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### Queering the 'straight' line: Men's talk on paying for sex

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## Queering the 'straight' line: Men's talk on paying for sex

This paper presents a qualitative analysis of interviews conducted with eight men who identified as clients of women sex workers, but who also spoke about paying to secretly explore their sexual desires for trans women and men. I draw on queer theory to approach the question of how, and to what extent, men's paid sexual encounters functioned as sites where they could resist the constraints of compulsory heterosexuality and navigate more fluid sexual identities. Highlighting the complex nature and meanings of paying for sex that were reflected in the data, I argue that the secrecy of the paid sexual encounter provided a space for 'breaking out' of the confines of heterosexuality whilst simultaneously being the very thing that allowed men to stay 'in line' with what was expected of them within the heteronormative realities of their everyday lives.

**Sex work; clients; queer theory; bisexual; trans sex workers; masculinities**

## Introduction

For men in many societies across the world paying for sex tends to be a secretive affair (Huff, 2011). This certainly is the case in South Africa, where sex work is both fully criminalised and highly stigmatised. This paper presents a qualitative analysis of interviews conducted with eight men who identified as clients of women sex workers, for all of whom paying for sex was a closely guarded secret. These eight participants formed part larger study conducted with 43 South African men who pay women<sup>1</sup> for sex. These eight participants are distinct in that they all spoke about how they used their paid sexual encounters to explore and express sexual desires that fell outside of the boundaries of normative heterosexuality. In addition to narratives about paying women for sex, they shared narratives about sexual encounters with trans women and men. I draw on queer theory to approach the question of how, and to what extent, these paid sexual encounters operated as sites where men could negotiate and navigate more fluid sexual identities. I reflect upon some of the complexities surrounding questions of resistance to and compliance with compulsory heterosexuality that were entangled in men's narratives about paying for sex. This paper argues that while secrecy of the paid sexual encounter operated as space for 'breaking out' of the confines of heterosexuality, it was simultaneously the very thing that allowed men to stay 'in line' with what was expected of them within the heteronormative realities of their everyday lives.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term 'women' sex to refer to cisgender women

## Literature review

### *Queer Theory*

This paper is situated within a queer theory framework. Specifically, I apply Judith Butler's (Butler, 1999, 2008) concept of *performativity* and Sarah Ahmed's (2006) work on *orientation* to understanding men's narratives about paying for sex. Both Ahmed and Butler are interested in the role that the repetition of acts plays in the production of the gendered subject, arguing that we 'become' gendered through repeating certain, seemingly mundane, acts. Ahmed's (2006) notion of *orientation* focuses on theorising bodies and spatiality. She suggests that sexuality is about being directed or orientated, and that in heteronormative societies our bodies are directed, from a young age and throughout our lives, towards the opposite sex. Therefore, through our actions, like choosing a partner of the opposite sex or of the same race, we are going down a path that we have already been directed towards. Ironically, it is by walking along that path that the path exists; thus, there is a reciprocal maintenance of dominant white heterosexuality.

In her deconstruction of compulsory heterosexuality, Butler (1999) purports that hegemonic heterosexuality is inherently a copy of a copy, a constant effort to imitate and achieve idealised versions of itself. People constantly fail to live up to these idealised versions of heterosexuality because they are radically uninhabitable and unachievable positions. Both Ahmed and Butler incorporate resistance and change into their theorising. Butler suggests that gender norms are subverted when they are repeated in a parodic fashion or in a context that defies expectation. It is through performing 'bad' or 'faulty' versions of gendered identities that resistance and change are made possible. Following the argument that idealised versions of heterosexuality are largely unachievable and

1  
2  
3 uninhabitable<sup>2</sup> subject positions, we might then all perform ‘faulty’ versions of our  
4  
5 gendered identities, and these faulty repetitions have the potential to be subversive.  
6  
7 Ahmed (2006, p. 61) suggests that there are possibilities for ‘failed orientations’ – bodies  
8  
9 can take up spaces that they are not intended to inhabit and follow lines other than those  
10  
11 they have already taken, which can work towards the ‘reorientation’ of bodies and spaces  
12  
13 ‘where the “new” is possible’. This paper is concerned with locating and analysing these  
14  
15 moments of resistance or possibilities for ‘reorientation’ within men’s narrative about  
16  
17 paying for sex.  
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### 23 *Men’s constructions of paying women for sex*

