

Rates, Roses and Donations: Naming Your Price in Sex Work

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Abstract

Questions about payment and what it signifies, lie at the heart of feminist debates concerning the morality and legitimacy of sex work. Yet the materialities of payment still remain interestingly under-explored in sex work research. This article addresses this gap by examining immigrant, migrant and racialized sex workers' pricing practices in Vancouver, Canada and Melbourne, Australia. Determining one's prices or rates in the sex industry was not a neutral, market-driven calculation for many workers, but was infused with strong ideas about safety, risk, experiential knowledge and the specificities of sex work. Analysing prices and pricing practices through a practice theory lens offers an opportunity to re-think the role of choice in feminist debates about sex work, by highlighting the decisions workers make on a day-to-day basis and capturing the myriad knowledges gained more commonly through experience rather than instruction.

Keywords

payment, practice theory, prices, sex industry, sex work

Introduction

The one thing the workers talk about most, the one thing they show up for day after day, is very rarely discussed in research. How they feel about money is rarely, if ever, compared to the way other workers feel about money. Instead, their sexual deviance is questioned at every turn, when few of them ever say, 'I got into it because I needed the sex.' (Weldon, 2006: 13)

The relative silence around money in sex work research is striking given that payment and consumption, and what they signify, lie at the heart of feminist debates concerning the morality and legitimacy of sex work. Kotiswaran (2013: 123) notes that 'debates on the sale of sex for money in particular mark the highpoint of commodification anxiety

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among feminists'. Feminist ontological debates about sex work have been exhaustively detailed by scholars (see Showden, 2011 for a summary), but in short, there are two polarized understandings that concern the moral distinctions between the consumption of goods vs. services. Anti-prostitution abolitionists assert that sex work constitutes a form of gendered exploitation and have long argued that payment signifies ownership of sex worker *bodies* (e.g. Raymond, 2004). Those who espouse a sex worker rights perspective or a labour perspective, argue that payment indicates compensation for sexual *services*, rather than the ownership of bodies, and argue that sex work should be recognized as a form of labour (e.g. Agustín, 2007; Ditmore et al., 2010; Egan, 2005; Jeffrey and MacDonald, 2006; Maher et al., 2012; Pheterson, 1989; Sanders, 2004, 2008; Scambler, 2007).

Analysing sex work through practice theory may assist in navigating the feminist impasse concerning the commodification of intimacy. Practice theory is characterized by a critical view towards dichotomous conceptualizations of agency and structure (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Coombe, 1989; Giddens, 1984). For practice theorists, a focus on practices (rather than individuals) allows for more generative analyses of both agency and structure. A parallel debate concerning agency or structure has long stymied sex work research, specifically whether experiences in the sex industry are primarily shaped by agency (whether individual or collective) or structural forces (such as patriarchy and capitalism). Within a radical feminist framework, anti-prostitution scholars continue to insist that agency is ultimately a 'logical impossibility' (Cavaleri, 2011: 1422) in an industry that they argue is marked by structural oppression. In contrast, those working from a sex worker rights approach insist that the agency of workers must be recognized, in order to address the harms produced by the anti-prostitution framework (such as criminalizing clients or ending 'demand'). In this context, practice theory may provide a useful lens that helps to centre what workers *do*, rather than who they are assumed to *be* (i.e. agents within a sex worker rights framework or victims within an anti-prostitution framework).

An investigation of prices in sex work also encourages a re-thinking of a few central tenets in practice theory. Practice theory has often prioritized *practice over deliberation* as the central analytical focus (e.g. Halkier and Jensen, 2011; Maller, 2015; Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014), yet it could be argued whether this risks setting up another blunt dichotomy. In this regard, an analysis of pricing practices in the sex industry may open up fruitful areas for conceptualization, such as the linkages between practices and deliberation. I have often turned towards *decisions* and *decision making* as a strategy to circumvent the impasse around 'choice' between sex worker rights scholars and anti-prostitution stakeholders, as well as to capture the day-to-day realities of decision making in the sex industry. Choice in the 'sex wars' (Abrams, 1995) tends to be limited to a singular choice, that is, the choice to engage in sex work or not. This risks a very narrow understanding of an industry in which decisions about which clients to see, how to manage risk and what information to share with other workers mark the day-to-day working realities of sex workers (Ham, 2017). A sharp dichotomy between practices and deliberation, as suggested at times by some practice theorists, may risk marginalizing agency in an industry where the recognition of agency remains precarious.

