised work they had undertaken outside the sex industry. Rebecca (27, parlour worker) felt she experienced greater autonomy in the small managed flat where she worked than she had in previous jobs with greater managerial control, where 'someone's telling you what to do and barking at you'. In part this related to the one-to-one encounter with the client in these settings where, as Cleo (45, independent sex worker and former parlour worker) noted, '…in a way you have your control, because when you're in the room with a client, you are in charge, you are the person there who's the professional'.

Table 1 Range of occupational transitions in sex work

Career pattern	Examples (related to aspirations/opportunities)
Interim pathways	Instrumentalist—planned length of time in sex work for specific goals, e.g. funding study, paying off debt
	Sex work as pragmatic option while considering further possibilities, reacting to circumstances
Multiple transitions	Shifting careers between different sectors or status, reactive or undecided
	Planned return, often linked to progression to more autonomous working style
	Parallel pathways: sex work alongside work in other sectors
Longer-term careers	Sex work as main occupation—e.g. comfortable with status, enjoying the work, lack of preferable alternatives, responding to external constraints
	Entrepreneurs: developing sex work business and/or peripheral ventures

The notion of 'control' over working conditions was thus raised in relation to both independent sectors and in establishments managed by a third party. More than three-quarters of participants also emphasised that job satisfaction from social interactions in their work was based on a premise of mutual respect between client and worker and, in some cases, between the worker and manager. Nonetheless, some described incidents where clients were seen as disrespectful, which could undermine participants' agency and control. Disrespectful conduct could relate to the language used in initial enquiries, non-observance of the terms of engagement set out by the worker on their website or during preliminary discussions, trying to haggle over prices or testing the worker's boundaries. This conduct was seen as unacceptable by participants in all settings. Parlours tended to set out expectations of both worker and client behaviour in their establishment rules, whereas independent workers often outlined expected conduct on their websites. For example, Elena noted:

> I've put this on my profile… don't like being called 'babe', you know, I want a message that is polite and respectful, and you telling me a bit about you. I don't want, you know, 'I've got the cash can we meet at 2 o'clock' or whatever, that's just not going to do it. You have to make an effort. (Elena, 35, independent sex worker)

Independent participants stated that in situations where clients showed disrespect, they would either be turned away or not given a repeat appointment. Jessica rejected a client who arrived after drinking heavily. Jake emphasised he would not normally see clients again 'if someone's arrogant and they're rude…or if someone is too aggressive'. Nonetheless, participants were aware that some circumstances might be beyond their control, despite their safety strategies. Five participants spoke of experiencing aggressive behaviour from certain clients, although they had usually calmed down the situation themselves; and three reported incidents of physical or sexual violence, which included non-consensual condom removal.

While participants were conscious of an element of risk in their work, they frequently normalised sex work as labour in their discussions, often comparing it with other work they had experienced. For example, Jem felt that for her there was little difference between sex work and other occupations in terms of customer relations:

> Working in the adult industry has all the same trappings as any job, repetitive, boring. Only the subject matter changes. I got as much abuse working for a bank or a mobile phone company as I do working in the adult industry, just as I get nice customers. (Jem, 27, independent sex worker)

Nonetheless, more than half of participants compared sex work favourably with previous jobs outside the sex industry. Eva (35) observed she felt more appreciated working as an agency escort than in her former sales job, which she again associated with relative autonomy and respect. Comparing sex work in a managed flat with previous office jobs, Sasha commented:

> It's much more skilled, it's much more challenging, it's much more interesting….and I'd say that…even aside from sort of social stigma, that I have more self-respect related to this job than to other jobs which I've done, where I was very unhappy, very bored. (Sasha, 31, parlour worker)

Participants related this difference in part to the emotional as well as physical intimacy of the sex work encounter, which required a range of skills and qualities to deliver a professional service. Jemma noted that the combination of emotional and interactive sexual labour was one of the elements of the job she enjoyed most:

> I'd say empathy…really good listening skills, really non-judgemental, kind, sort of open attitude …Being a really good conversationalist and being able to put people at ease… and then of course very good sexual skills as well, and the ability to take charge of a situation and read it, and be able to read people if they are a bit shy, or….whatever they want. And also be sexually open-minded and comfortable with yourself. And other people's sexuality. Which is a really interesting thing. (Jemma, 34, independent sex worker)

Although two participants emphasised they were less interested in emotional intimacy in their work, the interview data showed that sex workers of all genders often aimed to provide an interaction which made clients feel comfortable, valued and desirable. While this might sometimes involve a degree of acting, participants also wanted the experience to be rewarding for themselves, not only in terms of professional pride in giving a 'good' service but also increased job satisfaction. For instance, Angel, a transwoman, and Demetrio, a man working independently, spoke of their engagement in the intimate services they provided:

> …I'm quite proud of what I do, it's intimate, it's very intimate, it involves kissing and… just that sort of closeness that I suppose some guys just can't have. Which is hard, because it's acting on my part….but to them it is, they really *are* with a girlfriend. (Angel, 48, independent escort)

> …the kind of relationship that I establish with my clients is very…it's pretty much what they call the Boyfriend Experience, because I like to connect with the person I'm with….you know, to break this distance and…..feel comfortable and make the other person feel comfortable and then go with the flow. (Demetrio, 35, independent escort)

The intimacy and interactive nature of the encounter was also sometimes challenging for maintaining boundaries between the working and private self. Similar to sex workers in Abel's (2011) study, participants often saw the distinction they made between their working and private lives as indicative of their professionalism, as well as a means of managing their emotional health. The research discussed here showed degrees of intimacy and identity management in sexual labour, depending on the context and personal approaches to the work. As with other forms of intimate labour, such as caring occupations, the extent to which individual sex workers establish boundaries in their working relationships may be viewed as relating to a continuum of intimacy, which accommodates both commercial and non-commercial relations (Zelizer, 2005).

Negotiation of External Constraints: Stigma and the Policy Environment

Participants frequently mentioned stigma as impinging negatively on their job satisfaction, with 26 interviewees referring explicitly to the effects on their working practices, which included keeping their sex working status hidden, or disclosing it selectively to a few people. The long-term impact of stigma attached to working in the sex industry may affect workers' self-esteem and may be a reason for deciding to leave. Cleo felt this was the most problematic aspect of sex work: 'It's about social attitudes, it's about socially enforced isolation'. Susanna (35) spoke of being 'constantly on edge' because she kept her working status both as a receptionist in a parlour and previously as an escort secret from her family and friends. Although stigma may be an impetus for leaving sex work, sometimes the fear of exposure can limit alternative options and may present a barrier to moving on. For Tania:

> I think…my past will catch up with me. I'm scared of that, scared of going and getting a job and them finding out what I do or have done, and firing me. That's my worst fear, I'd rather, you know, not try, because the thought of being judged, when I give up…it's a scary thing that…your past will always haunt you. So it affects your whole life I think. (Tania, 30, independent sex worker)

Some participants expressed concern that dominant discourses perpetuating narrow stereotypes legitimised derogatory conceptions of sex workers in the media and public opinion:

> We're a very diverse group of people, from all different backgrounds, all different types of education, different types of working. And I think that the problem is, amongst some academics, among the media, amongst the "antis", they tend to concentrate on the worst examples of sex work (Christopher, 49, independent escort).

Jessica saw a tendency in some moral or abolitionist discourses to focus primarily on sex work rather than other occupations when discussing women and exploitation:

> …they [the media and abolitionist groups] never seem that interested in those of us who sort of do it and get on with it. I can never see why they think it's so strange that somebody would want to earn… maybe three hundred pound in two hours. And then not have to do anything for the rest of the week. You know and then they could get on with their studying and their [other] work….they don't think anything's strange about people working twenty odd hours in [a fast food chain] to earn half that. (Jessica, 38, independent sex worker)

While most participants viewed sex work as a form of labour, this did not always mean they perceived it as equivalent to other jobs. Nonetheless, as Pascal commented, one factor that distinguishes sex work from other occupations is not only the type of labour but also the policy and legal context, which both deny recognition and infantilise sex workers:

> …of course it's different [from other jobs]….and the law makes it very different...When you're a sex worker it's more than not being important, it's like people think that you're stupid, that you're…a victim…. It's like… whatever you can say…the system knows better for you. (Pascal, 29, independent sex worker)

This lack of recognition, when translated into state policies, could impede sex workers' ability to take precautions to protect themselves. For example, Eva pointed to the ways in which current laws in England relating to brothel management made it problematic to work independently but share premises with colleagues:

> …the fact that I can work alone in my flat, but if my friend comes and works in my flat for a few days a week

> we can both be charged for running a brothel…because I've been approached by a girl before who'd been attacked in her home. And she was looking for someone to work with her, 'cause she was terrified of working alone again. But had we done that, we would've run the risk of breaking the law. (Eva, 35, agency worker)

Discussion: Recognition, Social Justice and Sex Work

Although constricted labour market options and economic need are frequently presented as explanations for involvement in sex work, the research discussed here complements other recent studies (e.g. Brents et al., 2010; Benoit et al., 2017) which suggest that the diverse motivations for engaging with the sex industry may be seen as comparable to the range of reasons people have for entering any work. Bowen (2015) has pointed to the gaps in characterisations of transitions of sex workers, which fail to represent their varied approaches to the work, influenced not only by circumstances but also longer-term aspirations. Moreover, there has been a lack of acknowledgement that some people may undertake sex work alongside another job or career in the mainstream economy.