24  
25 When considered collectively, the body of critical qualitative research on men who pay  
26  
27 women for sex suggests that broader patriarchal heteronormative discourses are  
28  
29 commonly reproduced and reinforced through men’s talk on paying for sex (Huysamen,  
30  
31 2016; Huysamen & Boonzaier, 2015; Sanders, 2008). For example, almost all studies  
32  
33 reviewed found that men justified paying for sex by drawing on the sexual drive discourse  
34  
35 (Hollway, 2001), a dominant discourse that constructs men as having a biological, urgent  
36  
37 and insatiable need for sex that must be regularly satisfied. Men also justified their paying  
38  
39 for sex based on their desire for ‘no strings attached sex’ (e.g. Chen, 2005; Huysamen &  
40  
41 Boonzaier, 2015; Plumridge, Chetwynd, Reed, et al., 1997). Men constructed femininity  
42  
43 and female sexuality, again aligning with dominant heterosexual discourses, as being  
44  
45 primarily interested in sex as a means to secure committed relationships and emotional  
46  
47 and financial support from men (Hollway, 2001). Research has also repeatedly  
48  
49 highlighted men’s desire for emotionality and authenticity within the client-sex worker  
50  
51 encounter (Bernstein, 2001; Chen, 2005; Earle & Sharpe, 2008; Holzman & Pines, 1982;  
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60 <sup>2</sup> And undesirable for many.

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2  
3 Huschke & Schubotz, 2016; Huysamen & Boonzaier, 2015; Jordan, 1997; Katsulis, 2010;  
4  
5 Kong, 2015; Milrod & Weitzer, 2012; Plumridge, Chetwynd, Reed, & Gifford, 1997;  
6  
7 Sanders, 2008, 2012; Seabrook, 2001). To create this desired intimacy and emotionality,  
8  
9 many men said they sought the kind of sexual encounter, often referred to as ‘the  
10  
11 girlfriend experience’, that most closely mimicked traditional heterosexual dating scripts  
12  
13 (Bernstein, 2007; Chen, 2005; Huff, 2011; Milrod & Weitzer, 2012; Sanders, 2008). In  
14  
15 light of men’s seemingly contradictory need for both no strings attached’ sex and  
16  
17 intimacy and emotionality, Bernstein (2001) developed the term *bounded authenticity*,  
18  
19 arguing that paying for sex is appealing to men because it provides them with the intimacy  
20  
21 of a genuine relationship, but within boundaries that insulate them from the undesirable  
22  
23 obligations and commitments associated with femininity in our heteropatriarchal society.  
24  
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28  
29 While this qualitative research on clients has addressed the ways in which  
30  
31 heterosexual discourses filter through men’s narratives of paying women for sex, it  
32  
33 appears that moments of ‘breaking out’, where men’s narratives transgress or complicate  
34  
35 the boundaries of heterosexuality, have been largely neglected within this dominant  
36  
37 research paradigm. However, research on men who pay trans women for sex reveals a  
38  
39 more complex picture of male clients’ sexual desires.  
40  
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42  
43

#### 44 ***Men who pay transsexual women for sex***

45  
46 Sex industry websites and forums across the world, including South Africa, are filled with  
47  
48 discussions about, and advertisements for, trans sex workers. However, research on men  
49  
50 who pay trans women for sex is very limited, and it tends to be primarily focused on the  
51  
52 Southeast Asian sex industry (e.g. Jackson & Sullivan, 1999; Totman, 2011). Although  
53  
54 men may pay all kinds of trans women for sex there is one kind of trans body that is  
55  
56 particularly desired and highly visible within the sex industry. To be successful in the sex  
57  
58 industry, trans women should appear extremely feminised in their features – usually  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 having breasts and other distinctive, traditionally attractive hyper-feminine characteristics  
4  
5 – but they must also retain their penis (Kulick, 1997; Lim, 2015; Weinberg & Williams,  
6  
7 2010). In addition to various iterations of the category ‘transsexual women’, trans sex  
8  
9 workers are often referred to and describe themselves as ‘shemales’, ‘chicks with dicks’,  
10  
11 or ‘ladyboys’<sup>3</sup> on sex industry websites and advertisements (See Vartabedian (2017) who  
12  
13 presents a discursive analysis of websites where trans women advertise their services in  
14  
15 Portugal and the UK).  
16  
17

