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Agency-Based Male Sex Work: A Descriptive Focus on Physical, Personal, and Social Space

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Abstract

Thirty male sex workers (MSWs) from a single agency participated in a qualitative interview about social and occupational aspects of their lives. MSWs established physical (defined areas where clients were not invited) and psychological (limitations of relationship with clients, other escorts, and the agency manager) boundaries to construct personal and professional space regarding sex work. Physical and psychological boundaries often were blended (e.g., bringing friends/family to the agency, utilizing the agency as a “drop-in community center”). The agency further mitigated negative aspects of sex work by providing job training, social support, stigma management, and dual-use space. Actors co-created a context wherein business could be conducted while meeting MSWs' psychosocial needs.

Keywords

male sex work; gay; bisexual; social space; escort

Academic study of prostitution (herein, sex work) has emerged in the last century. Early research focused on female sex work, whereas study of male sex work did not emerge until the last half-century (Bimbi, 2007). Although the term “sex work” comprises a variety of professions (e.g., adult film actor, erotic dancer, street-based sex workers), it will be utilized in this article to describe those who engaged in sexual behavior for pay. This article further focuses on men who engage in agency-based sex work with other men (i.e., male sex workers, MSWs).

Sex workers are frequently confronted with stigma, degradation, verbal, psychological, and physical abuse due to moral, political, and religious proscriptions against this profession (Bimbi; Koken, Bimbi, Parsons, & Halkitis, 2004; Vanwesenbeeck, 2001). A substantial body

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of academic research also has stigmatized commercial sex work (see Bimbi; Koken et al.; Parsons, Koken, & Bimbi, 2004). Researchers have labeled MSWs as “deviant” (Lukenbill, 1986), “pathological” (Sagarin & Jolly, 1997), and “vectors” for disease transmission into heterosexual communities (Gattairi & Spizzichino, 1992; Morse, Simon, Osofsky, Balson, & Gaumer, 1991). More recent research has highlighted MSWs' HIV sexual risk behaviors (DeMatteo et al., 1999), drug use (Weber et al., 2001; Williams, Timpson, Klovdal, Bowen, Ross, & Keel, 2003), and their increased likelihood of HIV transmission (Roy et al., 2003; Weber et al.).

Stigma and Identity Management

Goffman (1963) made seminal contributions to the discourse of stigma and identity management. One type of stigma Goffman identified was “blemishes of character,” which refers to an individual's perceived moral deficits (Goffman; Koken et al.). Goffman further proposed that stigmatized individuals often struggle to maintain a positive identity in spite of the negative assumptions society makes about them. Sanders (2005) termed this struggle “emotional labor,” or managing the emotional impact of sex work. Sanders reported that female sex workers strategically “manufactured identities” to manage the emotional aspects of their personal versus professional lives. By acting particular roles in different settings, sex workers were able to distinguish their personal lives from their professional lives. This is similar to Goffman's (1959) concept of front stage and back stage behaviors, whereby individuals interact and exist in different environmental contexts and within these contexts adopt different roles (see also Koken et al.).

Similarly, interviews with Internet-based MSWs suggest that men also create separations between sexual behavior in their professional versus personal lives. Researchers have reported that MSWs avoid specific sexual behaviors with clients that they do with non-clients, including avoidance of deep-kissing, anal receptive sex, and sex without condoms with clients (Bimbi & Parsons, 2005; Parsons, Koken, & Bimbi; Smith & Seal, 2007). Although research indicates MSWs strategically maintain divisions between their professional and personal lives, little research has explored in-depth the specific ways that MSWs create, divide, and manage different sexual and non-sexual aspects of their lives (see Browne & Minichiello, 1995; and Koken et al. for exceptions).

More generally, prior research with MSWs has been largely restricted to street-based samples (Bimbi; Vanwesenbeeck). Research among MSWs working in other settings, such as Internet- or agency-based escorts, is limited. However, existing work suggests that these men may behave differently from those working predominantly on the street, especially in relation to HIV risk (Estep, Waldorf, & Marotta, 1992; Minichiello, Marino, Browne, Jamieson, Reuter, & Robinson, 2000; Simon, Morse, Osofsky, Balson, & Gaumer, 1992). We speculate that agency-based MSWs similarly experience and strategically manage sex work-related stigma, but may do so differently than street-based MSWs due to discrepancies in the psychosocial environments in which they work.