I would also argue that scholars should remain attentive that the focus on habituation or routinization in practice theory (e.g. Reckwitz, 2002; Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014; Schatzki, 2002; Shove et al., 2012) does not result in conflating routine with ‘mindlessness’. Suggesting that routines are ‘mindless’ may misread the embodied or unspoken knowledges that inform routines. It may be more accurate to say that routines and habits reveal the attentional and affective trajectory of practices over time, from intention in the establishment of a routine towards perhaps an effortless momentum. Therefore, there remains an important opportunity to theorize the links between routinization and deliberation (also see Schoolman, 2016 on ‘routine-reflection circuits’). This is particularly pertinent to sex work, where deliberation informs very intimate and embodied practices.

A focus on sex work may also assist in expanding recognition of what constitutes the day-to-day. Practice theorists have valued the quotidian or the mundane as a crucial site for the performance of practices (e.g. Halkier et al., 2011; Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012). The analysis of pricing practices in a criminalized and stigmatized industry speaks to the day-to-day but reveals that the quotidian or the mundane is not without risk. While there is a growing call for recognition of sex work as work among sex workers and their allies, sex work remains criminalized to varying degrees across many jurisdictions.¹ Both workers and clients may risk legal penalties or criminal punishment for communication for the purposes of selling and buying sexual services. In this context, prices and rates may be one of few available tools to establish clear expectations for both the worker and consumer. In an occupation where workers may not feel they are able to access protection from law enforcement if needed, other mechanisms such as advertising (Logan and Shah, 2013; Moorman and Harrison, 2015) and prices may instead be employed as risk-reduction tools.

Just as practice theory offers a useful lens to potentially move analyses of sex work beyond the ‘sex wars’ (Abrams, 1995), sex work offers an intriguing site to advance theories of practice in the sociology of consumption. Sex work is a sphere in which the question of what is being consumed – a commodity or a service – continues to be debated between anti-prostitution and sex work scholars. Sex work also speaks to emerging priorities in the sociology of consumption, such as the politics of ethical consumption and the intersections between consumption, inequalities and stratification (Warde, 2015). Warde’s (2014: 286) conceptualization of practice offers a useful guide for the sociology of consumption, which attends to ‘performances, doing (praxis), “knowing how”, practical competence, habit and routine, practical consciousness, embodied sense, collectivity, shared understanding, regulation, flow/sequence, dispositions and the material’ (also see Warde, 2005). In particular, Warde (2005) encourages attunement to ‘understandings’, ‘procedures’ and ‘engagements’ or as Halkier and Jensen (2011: 104) explain:

Understandings are the practical interpretations of what and how to do, knowledge and know-how in a broad sense. Procedures are instructions, principles and rules of how to do. Engagements are emotional and normative orientations related to what and how to do.

This article starts from Warde’s conceptualization of ‘understandings’, ‘procedures’ and ‘engagements’ to examine pricing practices such as price-setting. In analysing

pricing practices, I examine the factors that workers take into consideration when setting their rates and the work that prices do for the worker, such as the messages that prices convey to prospective clients. As will be discussed, determining and communicating rates or prices fulfil various functions beyond payment. They communicate sex workers' assessment of what their labour is worth. Rates or prices also indicate that what is being offered *is* labour. The determination of one's rates is also one site through which sex workers attempt to anticipate and shape consumer demand. In sex work research, rates or prices have been used as a way of organizing parameters of inquiry, such as studies of 'low-end' and 'high-end' markets (e.g. Liu et al., 2014; Weitzer, 2009). Medical and public health research has primarily focused on the impact of condom use on prices for sexual services (Adriaenssens and Hendrickx, 2012; De la Torre et al., 2010; Elmes et al., 2014). Yet workers' deliberations of what they should be paid have been less considered.

The sex worker rights movement has sought to centre workers' experiential knowledge as a key site for knowledge production and expertise (e.g. Kim and Jeffreys, 2013). Therefore a focus on worker practices may assist in analysing the production of 'experiential knowledge', or knowledge derived from 'lived experiences that are difficult for outsiders to capture' (Baillergeau and Duyvendak, 2016), in a criminalized and stigmatized industry where sharing occupational knowledge may incur legal penalties (e.g. under charges of 'recruitment'). Practice theory has the potential to shift attention to sex workers' roles in shaping consumption and in doing so, capture the myriad knowledges gained more commonly through experience rather than instruction.

