

Elucidating the discursive landscape of sex work in Johannesburg, South Africa

Abstract

In discussions about sex work, two dominant views are evident: Sex workers freely choose to sell sex as a means of earning an income or sex workers are victims of circumstances, driven into the sex industry through coercion or dire poverty. Both these views oversimplify the actuality of sex work. Sex workers themselves also at times oscillate between these two positions, but in this article we demonstrate how they are able, to some extent, to open up discursive spaces between these two extremes. However, just as sex workers are neither entirely passive victims nor entirely free agents in their lived experience, so too they are neither entirely passive channels for larger social discourses about their profession, nor entirely free to voice an authentic, first-hand account of what sex work “really” is. To explore this discursive entanglement, we spoke to five sex workers in Johannesburg and describe the ways in which they were able to both take on board, and to challenge, a variety of different discourses in order to talk about themselves as simultaneously agentic and constrained in what they can do.

Introduction

In discussions about sex work and sex workers, two dominant views are evident: First, sex workers freely choose to sell sex as a good way of earning an income (Sanders, O’Neill, & Pitcher, 2009; Hardy, 2010; Jackson, 2016); second, sex workers are victims of their circumstances who are driven into the sex industry through direct coercion or as a result of dire poverty (Gould & Fick, 2008; Trotter, 2008; Qiao, Li, Zhang, Zhou, Shen, Tang, & Stanton, 2014). Together, these views discursively position sex workers either as having agency and free will or as being helpless

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victims in need of rescue. These discourses are, more or less consciously, deployed in support of different ideological agendas such as a free market orientation in terms of which people are always able to take care of themselves or a conservative agenda in terms of which those who do not conform to sexual norms are 'fallen' and in need of rehabilitation. Our aim in this article is to problematise, deconstruct and reconstruct this discursive field to move beyond agency-victimhood and similar binaries, with the hope of developing new ways of talking about sex work that acknowledge the complexity of the sex industry. We do this by speaking to sex workers themselves and paying attention to how they are able to open up new discursive spaces.

Our rationale for looking to sex workers as a source of discursive strategies for transcending the agency-victimhood binary is that, unlike other role-players such as academics, activists, and religious leaders, sex workers have to wrestle with the contradictions and complexities of sex work on a daily basis and are thus more likely to engage with discourses that do not collapse these complexities into biased and simplistic binaries. Our hope is that by foregrounding these richer discursive patterns ways can be found for them to be assimilated into how sex work is constructed by the broader society.

Much academic enquiry on sex work is social constructionist in orientation and it is to this tradition that we hope to contribute. The three most prominent streams of this type of enquiry that we have identified are historical investigations, feminist work on the status of sex work in the context of patriarchy, and work on the role of male clients of female sex workers. First, there is a very substantial body of work on the **history of sex work** in different contexts such as Victorian England (Walkowitz, 1980b; Levine, 2003), dockside prostitution (Trotter, 2008, 2009; Fairbanks, 2013), the role of sex work in the colonisation of Australia (Frances, 2007), and the role of sex work in helping to enable the migrant labour system in Southern Africa (Vearey, Oliveira, Madzimore, & Ntini, 2011; Oliveira & Vearey, 2015). Second, there continues to be a wide-ranging and sometimes acrimonious feminist debate (and some empirical research) on sex work, which many see as emblematic of the patriarchal structures and forces that oppress all women (Jeffreys, 2008a; Farley, 2013; Sagar & Jones, 2014). While some, such as some 'sex-positive' feminists (Snyder-Hall, 2010; Comte, 2014), argue that sex work includes elements that are not incompatible with female emancipation. A third stream of enquiry focuses on the male clients of sex workers and their appeals to dominant discourses of masculinity and heterosexuality (Huysamen & Boonzaier, 2015; Huysamen, 2020). The issue of victimhood versus agency runs across all these different lines of enquiry, but in this article we will not focus on how it manifests in the academic literature, but rather on how the binary is managed by sex workers themselves. At the

end of the article we return to a consideration of how the academic literature could draw on the discursive strategies used by sex workers.

Conceptual framework

We drew on a multilevel conceptual approach that incorporates social constructionism (Becvar & Becvar, 2013), critical social theory (Honneth, 1991; Horkheimer, 1992) and discourse analysis (Coyle, 2007; Willig, 2008). Broadly speaking, social constructionism focuses on epistemology (the politics of how we know what is true), critical social theory focuses on ontology (the presumed actual nature of the social world), and discourse analysis on methodology (the pragmatics of how to study the social world).