The research evidence shows that sex work may provide opportunities for higher earnings than in many jobs where formal qualifications are not a requirement and some people take a considered approach to their participation (Weitzer, 2009). While some may enter sex work because of limited options, they may find the earnings and free time from sex work give opportunities for self-development. As with precarious jobs in other sectors, people may drift in and out of sex work according to their immediate needs or use it to build up funds to pursue an alternative career. Thus circumstances may change, as may individuals' ability to make decisions about their working conditions and future direction. The pathways into, within and from sex work in this study may be seen as comparable to transitions in the broader labour market. For example, Bradley and Devadason (2008) in their typology of labour market transitions of young adults across different class backgrounds in a UK city observe that the extent to which they were able actively to make choices about their occupational pathway related to factors such as gender, education and economic circumstances. They note that transitions of young adults in contemporary labour markets may often involve movement between different jobs in the formal and informal economies. As the current study found, the trajectories of those engaging in sex work were often not dissimilar. The intersection of structure and agency influencing the pathways of sex workers has also been noted by others as being comparable to the decisions made by participants in other labour market sectors (Scambler, 2007; Benoit et al., 2017). While some theorists (e.g. Sanders, 2007; Oselin, 2014) have focused on transitions from sex work in the context of the processes of role exit, Bowen (2015) suggests that theories of exiting alone present a limited framework for understanding the experiences of those involved in sex work. Benoit et al. (2017) propose that involvement in sex work should be considered within an occupational choice framework, which would enable the complex reasons for transitions into different sectors of the sex industry to be situated within the context of the broader labour market.

Contrary to the policy discourses discussed earlier, control and relative autonomy were key factors for some research participants when considering how and where to engage in sex work. The relation of working conditions to job satisfaction of indoor-based sex workers is also noted in other studies (e.g. Bernstein, 2007; Perkins & Lovejoy, 2007; Sanders et al., 2018). The interviews highlighted a range of factors influencing the extent to which sex workers feel able to exercise control over their working conditions, related to individual circumstances as well as the work setting and external constraints. Moreover, despite varying experiences, nearly all participants normalised sex work as labour, comparing it with jobs undertaken in the mainstream economy. The findings show sex work is often seen as a short-term means of earning an income, from which people move of their own volition. In situations where individuals do feel 'trapped' in sex work, the impact of social stigma as much as limited opportunities for alternative work may be a key factor (Oselin, 2014). Policy discourses which present a homogenous picture of sex work as degraded and sex workers as passive victims do little to address the stigma they encounter but rather exacerbate its effects.

Despite a growing body of literature demonstrating similarities between pathways into sex work and other occupations, policy discourses have largely failed to acknowledge that transitions in the sex industry may be as diverse as those in the mainstream economy. Nor do many reports acknowledge that men or transgender people can also be subject to exploitation in sex work and that coercion and domination relate to specific working situations, as well as the circumstances and experiences of individual workers. Hallgrímsdóttir et al. (2008) note the enduring nature of social stigma of sex workers. Through repeated iterations, the dominant narrative of prostitution as essentially gendered violence, often inextricably linked to trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation, becomes inscribed into everyday understanding, despite the lack of a sound evidence base. This distinct treatment further excludes sex workers by treating them as 'other'. Moreover, the failure to recognise sexual labour as an occupation in many jurisdictions means sex workers are not entitled to labour protections and rights and have no option but to remain in a precarious informal employment relationship or work independently in isolation (Pitcher & Wijers, 2014).

The theories of recognition and representation proposed by Honneth (1995) and Fraser (2009) are useful explanatory devices for illuminating how state and abolitionist discourses deny sex workers a voice and exclude them from political space and policy debates that have a direct bearing on their working lives and wellbeing. For example, Honneth (1995) associates disrespect with denial of recognition, which can include social denigration and structural exclusion from certain rights in society. A key message from participants in the current study was the importance of respect. While this was emphasised in relation to expectations of clients or potential clients, of equal importance was how lack of recognition excludes sex workers from citizenship. The primary constraints to participants' job satisfaction and wellbeing were often external, particularly in relation to social stigma and policy/media discourses, where participants frequently felt misrecognised in abolitionist narratives of victimhood and slavery.