Social Construction and the Production of Space

Social construction is the theoretical concept which posits that meaning and reality are created by the participants of a referent society (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Artifacts of a society (whether tangible or not) are assigned meanings and members of a group interact with these artifacts based on their assigned meanings (Hacking, 2000). As mentioned, sex work often has been socially constructed as a deviant, amoral, and criminal act. Only a small body of research has attempted to disentangle the ways in which sex workers have redefined (i.e., reconstructed) social definitions around the meanings of sex work (Calhoun & Weaver, 1995). Social spaces also have meanings constructed around them (Lefebvre, 1991). For example, the home as a

social space has a different social construction from work as a social space (Nippert-Eng, 1996). Nonetheless, the ways with which individuals act and the roles they assume within these spaces can vary greatly, consistent with Goffman's (1959) concepts of front stage and back stage behavior

Adopting concepts from the production of space and of social construction (Berger & Luckmann; Hacking), it is understood that different physical spaces can take on social meanings. These social meanings are products constructed by the individuals whom interact with a given space. Likewise, the social definitions and interactions prescribed to spaces have an impact on the individuals who come to interact within them. With regard to male sex work, we applied these paradigms in an effort to describe and better understand the working lives of MSWs who were employed by a single male escort agency. We particularly sought to illustrate the ways in which MSWs socially constructed and divided their personal and professional experiences, and how the agency provided physical, procedural, and social spaces related to this process. We took into consideration the interactions between escorts, agency management, and non-sex workers, as well as the physical and procedural aspects of the agency itself. We then examined the ways in which these intertwined factors influenced the ways that young men construed their work in providing sexual services for pay.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Over the course of a 14-week period in 2004, the lead investigator spent approximately 160 hours conducting on-site ethnographic field observations, quantitative surveys, and qualitative interviews at a single male escort agency located within a small, mid-Atlantic city (population of about 49,000). During this time period, 90% (30 of 32) of the MSWs working for the agency participated in the study. The agency manager, a former MSW, and his assistant also completed qualitative interviews.

Study protocols and materials were approved by the lead investigator's Human Subjects Review Committee. Potential participants were provided with information about the research project and study methodology. All participants gave informed consent before being interviewed. Data collection consisted of a semi-structured interview and two quantitative surveys about sexual behavior and mental health. The data from the quantitative surveys have been published elsewhere (Smith & Seal). MSW participants were compensated \$60 (USD) for their participation.

At all times, the MSWs and agency managers were aware of the lead investigator's role as a researcher at the agency. The lead investigator did not interact with agency clients. Special attention was given to confidentiality protection. Participants were instructed to not provide names or personal identifiers about themselves, other MSWs, or clients. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Any personal identifiers were deleted from the transcripts. The audiotapes were destroyed after the lead investigator verified the transcription accuracy.

Semi-Structured Qualitative Interview

Data were collected using a semi-structured in-depth qualitative interview (Bernard, 2000). Each interview covered a range of topics, including education, work history, substance use, mental and physical health, relationships, and social history. In an effort to capture social and occupational aspects of the MSWs' lives, participants were asked a series of questions about their entry into sex work, job satisfaction, personal feelings about escorting, interactions with other escorts, and perceptions of the agency.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Interviews were analyzed for emergent themes using principles of Grounded Theory Analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Transcripts were initially examined to identify primary coding categories pertinent to the topics of interest, and to identify the range of themes within each category. Identified themes were organized into a formal codebook and all transcripts were content coded. The research team discussed new themes that emerged during coding, and modifications were made when deemed appropriate. Illustrative quotes relevant to the categories and specific themes were extracted from the transcripts to contextualize the coded results.

Four trained raters initially coded transcripts. Inter-rater discrepancies were discussed until consensus about the appropriate code was obtained. Most of the discrepancies involved the omission or confusion of a specific code by one of the coders rather than disagreement about a major category. Decision trails were documented to assure that interpretations were supported by the data (Hall & Stevens, 1991; Sandelowski, 1986). This process was repeated until raters consistently achieved 80% or greater concordance on two successive transcripts (occurring at transcript five), after which single evaluators rated each transcript. Subsequent to the completion of coding, one of the remaining transcripts was randomly selected for examination by all of the raters in order to monitor continued concordance (0.82 across all transcripts).