From a social constructionist epistemological perspective, sex work is not a timeless and objective fact, but an institution with certain historically and socially contingent rules and regulations, hierarchies, stakeholders and interested parties. These arise from, and are sustained or undermined by, a constant process of social and political cooperation and contestation among role players who on a daily basis help to (de)construct what sex work 'is'. It is this process, of socially creating and dismantling sex work, that social constructionism is meant to bring into visibility. Social constructionist perspectives tend to give equal weight to 'ordinary' and everyday texts (Becvar & Becvar, 2013) and interactions as to those that are officially sanctioned or mandated. The assumption is that power seeps in from the edges to create the social world rather than being wielded from the centre to warp and suppress an already-existing world (Foucault, 1980; Honneth, 1991; Hook, 2007).

However, we are not disputing the idea that power is sometimes concentrated in the hands of the few and that those who occupy 'powerful' positions (such as men, law enforcers, religious leaders and politicians) may have inordinate influence over what is 'known' about sex work. Therefore, the social constructionist paradigm acknowledges that a 'subject' (namely, a sex worker) is social, not individual, and that the lenses (that is, theory, model and ideology) used to understand the 'subject' should be treated with caution as they often represent discursive patterns that are shaped by the same historical, geographic and ideological positions that construct individuals in particular ways (Gergen, 2001; Hibberd, 2001).

In providing concrete historical and political substance to an understanding of how social realities are constructed, Critical Social Theory (CST) foregrounds how women (and sex workers in particular) are fetishised and commodified (Bell, 1998; Scoular, 2004; Scoular & O'Neill, 2008; Young, 2009; Davidson, 2014). Critical theory provides useful concepts for understanding sex workers' place in the political and economic system of capitalist society (Overall, 1992; Young, 2009; Delicado-Moratalla, 2018).

Critical Social Theory owes its roots to a number of different scholars connected to the Frankfurt School (Jay, 1996; Tarr, 2011), but for purposes of our discussion, we primarily draw on the work of Horkheimer.

Horkheimer was critical of, among others, the notion of dualism, which, he argued, often leads to “paralysing dichotomies” (Held, 1980; Horkheimer, 1992; Brunkhorst, 2011). Horkheimer pursued “dialectical mediation”, which is an attempt to overcome categorical fixities and oppositions (Hohendahl, 1985; Wheatland, 2005), in our case, of victimhood and agency. In terms of Horkheimer’s concept of dialectical mediation, academic and other discourse on sex work would be strengthened if the focus is not exclusively on ideological differences but also on similarities between what might at first appear as immutable dichotomies.

The third element in our conceptual apparatus, discourse analysis (or discourse theory), is often understood as providing a means of doing empirical research from a social constructionist perspective. This understanding is not incorrect but ignores the long history of discourse-related thinking in theoretical milieus other than social constructionism. Discourse analysis and theory has a particular identity and recent history in the discipline of psychology, which goes beyond methodology. Therefore, rather than thinking of discourse theory and analysis as merely a methodological extension of social constructionism, we treat it as a theoretical pillar that is on a par with social constructionism and Critical Social Theory.

We used discourse analysis in an attempt to trace the discursive patterns that produce (and are in turn produced by) texts on sex work (Willig, 2008). We were especially interested in doing a Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) because it is concerned with both the discursive resources utilised by people and with how they negotiate power relations (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Willig, 2008). We provide more detail about the analysis in the ‘analytic strategy’ section below.

Ethics

Research involving sex workers is, by its nature, ethically complex as it involves private sexual matters, illegal activities (at least in some jurisdictions) and potentially vulnerable participants. We therefore took care to minimise the risk to participants and obtained permission to conduct the study from the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology at the University of South Africa. Informed consent was requested from participants who volunteered to participate. An informed consent form that explained the purpose of the study and how data would be handled was given to participants before interviews were conducted. Permission to record the interview was negotiated with each participant. All participants consented to be recorded.

Furthermore, participants were informed about their right to terminate involvement in the study at any point.

Anonymity was ensured and maintained throughout the research process. Pseudonyms were used in place of participants' real names and care was taken not to include information that could identify participants in the written text. Participants were informed that the results might be published in academic journals, but that their names would not be included. We arranged for therapists to accept referrals of participants who may be distressed or who may seek further psychological help, but none made use of this opportunity.

In addition to taking these necessary steps, we were also aware that there are additional, more subtle, ethical issues involved in work of this nature. We discuss these in more detail in the section on 'meeting with sex workers' below.

“Adventurers and gamblers”: Sex work in Johannesburg

Johannesburg, where the current study was conducted, is often presented as the economic hub of Africa (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2015), and is located in the wealthiest province of the country, Gauteng. Johannesburg has a population of almost five million (Statistics South Africa, 2017), the largest of any South African city. The status of Johannesburg as the “city of gold” often attracts people who seek better work opportunities and this image of Johannesburg as an ideal work destination is not a new phenomenon (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2015). The discovery of gold around 1886 prompted the beginning of migration by individuals, particularly men, who supported families in other parts of South Africa and other Southern African countries such as Mozambique, Zambia, Namibia, and Lesotho (Landau & Gindrey, 2008).