As Fraser (2009) has argued, misrecognition also relates to social justice. Misrecognition, particularly when institutionalised, denies political and social parity to groups conceived as 'other', who through their perceived deficiency are not treated as full members of society. Through emphasising vulnerability and victimhood in relation to women in sex work, neo-abolitionist narratives which also permeate many policy discourses detract from sex workers' agency by denying them participatory parity. Through purportedly addressing one form of social injustice, therefore, some feminist campaigns against prostitution may simply create other forms of injustice. When certain policy discourses are viewed alongside the expressed views of sex workers, there is a clear dissonance between these conceptualisations of sex workers as exploited and passive victims in desperate circumstances and sex workers' own voices, which show them as taking a more considered approach to their work, in terms of expectations of client behaviour, personal requirements of working conditions, job satisfaction and professional boundaries. It should be acknowledged that interview participants were a self-selecting sample and thus the research may not have encountered sex workers in less favourable indoor working conditions. Rather than seeking representativeness, however, the study was designed to consider ways in which sex workers interpret their experiences, and the diverse voices of participants discussed here provide a counterpoint to the narrow focus of dominant discourses. It is important not to neglect instances of exploitation or the context in which they occur, but these will not be addressed within a unidimensional account which fails to recognise varied experiences and circumstances. Fraser (2009) suggests that injustices of recognition need to be understood in relation to inequalities in the distribution of resources. This is of particular importance when considering sex work, given the economic and social conditions which often frame people's engagement in sex work. While people may have limited options which make the notion of 'choice' contentious, this does not mean they have no agency at all (Benoit et al., 2017).

Moreover, the translation of these discourses into state policies and laws which prohibit certain aspects of sex work or limit the capacity of sex workers to improve their working conditions can lead to unsafe working practices (Pitcher & Wijers, 2014). Nonetheless, while legal changes may help to advance sex workers' rights to a safe working environment, it is important also to consider how to shift the discourses which currently frame debates around sex work. The research findings suggest a need to move away from current narratives, which tend to conceptualise sex work in terms of binaries, such as voluntary/forced labour, legitimate/illegitimate work, and to develop an understanding of sex work as related to a continuum of working relations in intimate labour, incorporating degrees of exploitation and autonomy. It should also be noted that not all people who engage in sexual commerce identify as sex workers and broader analytical frameworks may be required to encompass sex workers' human and sexual rights (Cabezas, 2004). It is important to introduce policy measures which take into account the contextual nature of choice and exploitation, in order more effectively to make improvements to conditions in the sex industry (Benoit et al., 2017). Fraser's (2003) theorisation of (mis)recognition and (mal)distribution as two intersecting but differentiated spheres can help to reframe considerations of relative exploitation and control and ensure that mechanisms for addressing competing claims for recognition do not result in social injustice for any one group nor remove their ability to earn an income in a way which meets their circumstances and needs.

Conclusion

The study discussed here has provided examples of the diverse reasons individuals present for engaging in sex work, which present a clear contrast with many of the policy narratives which dominate debates on commercial sex. For many people, sex work was seen as a short-term means to meet specific goals, with participants tending to make pragmatic decisions on the basis of the relative financial and other benefits provided by the work. Similar to many other jobs, there are multiple variants in terms of working conditions and sectors. Theories of recognition and representation provide an alternative framework for debate which acknowledges the agency and diversity of those engaging in sex work, as well as the material conditions which contextualise their engagement in the industry. Furthermore, restructuring the debate in these terms affirms that the voices of sex workers should be central to the formulation and implementation of policies which directly affect their working lives.

In relation to this, it is important to consider how sex workers frame themselves, not only through their own struggles for recognition but also through research which explores diversity of experience and to contrast these with dominant policy discourses which appear to screen out their perspectives. At the same time, it is necessary to challenge claims of 'representativeness' which permeate the debates, which are also often based on small samples of sex workers in particular contexts, who may not reflect the broad spectrum of individuals engaging in sex work nor the range of working contexts. Reconceptualising policy debates around sex work in terms of relative autonomy, economic circumstances and degrees of exploitation in work would enable consideration of measures to address specific workplace inequalities and infringements of individuals' labour rights in diverse situations.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

The research study was approved by Loughborough University's Research Ethics Committee. The processes were guided by the University's ethical procedures and by confidentiality and informed consent protocols, including those of the British Sociological Association and the Social Research Association. Informed consent was obtained from all study participants. Protocols for informed consent included giving participants a participation information sheet explaining the research and consent form prior to interviews, ensuring they were aware of their rights to withdraw from the research at any point and setting out the conditions for their participation, which included assurances regarding confidentiality of interview data. The study took a participant-focused approach, which included encouraging participants to select their preferred pseudonym, undertaking member checks of interview transcriptions and feeding back preliminary research findings to participants to check validity. Interview participants were each offered a £15 voucher to thank them for giving up their time.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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