Results

MSW participants typically were young (*Median* age = 22 years, *SD* = 3.76, *Range* = 18-35), Caucasian, gay-identified, and had at least a high school education (see Table 1). Two-thirds of the MSWs held other jobs in addition to escorting. Of these men, most (60%, *n* = 12) held full-time external employment. About a fourth (27%, *n* = 8) of the MSWs held part-time external employment, with half of these men (*n* = 4) also going to school. Sex work was the sole source of income for one-third of participants. All MSWs had current housing with five living full-time at the agency. Length of employment in sex work varied from one to 60 months (*Mean* = 9.59, *SD* = 11.40).

Agency Functioning

Next, we describe the physical and procedural context of the agency in order to more fully understand the context in which participants navigated their personal and professional roles as sex workers.

Location—At the time of the study, the agency had been operating for five years. The agency was located in a working-class neighborhood row house, which was owned by the manager. The neighborhood was in an ethnically diverse section of the city, close to the downtown area. The city itself was located on the far exurban fringe of a major metropolitan area, about 90 miles from the center of the larger urban zone, such that the U.S. Census (2000) classified half of the neighboring counties as rural.

Physical and social layout—There were four levels to the house (three floors and a basement). Although the basement of the facility was predominantly the manager's personal living space, this area was often utilized as a social area in which MSWs would interact with the manager. The basement also served as a remote location for the manager to individually meet and discuss businesses-related matters with MSWs. Although agency clients often were welcome anywhere on the first floor of the building, they were not invited to this area. Adopting Goffman's concept of the back stage, the basement provided both a physical and social boundary from clients, creating an isolated location where agency employees could "let down their hair."

The main floor of the house consisted of three rooms. This first floor was a multipurpose area serving distinct functions: to receive and entertain clients prior to and after appointments; for MSWs and their friends and family to socialize (between seeing clients); to conduct agency-related business (e.g., billing, taking appointments via phone, and advertising for the agency via the Internet); and to serve as a supplemental sleeping area. The first room at the front of the house was primarily used as an office, equipped with two desks, each with a computer. The manager primarily used one desk for conducting agency-related business, whereas the MSWs predominantly used the second workstation for personal and entertainment purposes (e.g., email, Internet). Originally designed to be the dining area, the middle room's functions varied throughout the day (e.g., social area during the day, sleeping area at night). The kitchen was the third room in the rear of the house.

The two upper floors of the house contained five bedrooms and one bathroom. Five MSWs occupied four of the five bedrooms and lived full-time at the house. Much like the boundaries established with the basement of the facility, these four personal bedrooms were not typically used to see clients. Although the manager did not charge rent for the four bedrooms, those rooming at the agency occasionally gave money to the manager for food and utilities. The fifth bedroom was used exclusively for MSWs to see clients.

Staffing—Half of the MSWs ($n = 15$) learned of (and subsequently worked for) the agency via friends who had some prior affiliation with the agency (e.g., were escorting themselves or knew one of the escorts). Although not initially intent on becoming MSWs themselves, these men became familiarized with the occupational and social opportunities inherent to escorting and thus transitioned into working for the agency. One participant's story was typical:

We [my roommates and I] knew this one girl that worked for the other side of the agency ... and she's like, "How would you like to be a stripper?" I'm like, "yeah, easy money" and all that stuff... I don't know it kind of weirded me out, but I thought to myself, "Yeah, I think I'm going to be able to handle it." It's easy money. Today, I made more than like working for a construction company in just like a couple of hours. (Age 22, Participant 15)

An additional twenty percent ($n = 6$) of participants had first seen the agency's website. Another five MSWs (16.7%) indicated the agency manager offered them employment (i.e., scouted), typically via an Internet chat room. The final MSW had (while at a gay club) received a business card advertising for the agency and subsequently inquired about employment opportunities.

Agency as a Worksite

The agency conducted approximately 180-200 client calls per month. Approximately 95% of calls took place at a client's residence or hotel room. The remainder of calls occurred in the specially designated fifth bedroom at the agency (what in the business is labeled an "in-call" facility).