18  
19 The little research that does explore how men make meaning of their paid sexual  
20  
21 encounters with trans women shows that the typical client identifies as heterosexual,  
22  
23 although some men identify as bisexual (Kulick, 1997; Reback & Larkins, 2006;  
24  
25 Weinberg & Williams, 2010; Winter & King, 2011). These studies suggest that men  
26  
27 manage their heterosexual identities in relation to paying trans women for sex in various  
28  
29 ways. Kulik (1997), drawing on his ethnographic work in Brazil, and Winter and King  
30  
31 (2011), drawing on their work in South and East Asia, show how, in both these contexts,  
32  
33 a man’s gender and sexuality is generally not defined according to his anatomy, but rather  
34  
35 by what he does with that anatomy. Unlike in many Western cultures, where a rigid  
36  
37 heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy exists, it is the act of penetration that makes  
38  
39 someone masculine regardless of whether the body they penetrate is male or female.  
40  
41 Thus, rather than simply having sex with another man, it is only through being penetrated  
42  
43 by a man that a person would be understood as homosexual or as not being a man.  
44  
45 Transsexual sex workers who are regularly penetrated by their clients are thus, by  
46  
47 definition, ‘not men’, and the act of penetrating a transsexual sex worker would not be  
48  
49 deemed a homosexual act. Both studies found that the act of penetrating trans women  
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58  
59 <sup>3</sup> The term ‘shemale’, which was the term most commonly used by participants in the current  
60 study, is often considered offensive as it disregards trans people’s personal gender identity while emphasising their ‘biological’ sex (Vartabedian, 2017).



1  
2  
3 could actually bolster men's identities as heterosexual men, rather than call it into  
4 question (Kulick, 1997). In the United States, Weinberg and Williams (2010) and Reback  
5 & Larkins (2006) found that men who identified as heterosexual could pay for sex with a  
6 transsexual woman without it negating their heterosexual self-identity as long as they did  
7 not engage with, or express desire for, the transgender women's penis, but rather  
8 emphasised their desire for her breasts and feminine features. The body of work on men  
9 who pay transsexual women for sex shows how the sex work industry might open up  
10 possibilities for pushing the boundaries of heterosexuality. However, Weinberg and  
11 Williams (2010, p. 381) argue that, while the men in these studies 'deconstruct'  
12 patriarchal understandings of sexuality and desire in some ways, they simultaneously  
13 'also put it back together again' through phallogocentric definitions of male sexuality and  
14 by valorising cultural ideals of feminine beauty. This body of literature foregrounds  
15 important questions around how, and to what extent, men's paid sexual encounters might  
16 offer opportunities for resisting and queering the strict boundaries of normative  
17 heterosexuality.

## 38 **Methods**

### 41 *Recruitment*

42 Participants were recruited into the project via two online classified websites, Gumtree  
43 (www.gumtree.co.za) and Locanto (www.locanto.co.za). I posted an advertisement on  
44 each of these platforms stating that I was a doctoral student from the University of Cape  
45 Town looking to interview men who had paid women for sex about their experiences. I  
46 provided an email address where anyone interested in the project could contact me. No  
47 compensation for participation was offered, yet within the first few days of posting the  
48 advertisements, emails from men wanting to hear more about the project flooded in.

### *Participants*

Forty-three South African men who identified as clients of women sex workers participated in the broader study from which this paper emerges. This paper, however, is based on the narratives of only eight of these participants. These eight participants differed from the broader sample because, in addition to their experiences of paying women for sex, they spoke about their experiences of paid sexual encounters with transsexual women and/or men.<sup>4</sup> These eight men ranged between the age of 28 and 57, with a mean age of 40.<sup>5</sup> All but one of the men were either married to a woman at the time of the interview or had been married in the past. Most men defined themselves as financially 'comfortable' or well-established and described professional careers.

### *Data collection*

Interviews were either conducted face-to-face in public cafes or restaurants or by using instant text messenger (IM) applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Gmail chat. I communicated with participants over text on a real time basis, providing a passport style photograph of myself as my profile picture.

The overall interview process was informed by a narrative research approach (Riessman, 2008) as I was interested in how participants constructed and managed their identities through the stories they told. I aimed to ask open-ended questions such as 'tell me about your first experience of paying for sex' that invited participants to tell detailed stories about their personal experiences of paying for sex, allowing them to lead the

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<sup>4</sup> Four men said they paid women, men, and trans sex workers; two men said they paid only women and trans women sex workers; and two men said they paid only women and men sex workers.

<sup>5</sup> The demographic characteristics of these men did not differ from the broader sample, for example, the mean age of the broader sample was 41 years.

1  
2  
3 interview and determine its pace, tone, and content. However, in reality the interviews  
4  
5 varied along a continuum from being relatively unstructured to being semi-structured,  
6  
7 depending on the ease with which individual participants conversed.  
8  
9

10 As a whole, face-to-face interviews tended to elicit longer, more detailed  
11  
12 narratives. Text-based IM interviews tended to be more structured and participants and I  
13  
14 were also inclined to converse in shorter sentences, often using the simple or shortened  
15  
16 vernacular that is characteristic of text messaging. However, online IM interviews also  
17  
18 invited a level of disclosure that face-to-face interviews seldom did. Thus, it is perhaps  
19  
20 unsurprising that 6 of the 8 participants who spoke about their non-heteronormative  
21  
22 sexual experiences had been interviewed via IM applications.  
23  
24  
25