Methodology

This inquiry stems from a project that explored the uses and limitations of the 'migrant sex worker' category in two cities that share cultural and demographic similarities (e.g. diverse metropolitan areas that pride themselves on progressive attitudes) but employ different legal frameworks to regulate the sex industry (i.e. criminalization in Vancouver vs. legalization in Melbourne) (Ham, 2017). Semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2012–2014 with 65 immigrant, migrant and racialized² women in the sex industry in Melbourne, Australia ($n = 30$) and Vancouver, Canada ($n = 35$). This sample included naturalized citizens ($n = 28$), permanent residents ($n = 14$), temporary migrants ($n = 9$), Australian/Canadian-born racialized women ($n = 6$) and participants with undeclared status ($n = 8$). The majority of participants were Asian ($n = 49$). Other participants included women of European, Middle Eastern, Latin American or mixed descent ($n = 16$). Interviewees included brothel workers ($n = 27$), 'massage shop' workers³ ($n = 25$) and independent escorts ($n = 13$). Women in the sex industry were recruited if they were legally or self-identified as im/migrant, experienced assumptions of being im/migrant (e.g. racialized workers) or performed exoticized ethnic identities as workers.

This research was grounded in community engagement with sex worker support organizations in both metropolitan areas. However, as a cisgender Asian-Canadian woman, I found participant recruitment was most successful through in-person 'door to door' visits to commercial establishments and through dissemination of project

information in online advertising spaces for sex workers. I visited 50 commercial establishments across the wider metropolitan Melbourne area (48 licensed brothels, two unlicensed establishments) and 42 workplaces across the Greater Vancouver Area.⁴ An honorarium (40 AUD or 40 CDN) was provided after consent⁵ was given and before the interview began, to minimize the likelihood of social desirability bias. This reflects guidance by sex worker rights organizations, which emphasizes the provision of honoraria as an ethical research practice and suggests that honoraria may be thought of as similar to a 'booking fee' to ensure that participants know they are able to terminate an interview without incurring negative consequences such as the withdrawal of honoraria (Bowen et al., 2006). The other ethical dimensions of this research have been discussed in greater detail elsewhere (Ham, 2017). Interviews were audio-recorded if consent was provided and transcribed by myself. Transcripts were de-identified and coded in Nvivo. Both content analysis and thematic analysis were used in coding and data analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

This project was grounded in a sex worker rights approach or labour framework. Interview topics focused on women's work-related decision making and perspectives on best work practices (e.g. where to work, what services to provide, which clients to see), interactions with law enforcement and other systems, opinions about the sex industry and interactions with co-workers. Initially, no specific questions about prices were planned for interviews and no systematic information about workers' actual prices was collected. However, issues around pricing quickly emerged as a priority for many interviewees, such as what constituted a good rate or a good 'tip', and how to communicate and receive payment without triggering unwanted interference from law enforcement.

There are factors that can complicate the systematic collection of pricing information. First, prices may vary not just between workers or workplaces, but also across time and between clients and services. For instance, a worker may charge slightly different rates for the same service for different clients. Given these factors, it can be challenging to ascertain fixed rates for specific services for specific workers. Clear information on rates is provided in some contexts, such as in Melbourne's legally licensed brothels. This clearly indicates what the client pays, such as in price lists displayed in reception areas, but this does not indicate the percentage or the 'cut' that the worker receives.

Second, discussions about pricing can spark heated debate among workers, such as the implications of setting relatively lower rates or relatively higher rates than other workers, as will be discussed in the following sections. Interview questions were phrased to allow as much space as possible for workers to share information they were comfortable with. For instance, I tried to start by focusing on what workers thought were good tips for particular services, and the meanings attached to 'low' or 'high' prices, rather than pressing for information about their actual rates. Focusing questions on perspectives and reflections left space for workers to discuss their experiences or information gained from other sources, if they chose. Despite these methodological challenges, interviews yielded rich data which provides an opportunity to examine the factors that inform decisions about pricing, perspectives on what is fair pay or a good rate, and the information that prices communicate about the worker.