The history of sex work in Johannesburg is intricately linked to its status as an economic magnet for job-seekers. For example, Stadler (1979) describes how, in the 1940s, high rates of unemployment, the high cost of living and low wages led to the rise of the squatter movement, which was concentrated in and around Soweto and Alexandra (Stadler, 1979). According to one municipal welfare officer:

“99 per cent of the squatters are intruders from outside the Johannesburg area... the vast majority of these intruders are adventurers and gamblers, particularly among women, of a type attracted to Johannesburg by the prospect of making money from organized prostitution and illicit liquor selling.” (cited in Stadler, 1979: 105)

This perception, of sex workers as associated with a wave of unwanted immigration that causes social decay and strife, persists into the present. Many sex workers are indeed

motivated to take on sex work for socio-economic reasons (Monroe, 2005; Richter, 2013) and some do migrate from elsewhere (or are attracted by the availability of male migrant workers who are temporarily separated from their families). The phenomenon

of (predominantly male) migrant labour was underpinned by the colonial and apartheid system which sought to draw on the available labour pool without granting Black people a permanent foothold in the centres of economic development. It can be argued that sex work was an important factor in enabling this migrant labour system to function – allowing male labourers to engage sexually and romantically with women during long periods of absence from their families.

Despite the essential role played by sex work in South Africa's economic development, sex work remains illegal. There have been challenges to the constitutionality of some clauses in the Sexual Offences Act (previously Immorality Act) 23 of 1957 that criminalise sex work, but these have been overturned in a Constitutional Court judgement (see Ngcobo in Jordan, Broodryk and Jacobs versus the state, 2002). As a result, sex workers experience structural violence on a daily basis at the hands of law enforcers, the public health system and society in general (Fick, 2006; Green, 2016; Koster, 2015; Rangasami, Konstant, & Manoek, 2016). Law enforcers, particularly the police, take advantage of the criminalisation of sex work as sex workers are understandably reluctant to come forward to press charges when they are violated.

Meeting with sex workers

The first author interviewed five sex workers in Johannesburg. He was introduced to some of the participants by a sex worker who was a peer educator at the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT), and they in turn introduced him to more women who were willing to be interviewed – thus relying on snowball sampling (TenHouten, 2017). The women we spoke to were all self-identified heterosexual sex workers who had been in the sex industry for more than three years, and who were over 18 years of age. All of the women started their trade by soliciting clients on the street, and some also had experience of operating via a bar or brothel. Three of the women were South African and two were immigrants, one from Zimbabwe and the other from eSwatini. The semi-structured interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. We used English for some participants and isiZulu for those who were uncomfortable with the former, and all interviews involved a mixing of languages to some extent. We did our own transcription, as well as the translation for two of the interviews, which were conducted in isiZulu. We considered using the original isiZulu transcripts for purposes of analysis but decided against it for the sake of consistency across the interviews and because the two isiZulu interviews in any case contained many passages that were conducted in a mixture of isiZulu, English and other South

African languages. The first author is a native isiZulu speaker and is fluent in several other South African languages and took care to capture as much as possible of both the meaning and the rhetorical style of the translated passages in a manner similar to that described by Sims-Schouten, Riley and Willig (2007).

The first author's experience in many ways paralleled the dynamics described and theorised by Huysamen (2016, 2018) in her her interviews with men who pay for sex, despite the various reversals in roles relative to Huysamen's work. Specifically, there were clear social pressures for the researcher to enact a masculine role and the role of a "good researcher", while the participants appeared, at least to some extent, to be interpellated by ideologies of femininity and respectability.

The encounters also, inevitably, had some sexual and erotic overtones. As a man doing research on sex workers, the first author experienced some degree of cautious resistance about why he was interested in the lives of (female) sex workers, but this tended to dissipate as the interviews progressed. The first author had to remain aware of the dual role he could possibly play – as a researcher and as a potential client. He was cognisant of not offending sex workers by simply dismissing their initial assumptions that he might be a client as inappropriate, and always attempted to reveal the real purpose of his interest respectfully and as soon as possible.

Analytic strategy

The purpose of our analysis was, in a broad sense, to explore what it is like to be positioned as a "prostitute" or a "sex worker", and what kinds of actions and experiences are constrained and enabled by such a positioning. To do this we drew on Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) (Willig, 2008), which is inspired by the writings of Michel Foucault and other post-structuralist scholars who explored the role of language in the construction of social and psychological life (Hook, 2007). FDA studies the availability of discursive resources within a culture and the implications that this carries for those living within that culture (Hollway, 1989; Burman, 1992; 1995; Parker, 1992; Burman & Parker, 1993). To bring discourses into visibility analysts typically study "texts"; which are broadly interpreted as any collection of writings, speech (such as interview transcriptions), or even visual materials. Texts are assumed to achieve purposes such as informing, persuading or entertaining, in part by drawing on discourses that have become so deeply embedded in a culture that they operate imperceptibly to provide texts with apparent coherence and veracity (Makki, 2020). There is no set procedure for making the discourses that animate texts (and that are in turn re-invigorated by texts) visible, but a key strategy that is often used, and which we also relied on, is to identify discursive binaries, as these reveal

unspoken assumptions about the structure of the social world a text inhabits (Parker, 1992; 2015) irrespective of which pole of each binary a text may be focussing on or advocating for.