Requirements for being hired—Managers and MSWs discussed the physical and personality characteristics desired in a potential hire for the agency. Qualities such as friendliness, flexibility, reliability, customer focus, and an ability to talk with clients (i.e., communication skills) were often discussed in addition to physical characteristics:

I think that would include being able to relate to anybody or be able to relate to a wide variety of personality types. I think that would include being able to share yourself physically, emotionally, and mentally on different levels of each depending on who your client is. (Age 20, Participant 12)

Similar to customer-centered approaches inherent to retail and other service businesses, participants indicated that undesirable qualities included poor service and a negative attitude (e.g., being rude, not caring about the client satisfaction). For example, one participant commented, “If you make it obvious that you really don't want to be there, you think the person's disgusting, you don't make them feel like a good person” (Age 25, Participant 27). Many MSWs indicated that an escort's physical inadequacies could be compensated by attractive personality characteristics; chiefly because these were valued by most clients who sought companionship in addition to sex.

Coordination of calls—It was standard practice for clients to first call the agency and set up an appointment; walk-in clients typically were not accepted. The manager fielded agency calls on behalf of MSWs. Appointments were distributed among escorts based on a number of factors: (1) client requests for a specific escort that may have been advertised on the agency's website; (2) client's desires in terms of MSWs physical attributes, personality, and sexual behaviors; (3) the manager's appraisal of escorts' past performances, as evidenced by client feedback; and (4) escorts' reliability and longevity with the agency. MSWs indicated the manager closely matched their wishes in terms of sexual behaviors with clients to the behaviors clients requested, “I don't really have to do anything out of my criteria. Like I tell him [the manager] what I can and can't do, and if the person fits that criteria, then fine. If not, then I don't have to go” (Age 24, Participant 29). Another MSW reported, “That's one of the cool things with [the manager]. He always said you only have to do what you feel comfortable with” (Age 20, Participant 28).

Agency as a Socialization Space and Living Space

Agency as socialization space—The agency manager represented a source of social cohesion for the MSWs both on a personal and occupational basis. Of the 29 MSWs who discussed their *personal* relationship with the manager, nearly half ($n = 14$, 48.3%) considered the manager as a friend or close friend. Men in this group frequently spoke of the manager in glowing terms, “[The manager]'s like my best friend I ever met. He is wonderful. He won't take money from anyone. Like last night we went out. He paid for all the drinks. ... Anytime I call him, he's like, ‘Yeah, I'll help.’ He helps with anything” (Age 21, Participant 04). The remaining 15 MSWs (41.7%) did not consider the manager a “personal” friend, though none of them expressed a negative personal view of the manager.

Of the 26 MSWs who qualitatively discussed their *working/professional* relationship with the manager, 21 (80.8%) stated that this relationship was positive. One escort, talking about the job, said, “I know I can depend on him for anything, and I know that if he would come to me for anything that I would totally help him” (Age 22, Participant 08). This group also included MSWs who did not rate the manager as a *personal* friend. The remaining five MSWs described their professional relationship with the manager in more neutral terms; none expressed their relationship in negative terms.

Participants frequently described their personal relationships with other escorts at the agency. Of the 27 MSWs who discussed relationships with other escorts, 14 (51.9%) socialized with other MSWs. They appeared to value having a social space where both personal and sex work experiences could be included, “I like the people here.... It's like we're all a big brotherhood. It's cool. It's just neat hanging out with them and listening to their experiences and stuff like that” (Age 19, Participant 19). Social activities among MSWs occurred both at the agency and external environments (e.g., dining, dance clubs).

Some men described negative interactions with other escorts at the agency, something resulting in stress and straining their desire to use the agency as a socialization space when not working. Conflicts were not typically based in the sex work itself, nor in jealousy about how much work

one escort received relative to another. Such difficulties appeared to be more related to non-work factors such as personality, perceived personal slights, or loyalty to a friend who was having problems with one of the other escorts. The distinctions between “who liked whom” helped to form various sub-groups within the agency (especially among men who lived there or used the agency as a social space), although the manager appeared to maintain good relations with all of these various and shifting configurations.

The quality of MSWs' professional relationships with the manager was positively associated with their personal relationships among one another. Of the 14 MSWs who reported socializing with other agency escorts, 13 also described their professional relationship with the manager as positive, with the remaining individual describing this professional relationship as neutral. The social aspects of MSWs' interactions blended with the occupational in a positive feedback system, with one side reinforcing the other in an interactive manner. The remaining MSWs, who indicated they did not personally socialize with agency escorts, more often framed their interactions with the agency as professional or business-related.