Setting the Scene for Consumption

Three key contextual factors shape pricing practices – the legal regulation of sex work, client understandings of sex work and social difference. In a criminalized and stigmatized industry, what soon becomes evident are the ‘procedures’, ‘understandings’ and ‘engagements’ (as conceptualized by Warde, 2005) that are negotiated in order to establish particular pricing practices. Practice theory has more often prioritized the routinization of practices over deliberation (e.g. Reckwitz, 2002; Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014; Schatzki, 2002; Shove et al., 2012), yet sex work reveals the close interplay between the two. The legal regulation of sex work often requires the routinization of a heightened vigilance on a day-to-day basis. Criminalization imposes unique demands on the sex worker to simultaneously mask compensation yet clarify the terms for consumption. Under the federal Canadian Criminal Code, sex work is not illegal but activities related to advertising and communicating for the purposes of sex work are deemed criminal offences.⁶ In the Australian state of Victoria, the legalization of sex work (under the Sex Work Act 1994) means that sexual service providers and businesses can operate legally if they obtain a licence.⁷ However, legalization has also produced extensive administrative requirements including regulations that limit the type of information that can be advertised.⁸ The legalized sex work sector operates alongside an illegalized sector that includes unlicensed brothels, street-based sex work and private, incall work (e.g. working in one’s apartment without a licence exemption). The legal restrictions around communication and advertising require sex workers to often camouflage what is being bought or sold, producing what Warde (2005) refers to as a ‘procedure’. In Vancouver, Canada, one of the common strategies used to reduce the risk of arrest involved discussing payment not in monetary terms, but as ‘tips’, ‘gifts’, ‘honoraria’, ‘donations’ and ‘roses’:

But basically, I think, it’s, it’s on how you ask. Like there’s codes, like ‘donations’, how much are your ‘donations’? And it’s, like, you know, you don’t say ‘Do you want to do, you know, service now?’, you just say ‘Is there anything else you’d like?’, right. And it’s all ok, I think. (Nina,⁹ massage shop worker, immigrant citizen, Asian, Vancouver)

In this context, the routinization of camouflaging one’s rates speaks to an ongoing heightened attentiveness, rather than a ‘mindless’ or ‘unconscious’ process. Legally, euphemisms were employed as a safety tactic, to reduce the likelihood of interference from law enforcement and to suggest a more legally permissible transaction. On a practical level, both workers and clients were very clear that ‘tips’, ‘donations’ or ‘gifts’ were understood as compensation. Legal safety requires obscuring compensation, but physical safety requires workers to ensure clarity about the terms for consumption as both the sex worker and client may have strong notions about what is being bought and sold.

The question of what is being consumed speaks to the debate about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of sex work – whether sex should be understood as a commodity (and therefore immoral, as argued within an anti-prostitution framework) or a service (which can be provided and consumed ethically, as argued within a sex worker rights framework). The polarized debate between these two understandings is mirrored in interactions between sex workers and some clients. There was an overwhelming consensus that one

of the markers of a bad client (e.g. abusive, disrespectful, cheap, troublesome) was misunderstanding the terms of consumption. When asked about the differences between a good client and a bad client, women overwhelmingly pointed out that a bad client was often someone who mistakenly believed that paying a worker's rate meant temporary ownership of the worker's *body* (i.e. anti-prostitution framework) despite workers' insistence that payment indicated the provision of sexual *service* only (i.e. sex worker rights framework), as Bebe and Amy explain below.

And if bad customer is like spend money on you, they thinking 'I'm the fucking boss so I can do everything on you.' So it's that kind of, call a bad customer. (Bebe, brothel worker, visa holder, Asian, Melbourne, brothel worker)¹⁰

Bad customer is very rude, nasty, thinks that because he pays money it means he's the boss and can do whatever he wants, doesn't care if he hurts the girl. Stingy customer who try to negotiate the discount, negotiate the price. This is not the Victoria Market, don't come in here if you can't afford it. (Dana, brothel worker, visa holder, Asian, Melbourne)

In the case of problematic clients, the communication of prices between the worker and the client reveals divergent understandings of what prices signify. Consumer expectations not only concerned the nature of what was being exchanged but also the position that particular workers were expected to occupy in the sex industry. For instance, concerns were raised about a minority of clients¹¹ who expressed strong expectations for reduced rates from immigrant, migrant or Asian workers (also see Ham, 2017) and the additional labour that was required in order to challenge these expectations:

There are clients who think that as an Asian, Asians should not be upmarket, they're not considered upmarket. And if you try to do position yourself with a rate higher than what people usually pay for Asians in a parlour, in a brothel, then you have to be really, really outstanding, you have to work much harder to make a name for yourself and to be able to command higher rates than anyone else. (Bella, independent worker, visa holder, Asian, Melbourne)

[T]hey think you'll take nonsense . . . they think you're vulnerable, they think you don't know the resources here as an immigrant, they think they can scare you, think you have nowhere to go . . . it does go against you . . . I had one client offer \$100 [CDN] for two hours. I said no. He called me and left a nasty message, 'go back to this [your] country if you don't want my money'. (Anna, independent worker, naturalized citizen, Eastern European, Vancouver)

Unfortunately, immigrant, migrant and Asian workers also faced suspicions of undercharging and thus undermining other sex workers – even as they spoke about trying to resist and challenge consumers' attempts to normalize lower rates for particular groups. Grappling with the implications of social difference speaks to the interstices of agency and structure, as women work to shift some of the expectations for immigrant, migrant and racialized workers in the sex industry.

