

A Different View on Prostitution: The World's oldest Trade or a Story of Women like You and Me

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This article explores the social realities and cultural knowledge of prostitution in Vienna. It draws heavily on a dynamic and situational concept of culture. Culture represents shared, implicit knowledge and is continually acquired and actualised in a process of communication, which is mediated by power differences. This article focuses on the daily routine and life of prostitutes, especially the interdependencies between their leisure and work time. Further points of inquiry were the ways in which the prostitutes constitute the specifics of their profession and how this translates into their social realities. In accordance with the documentary method, narrative interviews were conducted with social workers, a psychologist, a policeman and fifteen prostitutes. In spite of the surprisingly vast amount of interpretations of and adaptations to the individuals' respective situations that were discovered within this study, several key issues structuring the field of prostitution could be identified. Some of the most important issues were the relation to one's partner and family, violence and power relations between client, prostitute and brothel owner.

For an undergraduate research project a study was conducted on culture(s) of prostitutes in Vienna over the course of 6 months. The aim was to gain a better understanding of the life and the background of such women. Furthermore, no other study we knew of had dealt with this subject from a cultural psychological perspective, i.e. seeing prostitution as a culture. For this study, culture is regarded as conjunctive spaces of experience that are shared by social groups and constitute the prerequisite of every-day communication. This knowledge is acquired during the course of one's socialization and thereafter modified, supplemented, and refined to a certain extent. Consequently, seeing prostitution as a culture means exploring how specific attributes of being a prostitute are embodied in the speech and acts of the individuals in this field, and where and why they differ from each other. It was our ambition to avoid dealing with prostitution simply as a problem, recording the grievances of its victims. Nonetheless, it is important to note that prostitutes often find themselves rejected and excluded to the outer fringes of society, which deserves further exploration.

Within this study we solely focused on the habits of female prostitutes who work either in brothels or on the streets in Vienna. The only group of prostitutes that were excluded were minors. The sensitive matter of minors being involved in prostitution would have called for special attention. Furthermore, we were concerned that this group would have been very likely to affect us on a personal level, which is why this research project includes only women of the age of 18 or older.

RESEARCH INTEREST

Our primary research question is: Is there a specific culture of prostitution and if so, how is it constituted? Furthermore, how does it impact the lives of protagonists in this field and how do these individuals react to it, how do they shape and utilise it to advance their own interests? Consequently we focused our attention on the daily lives and routines of prostitutes. We were especially interested in how they organize their leisure and their work time and to what extent these fields are interconnected and influence each other. In addition, we found it important to explore how these women experience their job, what it means to them and how they deal with the social stigma that accompanies it.

METHOD

We found that our research goals were suitably matched by the emphases of the documentary method as originally devised by Karl Mannheim (see e.g. 1980) and further refined by Ralf Bohnsack (see e.g. 2003) and Arndt-Michel Nohl (see e.g. 2006), amongst others. Through various steps of interpretation the goal of the documentary method is the (re)construction of social typologies in a particular field, illuminating the social configurations at work during their formation. Thus the focus lies on the implicit content of the interview—the structure is more important than the statement itself.

We conducted several expert interviews with social workers, a psychologist and a policeman and fifteen narrative interviews with prostitutes, ranging from ten minutes to two hours. We usually worked in groups of two or three. With consent of the interviewee the interviews were recorded and transcribed. If the consent was not given, a protocol was composed immediately after the interview. Our regular team discussions focusing on self-reflection and one's reactions to the field turned out to be as valuable and insightful as they were productive.

REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Before venturing into the field, reviewing some literature and conducting research in various medial genres such as internet, newspapers and TV was necessary. Being inspired by the book of Caroline Tener and Tina Ring (2007) who conducted their dissertation on underage girls walking the streets of Vienna, the best approach seemed to be simply to go straight up to the women on the streets and try to talk to them. This approach turned out to be very fruitful as our first approach, and the following ones to come, were already a great success. Emphasizing our status as students regularly turned out to be an ice-breaker, probably due to the importance of education in many life-plans of prostitutes. Referring to our university subject, psychology, led to the opposite reaction: "We don't need help."

After conducting several interviews with women walking the streets we shifted our attention to brothels, where we encountered a situation that differed from the one in the streets in several key aspects: The most influential one is the aspect of private ownership, which had a direct impact on our approach as we had to contact the owner, usually mediated by a barman/barwoman¹ and ask for permission. In addition this somewhat

¹ The barman/barwoman generally seems to hold a key position in brothels, serving as a mediator between the brothel owner, the prostitutes and the clientele.

distorts our results, as we were far more likely to receive permission from law-abiding, humane brothels owners, thus seeding out the worst cases. The prostitutes themselves turned out to be very accessible when no prospective clients were around. If nothing else, the presence of several young women in an unusual environment certainly heightened their interest in participating in our study.

RESULTS

The women's mental conditions of street walkers varied greatly, ranging from obvious, undiagnosed mental illness and affliction over their life and job to others who seemed to deal with their situation very well and even enjoyed what they were doing. Many of them appeared to especially like the feeling of having power over men and earning good money.

All the prostitutes in our study stated that having intimate relationships while doing this job was not possible. According to these women, the main reason for this seems to be that men are not capable of handling the idea of having a girlfriend who works as a prostitute. They seem to be too demanding and jealous to accept it at face value. Concerning friendships, we found that none of the prostitutes could rely on anyone and didn't have close friends. Usually, they did not want to tell their friends what job they were doing and pretended to work as a dancer or a waitress in a bar. If they were lucky, some of the prostitutes had a family member (for example a brother or son) they could talk to about their job.

Apparently, these women were embarrassed to have their job because they are stigmatized. The job itself does not inflict as much suffering as the stigmatization does. The way 'society' treats them and reacts to female sex workers is a concern to most of them. In addition, prostitutes have to take into account that both worlds are overlapping. The men who fight most fiercely against prostitution in their neighbourhoods are commonly their best customers. This discrepancy may be the reason why prostitutes tend to prefer peaceful and quiet activities in their spare time. Most of them explained they loved going for a walk in nature or occupying themselves with handiwork. Further, there are certain factors promoting the job as a prostitute. Financial problems, hard strokes of fate (for example having to leave the homeland or the loss of loved ones) or negative experiences with men appear to be some of these reasons.

A major problem for prostitutes is the customers' propensity for violence. Therefore, as brothels usually have good security systems, prostitutes are to some degree safer in brothels than on the street. For example, there is always a panic button on the bedside, allowing the women to press it as soon as they feel threatened or scared by a suitor. Additionally, the results show that barkeepers in brothels are usually very influential. It was most impressive and stunning to realize that women working as prostitutes really are just like you and me. They are not always on drugs, without money and diseased. In fact, prostitution can be a job as any other and for a lot of women it is.

RESEARCH OUTLOOK

This study was the first attempt to get insight into the lives and cultures of prostitutes. Whereas this helped to get a general overview of the social reality of prostitution in Vi-

enna, further research should be able to elaborate the dynamics of power in and between the various groups. To confirm the result that prostitutes experience a certain amount of self-determination in their job, it would be interesting to explore the power dynamics between prostitutes, suitors and brothel owners.

Obviously, the negative social image of prostitutes influences how prostitutes experience their job. Therefore, it is the relationship of power between prostitutes and their social surroundings (e.g. adjacent residents), which should be further explored. As the working conditions of prostitutes are determined by the legal framework and the police, analyzing texts and researching relevant clauses of Austrian and European law could be profitable to examine power dynamics. To complete the circle around the culture of prostitutes, the structure of power between customers and prostitutes should be observed and analyzed.

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