Agency as living space—As discussed, five escorts lived at the agency. Two of these men were dating and shared one bedroom at the agency. Three of these men indicated they enjoyed living at the agency, whereas the remaining two MSWs described their living situation as having both positive and negative elements. One participant living at the house expressed this view when he described his relationship with some of the other escorts living at the agency, “Some people connect. Some people don't. I think we just are the kind of ones that never really connected on a more personal basis, it's more just business” (Age 19, Participant 21). Typically, MSWs were housed only intermittently at the agency (< 4 months) before, on their own volition, moving into housing with other friends.

Approximately half of the MSWs spent in excess of two to three hours per day socializing and working at the agency, with some of them spending the night. For example, four MSWs reported that they slept at the agency more than two nights per week on average, even though they generally liked where they were living full time. When not at the agency, these men lived with their families or friends. Some lived a significant distance from the agency, so they would spend their weekends at the agency working and socializing before returning home during the week.

When not seeing clients, MSWs who were at the agency engaged in social activities with other escorts, the manager, and their friends whom may have been visiting the agency. In this respect, the agency took on more of a “drop-in community center” type of feel, as MSWs and their friends and guests were free to come and go as they pleased. MSWs who did not regularly socialize at the agency often limited the time they spent there, which further compartmentalized their interactions within the agency. For these men, the agency was more specifically a work site rather than a fluid mixture of occupational and social pursuits.

Outside Relationships and Escorting

MSWs not only blended their social and occupational space within the agency, but many of them ($n = 23, 77\%$) also blended relationships outside of the social and occupational space provided by the agency. This varied depending on the degree of interaction MSWs permitted between within-agency and extra-agency aspects of their social networks. For example, 14 of the 16 MSWs who reported having a significant dating or relational partner had informed these partners of their occupation as a sex worker. Nine of these men indicated that sex work had created difficulty in their primary relationships. However, none of the MSWs indicated that their partners were jealous of them for having sex with clients. Instead, the MSWs in this group indicated their main partners were dissatisfied with the variable and unpredictable hours associated with escorting, and the amount of time spent traveling to and spending with clients:

The only part it really affected [is], you know, [when] we're sitting there, both tired, wore out. Or, we're just sitting there watching TV until we go to bed. and we have our [alone] time, and then you get a phone call. You got to go to work. (Age 20, Participant 18)

MSWs also suggested that they experienced decreased sexual desire with their non-paying partners due to having sex on the job, and this in turn impacted their personal romantic and dating relationships.

MSWs also disclosed to their friends ($n = 17$), siblings or other family members ($n = 5$), and parents ($n = 4$). In general, MSWs reported that friends and siblings were more supportive of their occupations than were parents and other extended family members. Concern about MSWs' personal safety was the most common negative reaction ($n = 10$) among friends and siblings. Parents and other family members also were concerned about MSWs' personal safety, but were more likely to react negatively to the sex work itself as being both immoral and illegal. Although MSWs rarely brought their partners to the agency, those having disclosed to friends and/or siblings indicated that many of these persons had visited the agency. In essence, these MSWs were merging their significant external relationships with their work.

Agency as a source of information and support—Many MSWs indicated that social support and mentoring within the agency facilitated their adjustment to sex work. Eighteen men (60%) spontaneously described social support and mentoring when answering questions related to how they started and adapted to their escort jobs:

I could talk to some of the boys that had already seen him [a client] or seen that client or something like that so it would be easier because I'd get to know the person before I got to go see them. I just felt more comfortable because I knew somebody else. (Age 23, Participant 06)

Eight MSWs indicated that transition support occurred exclusively via other escorts at the agency; seven reported this process occurred exclusively via their interactions with the manager, and three highlighted how this socialization process was facilitated by both. Most escorts reporting mentorship experiences also had received these types of social resources from friends of escorts who came to the agency. Three said that clients had assisted them in adjusting to sex work. Thus, social networks helped transitioning MSWs cope with thoughts and feelings about sex work, taught new MSWs about how to successfully interact with clients, and built expectations for what should and should not occur on various types of appointments.