Calculating rates and prices therefore involves a balance between managing an often criminalized context and contesting client 'understandings' and 'engagements' when needed, as when negotiating expectations about the nature of the transaction as well as

assumptions about those involved in the transaction. Rates remain a site for experimentation and adjustment, although workers varied in how they perceived their own role in shaping pricing norms. One factor that stood out was the amount of time one expected to work in a particular context. For example, Emma explained how her permanent resident status in Australia shaped her ability to experiment with work practices:

I sound like racist now (laughs) but a lot of girls who come from overseas have, like, very short span, like, they have limited time because of their visa . . . they can't, like, try a lot of things [with rates or practices]. But whereas I could. So [that] gave me, like, competitive advantage. And of course guys don't understand that. (Emma, independent worker, permanent resident, Asian, Melbourne)

Interestingly, the advantages that permanent resident status confers is not linked to legality or illegality. Rather, settlement or a longer-term trajectory in sex work offers the advantage of time in order to gauge the impact of different prices with clientele. Workers must determine rates that reflect their anticipated trajectories in the industry, as well as a working knowledge of the market in a given context. For instance, Lana explained how she determined her rates after researching other workers' websites:

I just took the average all across the board, even in New York, doms charge \$250 [US] an hour, that's the standard price, so, or 'donations'. So yeah, that's just how I took it. I know that one [dominatrix], I think, sometimes charges \$300 [CDN/US] and I think she's got a really fancy dungeon. And I mean, I don't know if I will do that ever. Eventually I could, but I think I'd rather not stand out from the others, just cause it just increases the quantity of the bookings you do. (Lana, independent worker, naturalized citizen, Eastern European, Vancouver)

Lana's strategy above was reliant on research into the sector (bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism (BDSM)) she was entering, yet her comment that 'I'd rather not stand out from the others' also highlights the role of rates in positioning oneself in the industry. As will be discussed, pricing can be political and some interviewees expressed strong opinions about other workers' rates and the perceived consequences for the market.

Going Higher

A closer look at sex workers' decisions to increase their rates reveals the 'engagements' (Warde, 2005) in the sex work sector or the 'emotional and normative orientations related to what and how to do' (Halkier and Jensen, 2011: 104). While it is commonly accepted that lower prices can act as an incentive for a wide range of goods and services, a few experienced sex workers countered this argument by highlighting the specificities of sexual consumption and argued that increasing one's rates could also increase one's business.

Pricing practices functioned as one mechanism for developing experiential knowledge about sex work as well as communicating messages about safety, risk and desirability. The decision to raise one's rates often emerged as workers gained an awareness of the diversity of the sex industry. For Lacy, an international student and independent escort

working in Vancouver, raising her rates was the result of moving from a simplistic view of sex work towards a recognition of the diverse clientele, workers and expectations within the industry, a process in which both other workers and clients played a role. She learned that one's rates communicated much more information to clients and other workers than simply the price for a particular service:

To be honest, when I started off, my rates were horribly low, because I had no idea about this industry. I hadn't done my research . . . I never had the thought of like, oh good clientele/bad clientele/cheap clientele/rich clientele. It was just that, 'oh I'm going to make the money' . . . I kind of went online and looked up websites . . . But I really had no idea . . . And I had no friends in this industry either, at that time. So I tried learning from more people. And a lot of my clients started telling me that 'oh, for the way you are and the kind of services you provide, you could change your persona. Now you just look like you're into drugs. And that you're charging so less.' (Lacy, independent worker, visa holder, Asian, Vancouver)

In response, she increased her rates to reflect norms already established by other sex workers in her community but also as a strategy to foster trust with potential clients by signalling herself as a reputable worker. As the above suggests, assessments of what is a 'higher' or 'lower' price can be subjective and can vary between consumers and across contexts. Emma, an independent worker in Melbourne, increased her rates as she gathered more information about diverse client markets within the Australian sex industry. Her reflection below not only reveals the racial dimensions of pricing, but also the subjective variability of pricing. She recounts how her rates were perceived to be both too high and too low by different clients or markets:

With the price, the interesting thing is, when I was advertising on one website, I got complaints. Even though my rate was lower, I got complaints [that] my rate is too high. And then, on the other website, even though my rate was higher, people were saying 'oh, you're fantastic, you're charging too low' . . . From one website, the problem was these guys, punters were exclusively going Asian parlours to Asian parlours to Asian parlours . . . And they saying 'oh, you're Asian, why you charging so much?' . . . I saw that was, excuse my language, bullshit . . . at the higher rate – I got way busier . . . So actually, number of bookings been, like, nearly doubled. At the higher rate. So it's not even the pricing, it's more marketing. (Emma, independent worker, permanent resident, Asian, Melbourne)

For Lacy and Emma, the decision to raise their rates was the result of accumulating experience and knowledge of the sex industry. This included gaining the capacity to differentiate between clientele, services and advertising channels. As evidenced in Lacy's and Emma's reflections above, prices or rates can signal certain attributes to clients. Workers' reflections on the decision to increase their rates revealed the diversity of clientele in regards to expectations and risk. Decisions to set higher rates often included references to the specific differences *between* clients, whereas comments about using lower rates were more likely to discuss clients as a homogenous group. Those who advocated for higher prices argued that increasing one's rates could increase the quantity and quality of the clientele – that is, well-paying, ethical consumers:

A lot of men don't understand this . . . a lot of men think that what they think is what all the men thinks. But it's not, every man is different . . . what they think [is] 'everyone wants cheaper girls' – no, they're not. Like, you even increase the rate, actually that brings way better clientele. (Emma, independent worker, permanent resident, Asian, Melbourne)

The rates one sets not only communicate information to clients, but also convey information about how a worker positions herself in the industry, such as one's brand or persona. Samira, an independent escort working in Vancouver, maintained higher rates in order to signal selectivity and exclusivity to clients, despite her own critical awareness that these factors are not the domain of a particular socio-economic class. For her, higher rates were part of her efforts to cultivate an elite persona, even as she remained personally critical of the classist connotations in 'elite escorting', such as the implicit assumption that well-paying clients are often assumed to be 'higher quality' clients or safer clients. Samira challenged the assumption that clients from a lower socio-economic background would not be as capable of working respectfully with sex workers. Still, she felt it was necessary to use the common parlance in the industry, by signalling herself as 'elite':

In Vancouver . . . there's such a large supply of escorts, especially girls who are doing quicker services, cheaper and then also calling themselves kind of high-class escorts . . . I wouldn't want to increase my price because I think, I don't really care about seeing 'elite' men. And sometimes I feel bad, I might talk to a guy who sounds lovely but he can't afford so I mean, in rare cases, I might say, ok, let's go for \$300 [CDN] . . . I don't even like this word 'elite' or 'high-class', I don't like any of this. But of course I have to conform to whatever is going to market myself and get business . . . I want to give this facade or fantasy that I'm not for everyone. (Samira, independent worker, Canadian-born citizen, Asian/European, Vancouver)

The rates she set as well as the language she used in her advertising were a key part of cultivating selectivity in her work and her persona. It should be noted that selectivity is not restricted to 'elite' escorts – selectivity can and should be the domain of any worker. But it is striking to see how Samira recognized the use of classed language to indicate practices that prioritize choice or selection. The link between markers of class, such as high rates or well-paying clients, and safety was one that was raised in several conversations which requires further analysis. As suggested above, it would be erroneous to assume that ethical, respectful, safe exchanges are the domain of high-paying clients. Yet in an industry where workers may be excluded from legal protection, any mechanisms or signals that are used to gauge safety should be taken seriously. This perceived link between prices and safety appears to be an enduring one, particularly in regards to workers who decide to set lower rates.

Going Lower

Analysing price-setting practices permits an examination of the politics around lower prices in the sex industry. This is particularly relevant given workers' strong opinions about rates that were perceived to be lower than accepted norms. Interviewees concerned about other workers' low rates wondered if a low rate indicated possible coercion, a lack of knowledge about sex work or an ethos that prioritized competition over solidarity. For

instance, conversations in Vancouver revealed concerns about a figure one could call ‘the \$80 girl’. This particular sum was invoked to voice workers’ concerns about workers who were perceived to be under-charging clients and therefore undermining other workers. When asked if there was anything she would like to change about the sex industry, Nicole, a massage shop worker in Vancouver, replied: ‘These girls that charge, like, 80 dollars. They ruin everybody’s, all the girls that they advertise, like, for bareback blowjob or Girlfriend Experience, they’re ruining it for everyone’ (Nicole, massage shop worker, naturalized citizen, Latin American, Vancouver). A systematic analysis was not conducted to see whether this price did indeed distinguish different groups of workers or types of services, but it was striking to hear this sum repeatedly raised as a boundary in Vancouver. As opinions about rates were offered unsolicited by some interviewees, it is difficult to gauge whether these perceptions would be substantiated by other workers. A few interviewees did acknowledge setting what they perceived to be lower rates, although none mentioned the \$80 figure.