### 26 27 ***Data analysis***

28  
29 I did not employ a set step-by-step framework for data analysis. Instead, my approach to  
30  
31 data analysis was eclectic and intuitive. I identified the discursive patterns in participants'  
32  
33 talk by employing an approach to discourse analysis that could be defined as a 'sensitivity  
34  
35 to language rather than as a "method"' (Parker, 2004, p. 310). Discourse, as it has been  
36  
37 employed here, is understood as a system of meaning for understanding, experiencing,  
38  
39 and acting in the world. Discourse regulates behaviour, stipulates how ideas about certain  
40  
41 subjects are put into practice, and establishes rules that restrict alternative ways of talking  
42  
43 about or conducting ourselves (Foucault, 1995). My analysis was also informed by a  
44  
45 narrative approach, in the sense that I was careful to keep the narratives that participants  
46  
47 told intact where possible, viewing these stories as strategic and functional and as units  
48  
49 of analysis (Riessman, 2008). I used this eclectic analytic approach to organise my data  
50  
51 thematically: identifying common themes and subthemes and retuning to, re-organising,  
52  
53 and refining these themes repeatedly.  
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## Discussion of findings

### *Paid sex and expressing queer desires*

I entered into the research process with a number of assumptions about my participants. Because they had all arrived for interviews advertised as being about men who pay women for sex, and because the majority were in heterosexual relationships, I was quick to label them as heterosexual men. However, these eight participants told stories and shared desires that complicated and pushed the boundaries of compulsory heterosexuality. I was reminded that identities are slippery, and that people often fail to sit perfectly within the binaries and boxes society prescribes (Humphreys, 1975; Kinsey, 1948; Reback & Larkins, 2006).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, for these eight participants, their sexualities were more complicated than an unequivocal desire for the ‘opposite sex’.

In the excerpt below, Kyle talks about the tensions between his sexual desires and his social identity as a heterosexual man:

Kyle: Indians are very conservative and fear what people think of them. I wish I can be stronger and be more expressive of my feelings towards shemales or males for that matter...

Interviewer: Am I right in assuming that you have kept paying for sex a secret from your wife?

Kyle: Yes

Interviewer: What do you think she would have to say if you told her about it?

Kyle: Probably would end our relationship...

Interviewer: What is it that you have enjoyed so much about your encounters with shemales, you have said it is one of your ideal experiences?

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<sup>6</sup> For example, see Savin-Williams and Vrangalova (2013) whose review of empirical research on the ‘mostly heterosexual’ sexual orientation category reflects some of the difficulties and challenges researchers have encountered in trying to define, and place participants neatly within, this sexual orientation category.

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2  
3 Kyle: The feminine side of a man, something I can't reveal. I want to  
4 be able to do that without reprise... If I could go back 22 years, I  
5 may not have chosen women. I may not have gotten married. I  
6 would have experimented more with my sexuality.  
7  
8

9  
10 *(Kyle, 39, Indian, married: Instant Messenger)*  
11  
12  
13

14 This excerpt highlights a common theme in the data: the tensions between participants'  
15 cultural and social identities as heterosexual men and their actual sexual desires. Kyle's  
16 narrative reflects the frustration he feels as a result of the conflict between his need to  
17 conceal his sexual desires from his family and his wish to openly express these desires  
18 without constraint. Throughout the interview, Kyle repeatedly spoke about wanting to  
19 exit his marriage and further explore his sexuality, but explained that divorce would be  
20 considered unacceptable, and homosexuality unthinkable, within his community. This  
21 meant that his desires remained a secret and left him feeling 'trapped' within his marriage.  
22  
23

24 Drawing on Ahmed (2006) and Butler's (1999) work, this narrative illustrates  
25 how bodies come to be policed and kept 'in line' through social structures that pathologise  
26 and limit 'unruly' sexual practices that fall outside of dominant conventions of  
27 compulsory heterosexuality. What the disciplining or policing of these deviating acts or  
28 bodies does is produce a false stabilisation and naturalisation of heterosexuality that  
29 conceals the fact that there is often not a coherent flow, or straight line, from sex to gender  
30 to sexual desire (Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 1999). This is certainly the case in Kyle's narrative  
31 and broader life story, where, to the outsider, he appears to be a traditional heterosexual  
32 Indian man with a wife and a child. However, stories like Kyle's show how discontinuities  
33 'run rampant' (Butler, 2008, p. 185) within heterosexual contexts. Kyle is a man in a  
34 heterosexual marriage, he speaks about wanting to have sex with men and transsexual  
35 women, and he describes his desire to reveal the 'feminine side of a man'.  
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3 Like Kyle, all of the other participants spoke about having sexual desires which  
4 they felt unable to express and explore in their 'ordinary' lives. These restrictive  
5 boundaries and limits within their ordinary lives made paid sexual encounters desirable  
6 spaces. Participants spoke about how paid sexual encounters with women sex workers  
7 offered them a unique space where they could safely explore and express their sexual  
8 desires for the first time:  
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19 Interviewer: Have you learned anything about sex or about your sexuality  
20 through paying for sex?  
21