Some binaries are so firmly entrenched in our culture that they can be said to constitute “dominant discourses” that are so central to making sense of certain topics (such as for example, race or gender) that it becomes almost impossible to write or talk about them without invoking the particular discourse (Dempsey, 2018). However, not all discourses are as forcefully present in texts, but exist rather as that which is left silent, unspoken, and marginal. This silence may exert as much discursive force in a text as discursive resources that are more overtly woven into the text, and may, at times, function as an insidious “counter discourse” to what at first appears to be the main thrust of the text.

The terms used to label textual and discursive elements vary. Some commonly used terms are “discourses”, “sub-discourses”, “discursive objects”, “rhetorical devices”, “binaries”, and “discursive repertoires” (Weatherall & Priestley, 2001; Coyle, 2007; Willig, 2008; Parker, 2015; Walton, 2016; Taping, Juniardi, & Utomo, 2017). In our analysis we relied in the main on the metaphor of a “discursive landscape” which is constituted by a series of “discursive objects”, with these objects in most cases coming into visibility via opposing, binary depictions regarding the nature of the object.

We made use of Willig’s (2008) guidelines for performing a Foucauldian discourse analysis, which starts by identifying discursive constructions (or objects) in a text and how they link to wider social discourses, then considers the performative purposes and impact of the text, and finally asks what subjectivities and subject positions are enabled by the text. However, in presenting our findings here, we do not “talk through” the process of analysis for each transcript in detail, but rather move more directly to the findings, interpretations and conclusions that arose from the analysis, while providing illustrative extracts to substantiate our findings. A more sustained and detailed account of the “close reading” that we applied to the interview extracts might be of interest in itself, but for the purposes of this article we decided not to focus in too much detail on the analytic process.

Findings

As we read and re-read the interview transcripts and attempted to discursively open them up using discourse analysis, the “discursive object” that seemed to loom largest in the texts was not, as we expected, that of the sex worker as victim or as entrepreneurial worker, but rather a series of objects that together formed

a landscape through which the sex worker traced her life story. In what follows, we shall try to trace the contours of this landscape and discuss how participants position themselves within it.

Between the street and the family: safe and unsafe spaces

The first discursive object that came into visibility from our reading of the transcripts, was **the street**, which emerged as the epitome of an unsafe space where nobody can be trusted and where there is nobody to protect you (Sanders, 2004). For sex workers, the street is first and foremost a space of potential victimisation, but our participants appeared to be in no way passive in the face of the dangers it exposed them to. Thando, for example, positioned herself as hyper-vigilant and street-wise because on more than one occasion she had witnessed people “turning into animals”. At the same time the women were not reticent in talking about instances where they were, in fact, directly victimised.

Princess, for example, narrated how, at first when she was a street-based sex worker, she had to endure constant harassment from the police and other sex workers who claimed a particular street corner as their own. It is not surprising that the streets are constructed as unsafe, given that some participants ply their trade at night and in circumstances where the level of competition and territorialism is high.

In contrast to circumstances on the street, Thando and Princess spoke about their apartments as **safe spaces** where they are able to play the role of caring mothers to their daughters. Two other participants also affirmed their family and home as safe spaces because, as one participant said, “family is the most important thing one can have”. The idea of family repeatedly emerged in the interviews as a soft, caring foil to the harsh realities of sex work and, in part, the family space is preserved as safe and caring by insulating it from professional work spaces. Although most participants had good relationships with their immediate family members, none had disclosed to them that they were sex workers. Thando, for example, had consciously chosen where to solicit because she was afraid of what her daughters would say if they were to bump into her and find out that she was selling sex.

Sex work is in part seen as scandalous because it brings sex into public visibility, and participants’ construction of a safe space is therefore, unsurprisingly, far removed from the public eye. The home, in the case of Thando and Princess, is their private space where they can act “normally” and interact with their children. By the same token, the street is, in part, constructed as unsafe precisely because what happens there is in the

public eye. For some sex workers there is also the relative safety and invisibility of the brothel space. As Princess explained:

"I am almost always indoors where I feel safe and I know that my kids won't see me."

The discursive object of the street appears to allow sex workers to mediate the victim-agent binary in ways that do not require them to fully embrace either role as some form of permanent identity. As Thando remarked: "If we had met on the street, I would not have spoken to you," except, of course, if I were a potential client. The street is indeed a space of potential victimisation, but to some extent it is possible for sex workers to side-step its dangers through heightened vigilance and by isolating it from safe spaces such as their family environment, where they can seek refuge.