The above suggests that there is an opportunity to shift analyses of prices beyond that of an identity or status marker. A focus on pricing as a practice permits an exploration of what Warde (2005) calls ‘understandings’ or ‘the practical interpretations of what and how to do, knowledge and know-how in a broad sense’ (Halkier and Jensen, 2011: 104). This starting point creates a space to consider the work that lower prices *do for* the worker, rather than what lower prices *say* about a worker. Workers who acknowledged setting what they perceived as lower rates were more likely to contextualize this as a temporary strategy or as a strategy to offset other perceived disadvantages. For instance, setting lower rates was posited as a strategy for those new to the industry, albeit for different reasons than those proposed by workers who were critical of low rates. Setting lower rates as a strategy for new workers was not perceived to be the result of ignorance or naiveté, but as an efficient means of quickly establishing a clientele, as Emma explains:

I set my prices pretty low first to just get more clients because when you’re new, you don’t have a reputation and that sort of thing, you don’t have regular clientele to rely on. But then of course now I know I can increase the rate. (Emma, independent worker, permanent resident, Asian, Melbourne)

It could be argued that being perceived as ‘new’ or ‘fresh’ can be an advantage in sex work which may not necessarily require lower rates to attract clientele. However, what Emma indicates is a temporary strategy with a view to establishing success over the longer term with a favourable reputation and a regular clientele. Offering lower rates was also considered as a strategy to offset other disadvantages workers perceived in the industry. These disadvantages did not hinge on physical or social characteristics (e.g. race, age, body size) but on perceived differences between sectors. For example, Lina and Mira explained that they did indeed set lower rates, but argued that this was to counteract their perceived disadvantage as apartment-based workers. In their opinion, commercial establishments such as ‘massage shops’ had the advantage of a larger advertising presence, brand recognition and locations in busy commercial areas. By comparison, they felt that prospective clients needed an incentive to see workers in less visible (although not ‘underground’) residential settings:

[Via an interpreter] I know the price in the outside [establishments]. And then I get less [set lower rates] because I want my client feel comfortable paying me at home. (Lina, independent worker, naturalized citizen, Middle Eastern, Vancouver)

[Via an interpreter] The problem is for somebody like her [interviewee] in Canada at indoor, so then she has lots of competition . . . there are lots of [massage] shop outside . . . You have to build up the trust with the client in order that the client actually wanted to come to the home rather than to go to the same competition outside, in the business outside [in commercial establishments]. That's why she keep her price down. (Mira, independent worker, naturalized citizen, Middle Eastern, Vancouver)

Lina and Mira are somewhat unique among the independent workers interviewed in that they perceived massage shops as their main competitors, rather than other independent workers. However, what connects them to other workers is the use of lower rates as a result of diverse readings of the industry. In this way, their comments diverge from the perceptions of lower rates as indicative of a workers' personal, social or moral characteristics. Instead, workers' rationale for setting lower rates evinces strategies based on evolving understandings of the sex industry and strategizing one's trajectory in sex work.

The use of lower rates was not a decision that workers took lightly. Lower rates were perceived to have consequences for workers' health, well-being, clientele and reputation. These could include suspicion or resentment from other workers, the potential need to see a higher volume of clients and the likelihood of attracting 'lower quality' clients. Lily, an independent escort working in Vancouver, discussed the consequences she experienced from setting rates that were 'too good' (i.e. lower):

I learned . . . that doing too much for clients, they use [that] against you. For example, I had a client who paid for half-hour, and I let him stay over an hour. The client comes back happy, but the client was trashing me on the review board thinking if I didn't have clients, that I'd raise my rates if I become popular. I didn't know they thought like that, if the price is too good [i.e. lower]. I learned you're not supposed to be too good for them. I had some rates, very low – so everyone comes back but when I get bad review, I realized what's going on. (Lily, independent worker, naturalized citizen, Eastern European, Vancouver)

Workers' opinions and analyses of sex work vary greatly, yet workers were similar in employing an analytical approach to understanding the sex industry and their experiences within it. Decisions to set lower rates were not solely based on an objective to attract more business, but also on an evolving analysis of how one seeks to position oneself within the industry and industry norms.