22 Mohamed: I learnt that you never know if you're gonna enjoy it until u try it.  
23 Also I learned that I am bi-curious.  
24

25 Interviewer: Ok interesting. Quite a few guys have told me that they found out  
26 that they were interested in more than just women through sex  
27 work. Could you tell me more about this?  
28

29 Mohamed: For me it's not only about sex. It's about the company and  
30 conversations you have with the lady. The right lady will not only  
31 talk to you but also listen to you. You can completely be yourself  
32 and have no fear of being judged. It's in these talks that all your  
33 fantasies and fetishes come out.  
34  
35  
36  
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39

40 Interviewer: Ok I see, so it's a much less judgemental space  
41

42 Mohamed: I think everyone is curious about same-gender sex. Very few  
43 people talk about it and even fewer explore it.  
44

45 *(Mohamed, 37, IT specialist, Indian, divorced: Instant*  
46 *messenger)*  
47  
48  
49

50  
51 Mohamed challenges heteronormative assumptions by suggesting that 'everyone is  
52 curious about the same-gender sex'. Although Mohamed argues that having homoerotic  
53 desires is not unusual, he suggests that feeling that one is able to acknowledge and act on  
54 these desires *is* unusual for many men. For Mohamed, the paid sexual encounter provided  
55 exactly this, a space where he could express and explore these desires for the first time.  
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1  
2  
3 Mohamed explains how a women sex worker could provide a man like himself  
4 with a safe, supportive, and non-judgemental environment where his fantasies and  
5 fetishes could ‘come out’. He suggests that the ‘right lady will not only talk to you but  
6 also listen to you’. Here the sex worker’s duty goes beyond performing a purely sexual  
7 service: providing this safe space for the client is part of the ‘emotion work’ (Weitzer,  
8 2005) entailed in their work. Hochschild (2003, 2012), who assesses the North American  
9 middle class’ increasing consumption of personal intimate services provided by those  
10 working as, amongst others, nannies, carers, and personal trainers, argues that emotions  
11 become commodities and intimacy a marketable service. Her work is helpful in  
12 understanding the emotional aspects of the work that sex workers do (Bernstein, 2001;  
13 Earle & Sharpe, 2008a; Hoang, 2010). Sanders (2008, p. 413) suggests, ‘the sex industry  
14 is not simply about selling sex and sexual fantasies’; rather it is also about attending to  
15 the emotional needs of male clients.  
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33 On a more material level, participants explained that women sex workers would  
34 assist in preparing them to have penetrative sex with a man or trans sex worker for the  
35 first time. This was done by, for example, performing ‘prostrate massages’ for clients, as  
36 Mohamed suggested, or introducing them to penetration through the use of sex toys.  
37 Kyle explained that ‘Sex toys were used on me... I feel I’m ready for the real thing now’.  
38 Some of the men said that women sex workers had arranged for a male or trans sex worker  
39 to join them for their first sexual encounter – women sex workers again playing a  
40 supportive, facilitative roles in the men’s sexual exploration. These narratives show how  
41 what would seem to be an essentially heterosexual encounter (men paying women sex  
42 workers) in fact becomes the very space that makes possible the imagining of other kinds  
43 of sexualities and sexual experiences. The emotional labour provided by women sex  
44 workers helped facilitate men’s future non-heterosexual paid encounters. In Mohamed’s  
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3 narrative there is a sense of change or ‘becoming’ as he tells of how the paid sexual  
4  
5 encounter provided a space where desire for other kinds of bodies first became possible,  
6  
7 a space where he ‘learned’ that he was ‘bi-curious’.  
8  
9

### 10 11 ***Paid sex and “Becoming” bisexual*** 12

13  
14 Men’s identification with ‘bisexual’ identity was a prominent theme across these  
15  
16 interviews. Four participants used the labels ‘bisexual’, ‘bi’ or ‘bi-curious’ to define their  
17  
18 sexual identity and one participant described himself as ‘pansexual’. As Mohamed’s  
19  
20 narrative above elucidates, these men spoke about how their paid sexual encounters were  
21  
22 instrumental in them becoming fully conscious of, or fully identifying with, their  
23  
24 bisexuality. The excerpt below, from an interview with Eric, presents another narrative  
25  
26 that illustrates how the paid sexual encounter offers possibilities for ‘becoming’,  
27  
28 specifically in relation to a bisexual identity.  
29  
30  
31  
32  
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34

35 Eric: [The difference between] what you see online and what you get  
36  
37 in real life makes you scared sometimes.... You walk in then  
38  
39 there is other men [clients] in the place, that’s not on for me. Or  
40  
41 the place is dirty or it is not a women but a man.