Encounters with men: Corrupt, undesirable, unruly... and regular

The next most prominent class of discursive objects were men, most prominently so **the police**, who were mentioned in all the interviews. The police are discursively constructed as either corrupt or not corrupt, with the former being much more commonly mentioned. For example, Joy explained how police sometimes raided a brothel where she worked and she then had to pay a R300 "fine" to avoid arrest. Thando complained about police corruption as follows:

"As a citizen, and in particular a woman, I trust the police to protect me from harm, but in the industry they are the ones who turn on us. Yesterday, I had to bribe a police officer with two hundred."

The women speak of themselves as effectively powerless in their relationship with the police and as having to submit to whatever demands corrupt officials make. As Thando points out, it is the responsibility of the police to protect citizens, but instead they turn against sex workers and exploit their vulnerable position that stems from the illegality of soliciting in public. A great deal of research (Fick, 2006; Gould & Fick, 2008; Peters, 2015) suggests that it is indeed common for police to target sex workers for sexual and monetary favours.

Spending a night or two in a police holding cell is also, apart from being uncomfortable and degrading, detrimental to sex workers' business as they stand to lose on hours they could have used to sell sex. In addition to financial loss, sex workers are also at an increased risk of sexually transmitted infections because, as reported by one participant, they are raped by the police and in some instances, it is group rape, with some officers not using condoms. The corrupt-not corrupt binary thus largely overlaps with a sexually violent-not violent binary as far as sex workers'

experience at the hands of police are concerned. Thando told a story of a friend who was raped by some officers:

“They took turns raping her. She is of the opinion that those police officers who do not use ‘protection’ are already sick.”

However, not all police officers were constructed as corrupt or violent. In some instances, the police were constructed as not corrupt. Tellingly, police officers who do not engage in activities that are deemed corrupt (specifically, bribery, extortion and rape), are explicitly constructed as “not ordinary” – the default, it would appear, is for policemen to be corrupt.

For the most part, therefore, sex workers present themselves as very much in the role of victim rather than agent in their dealings with the police. Even when interacting with not corrupt police officers, an element of victimisation was often present, and there seemed to be an internalisation of abuse by some sex workers (Dalla, Xia, & Kennedy, 2003; Ediom-Ubong, 2020). Thando, for example, when asked what she meant when she said “some police officers are nice”, explained that:

*“I mean that they let go of us and sometimes **ask** that we have sex with them”.*

Some sex workers have found ways to deal with the abuse by the police officers; however, in some cases it seems to come at the cost of normalising the way they are treated by the police. It is viewed as a magnanimous gesture if the police “let sex workers go” and if they “ask” to have sex rather than demanding it.

Another recurring male “discursive object” in participants’ narratives is **the client**. Clients are central in the sex industry, but relatively little research has been conducted on them (some notable exceptions include the work by Sanders, 2008; Huysamen, 2016, 2018; Farley & Golding, 2019; Senent, 2019). Here our analysis is not so much concerned with the profile of clients, but with how they are discursively positioned and constructed in sex workers’ narratives. Although there is considerable variation, there seemed to be a general consensus among participants that clients come in three forms: undesirable, unruly, and regular.

Undesirable clients are those who, on a “normal” day, a sex worker would not engage in a sexual encounter with. Princess, Joy and Thando constructed these clients as usually older, ugly and with an undesirable odour. Having to offer sexual services to undesirable clients indicates that sex workers sometimes have to make hard choices, but this does not fully affirm positions such as Jeffreys’ (2008a)

that sex workers do not really have a choice at all. There are instances where sex workers decide not to offer sexual services to undesirable clients, although admittedly this is more common in contexts of high-end sex work where the sex worker can better afford to lose the associated income (Mirror, 2010). None of the participants in our study were engaged in high-end sex work, but it was clear that there was an element of selectivity as far as clients are concerned. For example Angel, who works from a brothel and a bar, and generally targets older, married men, indicated that she carefully chooses who to have sex with, preferring not to offer sexual services to undesirable clients. Nevertheless, in a country such as South Africa, most sex workers probably regularly have to make the hard choice of offering sexual services to undesirable clients because of economic need. Thus sex workers discursively position themselves as “partially agentic” in relation to these men: They do have a choice of who to offer sexual services to, but sometimes undesirable clients are a necessary source of income.

Most participants also spoke of unruly clients who engage in unacceptable behaviour such as trying to deceive sex workers by removing condoms while engaging in a sexual act, robbing them of their earnings, or not paying for services rendered. Princess explained it as follows:

“Customers who do not want to pay are a big problem. We are also in business, but it is tough and you get other customers who do not want to use a condom or they would use it at first and during the sexual encounter, they try to remove it.”