Three primary roles were adopted by members of the agency to assist transitioning MSWs: mentor, copilot, and friend. Most of this assistance was provided in a “mentorship” interaction. Mentors could be anyone in the agency community with more experience than the new employee. Mentorship provided information about the agency (and its network of relationships) and about the work with clients (e.g., how to successfully navigate social and sexual situations with clients). Non-client mentorship helped new employees understand the different people involved with the agency (e.g., friends, partners, other escorts), get along with key people in the agency (e.g., the manager and his “favorites”), follow agency procedures, and cope with the social and emotional impact of sex work and sex work stigma. Escorts reported that mentors had taught them the importance of having a good social relationship with clients, helped them to manage sexual interactions with clients (especially undesirable clients), and talked about which clients were best and which were worst.

It is important to note that any number of persons involved with the agency acted as mentors. The manager was probably the most active mentor, being networked with all of his employees and holding the most power in the agency. He often facilitated contact between new escorts

and more experienced members of the agency. Other escorts also were important mentors, though their contact with new employees was less consistent unless they had other social connections to the transitioning MSW (either developed through the agency or outside of it). In some cases, regular clients (particularly clients who spent social time just “hanging out” at the agency) or friends of escorts acted as mentors.

Mentorship sometimes occurred during the work situation itself, the “copilot” role. Often, MSWs had to be driven to calls. Mentorship occurred to and from the appointment with the driver who was often another escort, the manager, or a friend of people at the agency. Further, the manager would often ride along with escorts being driven to calls as a way to talk to his employees, tell MSWs what to expect from a certain client, and develop desired work expectations. He typically rode with newer escorts more frequently than with experienced ones.

Sometimes, clients would request more than one escort for a sexual encounter. Here, copiloting took place within the sexual situation itself and always involved another escort. The manager often would pair a new escort with an experienced one for “dual” calls. Escorts liked going on calls with another MSW, “It’s both of us doing things together. And not some person we don’t know; someone we really have no attraction to” (Age 19, Participant 19). The manager also tended to send new escorts on such calls so that they could gain experience from the longer-term employee.

Similarly, the manager often would send new MSWs to clients who were well known to the agency. Not only would the client gain access to a new escort (which the manager reported to be highly desirable among his customers), but he could also be assured that the client would help mentor that MSW in how to be successful during appointments. Here, the client became a “copilot” for a new escort. Thus, the copilot role incorporated in vivo guidance and perhaps observational learning as the mentor was an active participant in the appointment.

Last, in the role of “friend,” new MSWs received emotional support from a more experienced person as well as key information related to transitioning into sex work. Friendship most often involved someone that the new escort already knew in the agency, the manager, or someone the new escort met after starting with the agency. Typically the manager and other escorts provided the majority of “friendship” assistance, helping new escorts cope with having sex for pay and with people for whom the escort felt little to no attraction:

Yeah, [another MSW at the agency]’s the person I run to if I ever have any problems. He actually understands me and he’s there for me. We’ll sit up and play video games until late hours of the night. We both have insomnia so it works. He just means a lot to me. (Age 23, Participant 09)

Friendship also helped escorts manage stigma they felt as a result of their sex work. This type of relationship tended to extend beyond the work situation into the escort’s personal life with time being spent together outside the agency, away from work situations.

Managing negative aspects of sex work—In addition to helping escorts make the initial adjustment to sex work, the agency’s social network allowed MSWs to manage the reported negative aspects of sex work. Over half of participants reported some element of stigma resulting from their employment at the agency. Many talked about internalized stigma in terms of feeling “dirty” or “unclean” when they had sex with clients. Others talked about varying degrees of moral conflict about their involvement with prostitution.

Moreover, a number of MSWs talked about problems in relationships as a result of their sex work. Three participants reported that romantic partners ended relationships when the sex work was discovered, “He told me that I lied to him since day one” (Age 24, Participant 23). Potential

partners sometimes refused to accept date invitations due to the MSWs' reputation in the larger community. Problems also occurred even when others did not disapprove of the sex work per se. Reduced sexual interest following sex with clients, late night hours, and unpredictable work schedules all interfered with relationships and friendships. Escorts often had to explain their work to people in their personal social networks in a way that would not have occurred in other lines of employment:

I have told every one, but it's always a sore subject. "I'm an escort, by the way." It's not something you look for when you're thinking about dating someone.... I'm very truthful about it, but I don't like to bring it up right away. I'll wait until the 2nd or 3rd date. Get the initial date done with, that way they call again. I get very embarrassed. Most times I only go on dates when I know something's a possibility. (Age 18, Participant 22)

As this shows, escorts worried about the reaction of potential dating partners and some had found ways to discuss it with them. Others found ways to conceal their sex work, often by telling dating partners they were strippers or dancers instead of escorts, "They knew you were going out stripping. They wonder, [but] they never said nothing" (Age 23, Participant 26). This created a "don't ask, don't tell" policy between many MSWs and people they were dating.