42 Interviewer: Ok, so you have arrived for an appointment and found that the  
43  
44 person you were meant to be seeing is actually a man?

45 Eric: Yes, it’s not what you expect when you think you going to touch  
46  
47 some pussy and there is a cock. I am shy but I am a strait forward  
48  
49 man, so I say what I want and don't think twice or don't like to  
50  
51 bullshitted.

52 Interviewer: So what happened in that case, when you realised it was a guy?  
53  
54 I've spoken to a few people who have had experiences with trans  
55  
56 sex workers.  
57  
58  
59  
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2  
3 Eric: He already gave me a BJ, she was a eastern lady/man. When the  
4 panties came off and I saw it was a hard-on down there I got up  
5 and dressed and left, but afterwards I actually enjoyed it.  
6  
7

8 Interviewer: Do you mean looking back you actually enjoyed the experience  
9 with the trans sex worker?  
10

11 Eric: Yes. I did and I have gone at later stage and had sex with her/him  
12 (*Eric, 41, white, IT specialist, married: Instant Messenger*)  
13  
14  
15  
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17

18 This is a narrative about Eric becoming something other than what he was when he arrived  
19 for the paid sexual encounter. It is a story about accidentally arriving to the ‘wrong’ kind  
20 of sexual encounter, one that was different to what he had expected, and one that did not  
21 fit neatly with his heterosexual social identity. It is a story about finding that this ‘wrong’  
22 sexual encounter actually felt quite right and pleasurable. In this sense, it is a story of  
23 *reorientation* – the kind of sex that Eric initially constructed as so undesirable that he ‘got  
24 up and left’ became the kind of sexual encounter that he later returned for (Ahmed, 2006).  
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34 Eric became the kind of man who paid trans women for sex.  
35

36 Participants’ desire for trans sex workers had very specific implications for how  
37 they understood and defined their sexualities – it meant that they were ‘bisexual’. This is  
38 elucidated when, as the conversation with Eric continues, he explicitly defines his desire  
39 bisexuality in terms of his desire for trans women:  
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48 Interviewer: How do you see sex with them [trans women], like how would  
49 you define it? I know some of the people I have spoken to have  
50 sex with shemales say that they are bisexual, but others say that  
51 they are not, and it’s the same as having sex with a woman. How  
52 do you see it?  
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3 Eric: Well you have to [be] bisexual if you have sex with them. It  
4 actually wakes up something in you to be able to able to penetrate  
5 and have your hands stoke their penis at the same time and then  
6 after it all you know it is a man sucking you and you know you  
7 are enjoying it all the way.  
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14 Interviewer: Ok, so that has actually made you realised something about  
15 yourself and your sexuality that you didn't really know before?  
16  
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19 Eric: Yes, that I am Bi!  
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23

24 In the interviews I tried to explore whether, as other research has found, having sex with  
25 trans women sex workers might be compatible with a heterosexual identity (Kulick, 1997;  
26 Reback & Larkins, 2006; Weinberg & Williams, 2010; Winter & King, 2011). However,  
27 for all participants who paid trans women for sex, it was not. Their desire for trans bodies  
28 was understood to be a signifier or expression of their bisexuality; those desires meant  
29 that they 'have to be bisexual'.  
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37 Not all participants constructed their bisexuality in line with dominant definitions  
38 the term, as the sexual desire for both the same and 'opposite' sex. As the following  
39 extract illustrates, both Gerry and Eric's constructions of their bisexuality did not include  
40 the desire for the masculine or male body. In fact, it specifically excluded the desire for  
41 men:  
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51 Gerry: Btw I'm also bisexual  
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53 Interviewer: ok and do you also make use of male sex workers then?  
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55 Gerry: Shemales yes. But not often tho.  
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3 Interviewer: How does the experience compare to having sex with a working  
4 girl?  
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6  
7 Gerry: V different lol. I'm a bottom so I receive anal...Difficult to  
8 explain but I like having a cock inside me  
9

10  
11 Interviewer: Some of the guys I've spoken to who use shemales don't see  
12 themselves as bisexual or gay, because they see them as woman,  
13  
14 just with different genitalia. how do you see it?  
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17  
18 Gerry: Lol that's a matter of opinion. I openly admit that I'm bi.  
19