Conclusion

A focus on pricing practices offers an opportunity to re-think the concept of choice in feminist debates about sex work. The recognition of agency remains contested in debates about sex work, specifically the feasibility of choice or consent in the sex industry. Anti-prostitution advocates' insistence that choice in sex work is a 'logical impossibility' (Cavaleri, 2011: 1422) obscures the fact that working in the sex industry is infused with

decision making on a daily basis (e.g. Ham, 2017). The debate around choice in sex work is somewhat comparable to the contested position that decisions or deliberations occupy in practice theory. Practice theorists have at times relied on a distinction between ‘unconscious’ or ‘mindless’ routines, and conscious decision making or deliberation, with an analytical focus on the former (e.g. Reckwitz, 2002; Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014; Schatzki, 2002; Shove et al., 2012). As such, deliberation about prices within the context of quotidian work routines may challenge expectations for practice theorists. Yet pricing practices in sex work demonstrate the interconnections between workers’ deliberations about prices and the work that prices do in practice. That is, the routinization of decision making is central to both the practice of determining one’s rates and to the quotidian work routines that workers seek to establish in an often criminalized and stigmatized industry.

Analysing pricing as a practice also offers an opportunity to examine the work that prices do. Prices do not only indicate compensation, but also function as social signals (e.g. Velthuis, 2005) that communicate expectations about the terms for consumption, safety, time and labour. Workers set prices with a view to maximizing income, but determining one’s rates was an ongoing process of experiential experimentation. Examining the decision to set higher rates through a practice lens reveals the ‘engagements’ or the ‘emotional or normative orientations’ (Halkier and Jensen, 2011: 104) in sex work, such as worker and client assumptions around price, safety and risk. Viewing lower prices through a practice lens illustrates workers’ diverse ‘understandings’ or the ‘practical interpretations of what and how to do’ (Halkier and Jensen, 2011: 104), such as the use of lower rates to establish a particular trajectory in sex work or to offset perceived sectoral disadvantages.

Decisions about what to charge and why, were the result of considerable reflection on workers’ own experiences, research into the industry, opinions about client preferences and conversations with clients and other workers. The importance of other workers in informing decisions about rates suggests a valuable opportunity for dialogue and the sharing of experiential knowledge among workers. Workers were not immune to expressing judgements about others based on the prices they charged. Conversations suggest that there remains a stigma within the sex industry against those who are perceived to charge lower rates. Shifting the focus to practices may be a more fruitful approach in fostering dialogue and analysing some of the economic logics that are utilized among workers. In other words, workers are not what they charge. Rather, what workers charge is an evolving dynamic that reflects how workers perceive the client, the industry and their position in it.

Within sex work research, a focus on practice also opens up an analytical space to explore strategy and ambition in sex work. Ellison (2018) notes that poverty or financial need may not be an adequate lens to capture the diversity of motivations that inform involvement in sex work. As Weldon (2006: 14) argues, in research about sex work, ‘financial desperation is examined, but never financial motivation’. Sex work research, including that grounded in a sex worker rights perspective, has understandably focused on safety and harm reduction. Yet sex workers’ careful deliberations about the rates they set also suggest an opportunity to talk about ambition and strategy in the sex industry. Work practices, including those that speak to ambition and success in the sex industry,

offer a potential to shift the ongoing debate about sex work, in which insisting on victimization (as in the anti-prostitution framework) or challenging assumptions about victimization (as in the sex worker rights framework) remains a key preoccupation.

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Notes

1. <http://spl.ids.ac.uk/sexworklaw>.
2. This refers to non-White women in Australia and Canada.
3. Most interviewees used the term 'massage shop' rather than 'massage parlour'.
4. At the time of research, licensed brothels in the Australian state of Victoria were regularly listed in *RED: The Magazine for the Sex Industry*. In Vancouver, information about businesses was obtained with the assistance of SWAN Vancouver, a sex worker support organization. At the time of research, SWAN was regularly outreaching to 56 businesses in the Greater Vancouver Area.
5. In Vancouver, consent forms were adjusted to reflect the Wigmore Criteria (Palys and Lowman, 2002).
6. http://www.parl.gc.ca/content/hoc/Bills/412/Government/C-36/C-36_4/C-36_4.PDF.
7. http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/consol_act/swa1994129/.
8. <https://www.consumer.vic.gov.au/businesses/licensed-businesses/sex-work-service-providers/running-your-business/advertising-licences-and-signage>.
9. Pseudonyms are used for all interviewees.
10. As interpreted by a co-worker and other interviewee who is a visa holder and the same ethnicity as Bebe.
11. It should be noted that the majority of workers stated that the majority of clients were by and large respectful and did not cause problems for workers.

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