Unruly clients are constructed by the sex workers as deceitful, untrustworthy, careless and sometimes even dangerous. On the other hand, sex workers construct themselves (in relation to unruly clients) as vigilant, suspicious and agentic. Most sex workers that we spoke to positioned themselves as fully cognisant of what clients are capable of doing and as ready to exercise agency when certain boundaries are crossed.

Sex workers also spoke about regular clients who prefer engaging in repeated sexual encounters with them. Most of our participants had a number of regular clients, with whom they had cordial relationships. These types of relationships come into being from some form of initial attraction that grows into repeat visits and are sustained through mutual trust. Having a special, regular client enhances the sex worker’s status among her peers. Sometimes detailed and sensitive information is shared between regular clients and sex workers, Angel explains:

“He often tells me that his wife does not satisfy him in bed... as in...she just lies there and that she is not in the mood all the time.”

The confidences shared by regular clients can raise interesting ethical issues. Lihle explained in the following way:

“I have a few that I know personally and yes they are into bad things but so is everyone else. I have a client who robs people and hijacks cars. He is my client. We have become friends and I guess he enjoys my company.”

Like psychotherapists, Angel and Lihle position themselves as non-judgemental, and able to interact with diverse individuals; for them, what their clients do outside of the professional relationship has nothing to do with them, yet at the same time they also position themselves as able to form and sustain friendships with their clients. Thus, Angel and Lihle appear to have become masters at maintaining the dual subject positioning of sex worker as an impersonal, professional provider of sexual services, and sex worker as a sympathetic friend. Whether imagined positively or negatively, it seems clear that what is at play here is, in part, an attempt at humanising an otherwise coldly commercial or controlling relationship and in doing so to regain some lost agency through an appeal to the other person’s humanity.

Being able to draw on the three readily available constructions of clients assists sex workers in managing how particular interactions turn out. For example, when a sex worker offers sexual services to an undesirable client, she is aware of doing so purely because she is in need of money – in other words her agency is severely constrained by her financial needs, but she does at least understand the nature of the compromise that she is consciously making. Similarly, if she “chooses” to engage in a conversation with a regular client she knows that it may in part be because they have become friends and not purely because she is being paid.

“Rubbing off”: Sex workers as psychological, medical and moral subjects

A discursive object that is quite prominent in writings about sex work from a perspective that seeks to position them as vulnerable to exploitation is that of an **unfavourable past**, and this did indeed also manifest in our conversations with sex workers. Lihle, for example, came from a household where her parents struggled financially:

“Eish... my father was the only breadwinner and after he died we struggled at home because before he died, he was retrenched from work. So my father got sick, he developed a strange sickness. We went to doctors, traditional healers, churches but he was not helped. Eventually they retrenched him at his workplace.”

Thando gave a similar account about her home conditions:

“I was born in the Eastern Cape, in a little town near Mthatha. We are three girls and one boy. I am the oldest. My father went to Johannesburg to look for work because our village is poor. I went to school until Standard Eight but it became increasingly difficult when my mother became sick and I had to look after her and my siblings. So I stopped going to school.”

However, not all sex workers construct themselves as victims of an unfavourable past. Angel, Princess and Joy spoke fondly about their childhood and of having parents who had a steady income. For example, Princess’s parents were relatively wealthy teachers and Joy spoke of her family as being “warm and caring”. Based on participants’ accounts it is clear that one could present oneself as having a “favourable” past despite having become a sex worker, and the converse (having an “unfavourable” past but not becoming a sex worker) is clearly also true. This should not, of course, be taken to mean that those who become sex workers have necessarily done so entirely as a matter of “free choice”, but neither have they necessarily been “forced into” sex work due to their deprived circumstances.

Another discursive object that frequently emerges from popular and academic writing on sex work concerns the image of sex workers as **vectors of disease**, specifically of HIV (Merrigan et al., 2015; Shannon, Strathdee, Goldenberg & Duff, 2015). This discursive object has a long history and can be traced back to the Vagrancy and Contagious Diseases Acts that were promulgated in the United Kingdom starting in the early 1800s (Walkowitz, 1980a; Levine, 2003; Sanders, et al, 2009; Hubbard, Sanders & Scoular, 2016) and to innumerable public health policies that have been implemented internationally since.

Participants did not personally buy into this construction, although they were painfully aware of it. Thando, Angel, Joy and Lihle all spoke about how the general public sees them as transporters of disease, especially HIV. Participants were therefore themselves engaging in a form of discourse analysis – describing not only direct victimisation by, for example, police, but also outlining the ways in which the contours of the discursive landscape within which sex work takes place make their lives difficult. Thando had this to say about the sex-worker-as-vector-of-disease discourse:

“People out there think that we have AIDS because we sleep with many people that we do not know. I think that those police who do not use condoms are sick. They want to infect us. How can you have sex with someone that you know sleeps with many people without using protection? It’s because you are sick, but maybe they have come to understand that not all prostitutes are sick.”