20  
21 Interviewer: And do you ever pay men for sex? other than shemales?  
22

23  
24 Gerry: No, I don't!  
25

26  
27 (*Gerry, 37, Indian, Call centre analyst, Married: Instant*  
28  
29 *Messenger*)  
30  
31

32  
33 Whilst four men said that they paid men and trans women for sex, Gerry and Eric very  
34 explicitly stated that did not have sex with men. Rather than bisexuality meaning a desire  
35 for men *and* women, Gerry and Eric constructed their bisexual identity purely in terms of  
36 their desire for transsexual women's bodies. Their sexual desire for a soft femininity  
37 together with the 'hard' phallus in one sexual encounter, the combination <sup>7</sup> of masculinity  
38 and femininity within *one* body, is what defined their bisexuality.  
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#### 48 ***The functions of the secrecy and silence of the paid sexual encounter***

49  
50 The secrecy and silence around the paid sexual encounter is a theme that flowed steadily  
51 through all eight participants' narratives. For these men, the fact that they had  
52 experimented, or desired to experiment, outside the strict boundaries of heterosexuality  
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59 <sup>7</sup> As Kyle described it, 'the feminine side of a man', or Mohamed put it, the 'Best of both  
60 worlds. Cock 'n tits'.

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3 was a safely guarded secret – as Jabu (28, Engineer: Instant Messenger) suggested, ‘I  
4 can’t even talk to a friend of mine coz I have to protect my girlfriend’ and Gerry said, ‘no  
5 one knows my preference’. All eight of these men valued their paid sexual encounters for  
6 the sense of safety that this secrecy ensured. In the excerpt below, Richard, who identifies  
7 as ‘pansexual’, highlights the value that the secrecy of the paid sexual encounter may  
8 hold for men in terms of negotiating and maintaining their heterosexual social identities:  
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19 Men pride themselves on how many chicks they’ve fucked and the story and the high  
20 five and that pride. Whereas for a man to be prepared to be physically or sexually  
21 engaged with another guy that’s a huge step for them. Because they’re worried not  
22 only what the other guys are thinking, they’re worried about what the girls are  
23 thinking.... So now you have a scenario where you have a couple, a guy and a girl...  
24 for the woman it will be easier to be curious and say let’s explore that curiosity. Now  
25 the guy is like shit, I would like to explore that curiosity as well. But what happens  
26 if I tell her? I’ll alienate her because she’ll think I’m gay or I’m not man enough  
27 anymore or it’s repellent to her... Do you go and explore this curiosity on the side  
28 yourself?... By paying somebody... to do this occasionally on the side and see how  
29 it works for you. And then keep your other, the other persona at home. The  
30 perception which you, you created for people.  
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40 *(Richard, 43, white, divorced: Face-to-face)*  
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44 Richard’s narrative reflects his understanding of the fragility of hegemonic masculinity  
45 and how intimately it is tied to, and dependent upon, the expression of unfaltering  
46 heterosexual desire (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2004). Richard speaks of his fear that the  
47 mere knowledge of his homoerotic desire would alienate a female partner because ‘she’ll  
48 think I’m gay or I’m not man enough anymore’. Richard draws on the dominant discourse  
49 that equates homoerotic desire with being ‘gay’; being ‘gay’ is in turn equated with  
50 emasculation or not being ‘man enough’. Ahmed (2006, p. 71) suggests that, ‘the line of  
51 straight orientation takes the subject toward what it “is not” and what it “is not” then  
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3 confirms what it “is”. Thus, in order to be recognisable as a successful man, a man must  
4  
5 explicitly express and prove that he does *not* desire other men, because to desire men is  
6  
7 seen to be feminine in a heteronormative society.  
8  
9