Sex workers also discussed anxieties about personal safety as a downside of being involved with the agency. Most men discussed clients as potential sources of risk in terms of sexually transmitted infections and/or physical violence. Participants were sometimes concerned that clients would attempt to exploit them by not paying for the appointment or making negative reports to the agency manager, especially if the MSW refused to engage in certain sexual activities (e.g., anal sex without a condom).

Despite the risks perceived as inherent to sex work, MSWs clearly viewed the agency as a protective factor relative to potential difficulties. Participants felt reassured by the manager's pre-screening of clients in terms of promoting sexual safety and ensuring payment for services. One escort reported, "[The manager]'s a safety net, which, if you do stuff outside of the company, you don't know what you get yourself into. So I won't do that" (Age 22, Participant 08). That the manager and other MSWs knew where any given escort would be during a call, and with whom, was also reassuring. Further, the manager clearly communicated safer sex expectations to both his employees and to clients. He backed up MSWs who said that they sometimes had to set limits with clients around safer sex. Of condom use with clients, the manager stated, "I would like to think it was 100%."

Moreover, the mentor, friend, and copilot roles that developed early in an escort's "career" with the agency usually continued, and even expanded, over the course of his time with the organization. They provided emotional support and guidance during emotionally charged situations, gave participants role models, and informed MSWs about potential coping strategies. Employment with the agency carried a sense of community, an "us versus them" attitude that shielded escorts from potential stigma by minimizing the importance of the individual delivering the negative message relative to the connections between the escort and the agency's own social network.

Discussion

This analysis investigated the ways that social, personal, and occupational space were constructed and managed among agency-based MSWs. To explore these questions, ethnographic field observations and qualitative interviews were conducted with 30 MSWs working for a single escort agency. This analysis highlighted ways in which the agency functioned, including its location, physical and social layout, and staffing. It explored how the

agency functioned as a worksite, by illustrating the requirements for being hired and the ways in which client appointments were distributed among MSWs. Further, it elaborated on the ways in which the agency incorporated social and living spaces, and discussed how MSWs blended personal and occupational aspects of their lives.

Although originally designed as a single family dwelling, the agency provided multiple functions such that it was a home, place of business, and “drop-in community center” for MSWs and their friends/families. The agency manager represented a social nexus through which MSWs accessed the various functions of the agency. Employees' personal and professional association with the manager appeared to mediate the continuum of functions that MSWs utilized. Nevertheless, MSWs reported some level of interpersonal conflict among themselves, which may have led some to affiliate with the agency in a more detached (i.e., “business-like”) manner. Meanwhile, some MSWs were so connected with their pre-established social networks that they did not wish, and/or have the opportunity, to more closely socialize with individuals at the agency.

Researchers have highlighted the negative role of stigma in the lives of sex workers (Koken et al.). By creating a social and occupational space for MSWs, the agency served as a vehicle through which a variety of experiences could be managed. The community-center aspects inherent to this socially constructed space helped MSWs to manage the negative emotional impact of sex work, discuss safety with clients, and learn how to interact with clients in ways that promoted both customer satisfaction and personal integrity for the MSW. Similar to other research (Bimbi & Parsons; Joffe & Dockrell, 1995), participants said that they limited the types of sexual behaviors in which they would engage with clients. Our data suggested relationships within the agency facilitated this process. They appeared to mitigate some of the more negative aspects inherent to sex work identified among street-based sex workers, including violence (Kayne, 2005), HIV risk behavior (DeMatteo et al.; Roy et al.; Weber et al.), and sexual and financial exploitation (Bresnahan, 2005; Kayne, 2003).

Moreover, the manager likely fostered positive relations with his employees for both personal and professional reasons. Professionally, it was in the agency's best interest to maintain good relations with employees. Creating an environment in which MSWs could socialize and live, the manager subsequently maintained an available pool of staff available for client appointments. Personally, this provided the manager an opportunity to extend his own social network and mentor other MSWs.