Thando performed an interesting switch here – rather than a vector of disease, she positions herself as a victim of being intentionally infected by police. Angel similarly relocated the source of disease:

“There are diseases. You run a risk of getting HIV because you have sex with different people that you don’t know. People are sick out there. Imagine having sex with someone and the condom breaks. It’s over for you!”

Participants further positioned themselves as doing what they could to prevent being infected by diseased clients. The most obvious, but sometimes difficult to implement, strategy is to refuse ever to have sex without a condom. For example, Joy sometimes has clients who request not using a condom during sex, but indicated that she responds with a firm refusal:

“Yah, I do [get such requests], but not all the time. I refuse because I just checked my status and I am HIV negative. So, I am not going to risk my life.”

In addition to finding themselves entangled in modernist psychological and medical discourses, participants were also acutely aware of **moral discourses** relating to prostitution that long pre-date modernity. Specifically, they spoke of culture and religion as panoptical discursive structures that discipline and regulate them, and again they appear to have found some ways of partially circumventing these structures. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam construct sex workers as immoral (Immordino & Russo, 2015; Obadare, 2015), and the participants were well aware of being subjected to this:

“What I’m doing is morally wrong and my parents will probably hate me if they were to find out that I am a prostitute. You know, my parents are serious Christians.” (Angel)

None of the participants overtly positioned themselves as unfairly victimised by religious prejudices, but rather appeared to acknowledge the validity of the religious construction of themselves as morally fallen. However, they sought to minimise the impact of such judgements by compartmentalising their lives to ensure that religious family members and friends would not know the nature of their professional lives.

With regard to traditional African cultural beliefs, participants also appeared to acknowledge their validity, but cast themselves more unequivocally as victims of these supernatural forces. Lihle, for example, remarked:

“Most of us have had it tough. We get arrested, raped and even fight among ourselves. Sometimes, you end up believing that you are cursed.”

Thando spoke about a different cultural belief that added additional peril to her professional life:

“You know us Blacks and culture. They will tell you that rubbing against different people, murderers, robbers, people who are bereaved, people will bring bad luck and as a sex worker, you cannot tell if a client is one of those.”

The bottom line for our participants appeared to be that sex with strangers brings bad luck and is morally wrong and that this moral judgement and bad luck might indeed “rub off” on them. They have to manage their professional lives in such a way as to try and minimise this, including taking calculated risks, not only in the domain of health, but also in terms of morality and vulnerability to evil influences.

Against the backdrop of the many more clearly defined discursive objects that populate participants’ discourse, there is also a certain **absent-presence** in the form of the structural inequalities that pervade the South African political and economic landscape. Participants did not typically speak about this directly, but it was present in much of what they told us about their lives.

Notably, the migrant labour system, which had its heyday during the apartheid era, strongly impacted on some participants’ life stories. This system relied on racial discrimination in terms of which Blacks¹ were supposed to be confined to distant, rural “homelands”, and were expected to travel to cities in order to find “temporary” employment before returning to their “permanent” place of residence (Legassick, 1976). Many Black men were recruited to work in the mines and other industries, as cheap labourers, and as a consequence had to leave their families to find employment (Stull, Bell, & Ncwadi, 2016). For example, Thando’s father went to Johannesburg to look for work because their village was poor. The violence perpetuated by the migrant labour system was vividly present in Thando’s account, who further revealed how familial structures disintegrated in interaction with such a system:

“If I remember correctly, he came home once a year during the Christmas holidays but he stopped. It was nice when he was around. He brought us nice clothes and toys. We all wanted to see this Joburg that had beautiful things, but then our father stopped coming home.”

¹ We use the term to refer to South Africans of African descent, but acknowledge the legitimacy of using it more broadly to include other groups that have been subject to colonial and apartheid oppression.

Not only migrant labour, but also the apartheid system more generally did not provide equal economic opportunities for different races in South Africa (Nattrass & Seekings, 1997). Most participants' parents lived during the apartheid period and from participants' narratives, the apartheid system is an absent-presence in the sense that it limited economic opportunities for their parents and began a cycle of intergenerational suffering, which still haunts them.

Towards a non-binary discourse on sex work

The sex workers we spoke to demonstrated an ability to take on board, and to challenge, a variety of different discourses in order to talk about themselves as simultaneously agentic and constrained in what they can do. In this article we attempted to challenge two competing views on sex work: Sex work as a legitimate and acceptable form of employment, freely chosen by women versus sex work as imposed on and degrading to women (Carpenter, 2000; O' Neill, 2001; Jeffreys, 2008a; Jeffreys, 2008b).