10 Kimmel (2004, p. 188) argues that one of men’s greatest fears is that other men  
11  
12 might expose them as having homosexual desires, suggesting that ‘this is the great secret  
13  
14 of American Manhood: *we are afraid of other men*’. However, this data suggests that men  
15  
16 feel similarly threatened by women. Richard’s narrative shows that men value paid sexual  
17  
18 encounters as a space where they can express and explore their sexualities without the  
19  
20 fear of being exposed, rejected, or ridiculed by their female partners. Similarly, Huschke  
21  
22 and Schubotz (2016), in their study on Irish men who pay for sex, present a case study of  
23  
24 a male participant who identified as a heterosexual cross-dresser and found that paying  
25  
26 for sex offered him a non-judgemental space to fulfil these desires without having to  
27  
28 broach this aspect of his sexuality within his other heterosexual relationships.  
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33 Bernstein (2001), in her theory of *bounded authenticity*, suggests that paid sex  
34  
35 provides men with an opportunity to have their sexual and emotional needs met in a  
36  
37 context that insulates them from any undesirable responsibilities and commitments  
38  
39 commonly associated with female sexuality. This paper contributes to and builds upon  
40  
41 existing knowledge on what it is that men pay for when they pay for sex: the paid sexual  
42  
43 encounter provides some men with an opportunity to have their non-heteronormative  
44  
45 sexual and emotional needs met in a context that insulates them from the undesirable  
46  
47 threats to their heterosexual social identities that would result from realising these desires  
48  
49 elsewhere. The boundedness of the paid sexual encounter allowed these men to  
50  
51 compartmentalise their sexual identities. Richard, for example, is able to express his  
52  
53 sexual desires and enact his personal pansexual identity, while still being able to ‘keep’  
54  
55 the heterosexual ‘persona’ that he created at ‘home’ for the benefit of others. His choice  
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3 of the word 'persona' is significant. The word is typically used to denote a social role or  
4 a character played by an actor, and has its etymological origins in the Latin term *persona*,  
5 a mask worn by an actor (Bishop, 2007). Thus, Richard's narrative suggests that paying  
6  
7 for sex meant that he could engage in the kinds of sex he desired while still being able to  
8 wear the mask and uphold the façade of a neat and tidy heterosexuality. Consequently, it  
9  
10 can be argued that, while paid sex allows men a space in which they can deviate from the  
11 straight line of heterosexuality, it is also the very thing that allows them to maintain the  
12 illusion that this straight line exists in the first place.  
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### 23 **Concluding comments**

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26 When bodies take up spaces that they were not intended to inhabit, something  
27 other than the reproduction of facts of the matter happens. The hope that  
28 reproduction fails is the hope for new impressions, for new lines to emerge.  
29 (Ahmed, 2006, p. 62)  
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33

34 This paper has argued that men's paid sexual encounters provided safe spaces where they  
35 were able to acknowledge and express their non-heteronormative desires. Whether it be  
36 relying on women sex workers to groom and ready them for their first non-heterosexual  
37 sexual experience or arriving to the 'wrong' kinds of sexual encounters only to find that  
38 it felt right, I argue that that the paid sexual encounter can become a *reorientation device*.  
39 A space that usually facilitates the kind of sex that heterosexual men and women usually  
40 do became the very space where these men felt able to explore desires for different kinds  
41 of bodies, opening up possibilities for non-heteronormative paid sexual encounters.  
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52 However, this paper has also illustrated that these paid sexual encounters  
53 operated as safe spaces largely because they were secret and bounded spaces where  
54 deviations from a compulsory heterosexuality remained concealed from everyone else. It  
55 was the secrecy of these paid sexual encounters that allowed men maintain to others the  
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3 illusion of a neat and tidy heterosexuality. The discussion around men's identification as  
4 bisexual showed how paid sexual encounters may have offered opportunities for  
5 *reorientation*, providing a safe space where men could explore and reassess their sexual  
6 orientations, with many emerging with a stronger sense of being something other than  
7 'heterosexual'. However, these men valued these paid spaces specifically because they  
8 allowed them to fulfil their sexual desires without having to reorient themselves in  
9 relation to their wives, families, friends, and communities. Men's paid sexual encounters  
10 thus represent an interplay between resistance to, and complicity with, compulsory  
11 heterosexuality, highlighting the complex and contradictory nature and meanings of  
12 paying for sex. Indeed, these complexities and contradictions are themselves important:  
13 as Henriques et al. (2002, pp. 430–431) suggest, 'every relation and every practice to  
14 some extent articulates such contradictions and therefore is a site of potential change as  
15 much as it is a site of reproduction'.

16  
17 Finally, this paper has illustrated how, as researchers, we might find that our  
18 participants come to queer our research, and how, as a result, our research itself might  
19 become something other than what it was originally intended to be. These eight men  
20 arrived for interviews that had been designed to collect narratives about paying women  
21 for sex. They made the research 'messy' by arriving to tell different kinds of stories to  
22 the ones for which the interviews had originally been intended, thereby shifting the kind  
23 of knowledge that was produced within those interviews. Our participants may even queer  
24 our future research, allowing for new lines of research to emerge. For example, Monro,  
25 Hines and Osborne (2017), in their review of sexualities scholarship between 1970 and  
26 2015, show how bisexual identity and experience has largely been underrepresented and  
27 thus invisibilised by the social sciences. Thus, participants' narratives about bisexuality,  
28 which arrived unexpectedly and took up space in interviews that were intended for  
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3 heterosexual stories, can be seen as moments of ‘talking back’ to this kind of silencing  
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5 by social science research. These men’s unruly narratives serve as a firm reminder of the  
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7 importance of ensuring that we give voice to bisexual experience, and indeed other  
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9 marginalised experience, through our research and scholarship on sex work.  
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