In dividing social and occupational aspects of this physical space, clear boundaries were created between clients and the agency. This was best highlighted by the divisions drawn in the basement of the facility and the personal bedrooms of those MSWs residing at the agency. Adopting Goffman's (1959) ideas around front stage and back stage interactions, these areas functioned as both a physical and social location where MSWs, their friends/family, and agency management could engage in “back stage” behaviors. These areas provided MSWs important cues for adopting roles appropriate to each situation.

This study has limitations. Given the difficulty in accessing agency-based MSWs for research, our study is limited by the small sample size. Although we collected substantial information from each participant, the degree to which this data would generalize to other MSWs is unknown. The men in our study also worked for a single escort agency. Although this presented a unique opportunity to examine an intact and functioning social unit, it also may have reduced the generalizability of our findings to the degree that MSWs in this agency differed from men working for other such organizations.

It also is unclear to what degree MSWs working for agencies are distinct from escorts who are working independently. Caution should be taken when comparing our findings to those of other

studies, to what may be occurring in the larger MSW population, or among men working in other venues, such as Internet-based or independent MSWs. Ethnic and cultural diversity in the sample also were limited, perhaps by the agency's location in an exurban area adjacent to several rural counties. Although measures were taken to ensure participants felt comfortable disclosing personal information in confidence, some participants may not have been willing to disclose less socially desirable information.

Despite such limitations, our data provide insight into ways in which social and occupational spaces mingle to the advantage of workers in non-traditional occupational environments. They highlight the ways in which a sense of group identity was developed among a potentially marginalized population. The agency space allowed for both personal and occupational activities, allowing MSWs to fluidly move from one activity to another. Even though a number of participants discussed problematic interactions with some other MSWs, personalized stigma related to sex work, and other occupational difficulties, nearly all of them viewed the space created by the agency as a source of positive support in a number of different ways (e.g., promoting resiliency). It is uncertain the degree to which these types of findings may reflect experiences of MSWs working for different agencies or whose sex work is structured in an alternative fashion (e.g., working on the street). Nevertheless, this study provides one framework from which to describe agency-based male sex work.

The agency likely allowed individuals to transition into and out of their role as MSWs with reduced disruption to outside relationships resulting from stigma or other factors related to the job. It contained opportunities for support, education, and social activity in an affirming environment where one could choose to maintain their confidentiality as an MSW. The multiple purposes to which the agency space could be employed mediated the amount of time many MSWs spent there. Further, these multiple functions seemed to reinforce each other in ways that were beneficial to the individual MSWs, their friends, and the business as a whole. Men more able to undertake these activities individually, or through extra-agency supports, were likely to be those individuals interacting less with the space and network provided by the agency.

Nonetheless, our results raise questions about the ways that spatial divisions emerge, develop, and maintain themselves over longer time periods. Future research might examine the dynamic operation of space over time. Although data collection spanned a 14-week period, we were unable to examine how the functions provided by the agency changed as different personalities joined or left the space, as their relationships with the agency manager changed, or as the business developed. Research could also examine the types of occupational and personal spaces relative to other types of sex work, such as men working on the street or independent MSWs advertising on the Internet. Whatever the specific locale or venue of male sex work, this information could be useful in better understanding the multiple ways in which MSWs manage the emotional labor of sex work, and how sex work becomes integrated into a person's sense of self. By understanding how MSWs structure their social and occupational environments, we can learn about the profession and the reciprocal impact it has upon those working in the sexual services industry.

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Table 1
 Characteristics of Agency-Based Male Sex Workers (N = 30)

Characteristic	Number (%)
Age	
18-21	12 (40.0)
22-25	13 (43.3)
26-35	5 (16.7)
Education	
Less than high school	4 (13.3)
High school	14 (46.7)
Current college student	5 (16.7)
Two-year college degree	4 (13.3)
Four-year college degree	3 (10.0)
Ethnicity	
African-American	2 (6.7)
Caucasian	21 (70.0)
Hispanic/Latino	3 (10.0)
Other/mixed	4 (13.3)
Sexual orientation	
Bisexual	6 (20.0)
Heterosexual	5 (16.7)
Homosexual	19 (63.3)