

Commentary On: “A Different View on Prostitution: The World’s Oldest Trade or a Story of Women like You and Me” (Katja Huber, Marie-Christin Rissinger, Birgit Stabler & Daniel Weigl)

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The topic of prostitution has been and will continue to be a fascinating area of research. If we take even a superficial glance at the literature we can see the various thoughts, questions, and concerns that have been raised. Kingsley Davis in his classic study on the sociology of prostitution stated:

“...prostitution is, in the last analysis, economical. Enabling a small number of women to take care of the needs of a large number of men, it is the most convenient sexual outlet for an army, and for the legions of strangers, perverts, and the physically repulsive in our midst. It performs a function, apparently, which no other institutions fully performs.” (Davis, 1937, p. 755)

Is prostitution just economic? A statement such as the one above written decades ago can provoke the ire of many today, as there are those for whom such an observation would resonate. Prostitution is a topic that provokes controversy around whether it’s a victimless crime, whether those involved in the trade are consenting adults or adults who are forced to comply with those to whom they are working for. Does prostitution represent self-determination or exploitation? There is no shortage of opposing attitudes for just the few questions raised above. There would be some consensus, however, that working in “the world’s oldest trade” is not a job just like any other job and that it’s also not just about women being victims. Women who work as prostitutes are more often than not marginalized in the society they live in, but have lives outside their work too. How do they cope with the marginalization? How are their lives lived? How are their own intimacy and sexual needs met? Do they let themselves, or can they let themselves be known to another—the true essence of intimacy?

The authors of this interesting study were well aware of the problems and concerns that prostitution evokes or provokes (Huber, Rissinger, Stabler & Weigl, 2009). They, however, wanted to explore the actual lived lives of a sample of these women. They were interested in the phenomenological experience of the women. This group of ambitious students interviewed various experts in the field (social workers, a psychologist, and a policeman) to obtain useful background information and perceptions from the perspective of these professionals. Approximately twelve interviews were then conducted with prostitutes, who either worked on the streets or were in private brothels. Interviews from private brothels required permission. What stood out in the approach with those who worked on the streets

was how the researchers managed to simply walk up to them and begin a conversation. As stated in this brief article, it was easier to engage with the “street worker” when she knew the interviewer was a “student” and not specifically a psychology student.

It would not be surprising if the notion of a psychology student was threatening, as there are individuals who think that those learning about psychology are learning to ‘read minds.’ It was also pointed out in the article that a reaction to the inclusion of “psychology” in the introduction was “we don’t need help.” The method employed was intriguing. It would have been interesting to find out if from the prostitute’s perspective the ‘interviewer’ appeared to be someone interested in joining the ranks; or, if the interviewer were male if he were perceived to be someone wanting his own business. Another comment is in order regarding the methodology. In the brothel interviews it was stated that the prostitutes were easily accessible when no prospective clients were around. The researchers stated “the presence of several young women in an unusual environment certainly served to heighten their interest.” It could very well be that their interest was heightened because someone was actually curious about their lives without any negative intent or degradation. It was an opportunity to be heard for their own sake, an opportunity for contact with another woman who had no real agenda with them other than to learn what their lives consisted of, including their hopes and dreams.

Some of the results of the study seemed to parallel the findings of two recent studies, one of which was conducted in the United States (Dalla, 2000) and the other in Canada (Jackson et al., 2009). The similarities were in the factors that led to entering this work life, most often not because this was a positive and well respected career choice, but because of circumstances derived from negative childhood experiences and various financial struggles in adulthood.

The present study found the women generally isolated from social support networks and intimate relationships. In the Jackson et al. (2009) study there were various levels of intimate relationships reported with husbands or boyfriends, indicating that the possibility exists although extremely difficult for some of the same reasons found in the current Vienna study. For some partners or potential partners, it is hard to separate the work life of the prostitute from who she is as an individual in her own right. That some of the women were obviously troubled and perhaps had undiagnosed mental health issues is also not a surprising finding. Being marginalized in society takes its own toll, and perhaps the ‘work’ with unpredictable and violent clients can create detrimental consequences.

Dalla’s (2000) work on the lives of streetwalkers refutes popular media images of prostitution as a temporary situation where in the end the prostitute finds love and happiness and suffers few, if any lasting scars. The present study likewise finds many of the prostitutes not leading self-actualizing lives. But, as was also pointed out in the present study there are women who have redefined their status and not succumbed to a negative self-definition, but have felt they control their own destiny by “having power over men and earning good money.” Inclusion of interview data would further strengthen the overall findings.

A Different View of Prostitution... a Story of Women like You and Me is an appealing title and a reminder that prostitutes are indeed like women everywhere. They have a range of experiences. Some lead successful lives with a degree of choice; others are exposed to violence and exploitation. Some enjoy what they do, others in the 'trade' want out. There is a desire for connection and intimacy. Are these experiences or hopes any different from other women? It is suggested that the researchers continue their project. The potential to add to the understanding of the intimate lives of prostitutes is certainly needed. Jackson et al. state:

"Defining the women solely in terms of their work fails to recognize the inter-connections between their working lives and their home lives, as well as the ways in which these two worlds combine to shape the women's overall health and well-being." (2009, p. 43)

Huber, Rissinger, Stabler, and Weigl (2009) have begun research that moves beyond defining women solely in terms of their work and can bring an important cross-cultural perspective and understanding to women who are in the "world's oldest trade."

References

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