Judging from the group of women that we spoke to, sex workers as a class cannot be neatly fitted into categories of being either exploited victims or entrepreneurs in a free market of sexual labour. Neither does it appear to make much sense to split sex workers into different classes depending on the extent to which they appear to be "masters of their own destiny". It is true, for example, that Lihle drifted into sex work partly as a result of impoverished and otherwise challenging home circumstances, whereas Princess, on the face of it, soberly evaluated the options available to her and entered (and remains in) sex work as the most viable way of earning a good income. However, neither of them fits squarely into being a victim of circumstances or not and each describes a life of both opportunities and compromises.

In addition to how they respond to their "real life" circumstances, sex workers (like the rest of us) do also appear to have some, if limited, "discursive agency" to open up spaces beyond the narrow and precipitous valley created by the victimhood-agency binary.

For us, the first lesson to be learnt from our conversations with this group of women is to be attentive to the role of space in any talk about sex work. The participants spoke of themselves as occupying, and traversing, diverse spaces – the street, brothels, rural and urban spaces, family apartments. Academics and activists would do well to bear this diversity in mind, and to avoid conjuring up overly constrained landscapes that show only single spaces such as the street or prison-like brothels as if these constitute the entirety of sex workers' life world. In talking about their experiences across various spaces, sex workers do draw on the victimhood-agency binary, but they also foreground other binaries such as safety versus danger, economic opportunity versus poverty, and visibility versus secrecy. In writing about

sex work it would therefore, for example, be useful not to be concerned purely with the degree of agency a sex worker might have while with a client, but also how she moves between different spaces and manages potentially conflicting interests such as the need for visibility versus secrecy. In Foucauldian (1986) terms, sex workers can be imagined as moving between a series of “heterotopias”, that is, spaces that reflect but also perturb spaces of “normality”. Specifically, sex work can be seen as centred on heterotopias of deviation, but also, more subtly, heterotopias of purification.

A second step towards a non-binary discourse on sex work would be to constantly return to the reality that almost all female sex work involves having to relate specifically to men. Unlike more “conservative” writings on sex work, feminist authors such as Doezema (2001) and Jeffreys (2008a, 2008b) already do this to an exemplary degree. However, taking a cue from how sex workers talk about their encounters with men, these should not be imagined as invariably involving overtly coercive and violent behaviours – sex workers do, for example, speak of policemen who are not violent and corrupt (or at least less so than others) and of clients who are not undesirable or unruly. They also speak of measures, such as increased vigilance, that they take to reduce the likelihood of being victimised, and hint at structural changes, such as the legalisation of sex work, that would remove some of the leverage men currently have for acting in a coercive manner. Regarding clients, sex workers paint a picture not only of degradation and danger, but of constant compromise, and of relationships that sometimes involve emotional connections that go beyond purely carnal and commercial concerns.

Thirdly, a helpful strategy for moving beyond the agency-victimhood binary in writing about sex work, would be to attend to the ways in which sex workers themselves are aware of (and actively position themselves relative to) discourses (such as certain religious and cultural discourses) that seek to pin them down as morally fallen. This raises the question of agency versus victimhood to a meta-level, prompting questions not only about how sex workers exhibit or are lacking in agency in their daily lives, but also about the degree and forms of “discursive agency” that they (and others who talk about sex work) may have. In Foucault’s words: “[d]iscourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart.” (1998: 100-101)

Finally, we can learn from the “absent presence” of structural oppression in our conversations with sex workers. An understanding of historical structural injustices, beyond the level of personal experience, are already very clearly elucidated in the work of some academics (for example, Scoular, 2004; Jeffreys, 2008a; Laite, 2009; Sanders et al, 2009; Trotter, 2009) and it is interesting that so little of this has made its way

into the everyday talk of sex workers themselves, who seem mostly to present their circumstances in terms of individual rather than collective struggles. In trying to forge more useful ways of talking about sex work it should not be imagined that it is purely a matter of academics and activists taking on strategies developed by sex workers, but also for sex workers to incorporate some of the framings and formulations developed by those not directly involved in the sex industry. The sex workers we spoke to had taken on board understandings relating to the potential benefits of the legalisation of sex work developed by academics and activist organisations such as SWEAT but did not seem to draw on ideas about other structural forces, such as South Africa's history of racial and economic injustice, that condition their work lives.

In conclusion, our hope is that this article will contribute to academics', activists', and sex workers' ability to resist the ever-present "paralysing dichotomy" (Horkheimer, 1992) of the victim-agency binary. By listening to sex workers, it becomes possible to find some valuable pointers to how to talk about sex work in a more nuanced and less formulaic manner. We are sure that the same is also true for other role players in the sex industry, such as pimps, clients (Huysamen, 2015), activists and academics. By focusing on the ways in which both sex workers and other role players creatively negotiate the discursive landscape of sex work, less simplistic and one-sided understandings may emerge.

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