

Exploring the Occupational Context of Independent Male Escorts Who Seek Male Clients: The Case of Job Success

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Abstract

Male sex work (MSW) research has been generally limited to the examination of “social problems.” Although there have been studies on occupational aspects, pointed examinations of the occupational environment, detailing the contemporary nature of the field, are rare. Research on nuances of the occupational context of MSW, providing insight on the rapidly changing face of the field, is wanting. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 20 escorts in Brisbane, Australia. This study explored job success, indicating that success in the field was well articulated, possibly highlighting that male independent escorting is becoming a professionalized occupation, with a shift away from current stigmatized understandings.

Keywords

male escorting, job success, occupation, sex work

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The majority of research on male sex work (MSW) tended to center on typologies and risk discourses, possibly due to the early view that it had to be managed and controlled (Dawthorne, 2015). Although such research was essential for an enhanced understanding of sex work, these studies have neglected the shift that has occurred in MSW, from the paradigms of deviance and health risks, to that of a form of work (MacPhail, Scott, & Minichiello, 2015; Phua, Ciambrone, & Vazquez, 2010). Within research on the occupational features of sex work, several studies have been successful politically in aiding legitimization (Browne & Minichiello, 1996; Logan, 2010; Smith, Grov, & Seal, 2008). Studies centering on facets of the occupational context of the field are sparse, despite the field rapidly moving toward a liberalized model, at least in the Global North (Kumar, Minichiello, Scott, & Harrington, 2017). Research on the nuances of the occupational environment of MSW is critical to provide insight on the changing nature of the field.

The study this article is based upon regards independent Internet-based escorts, as this variant is said to be the future of the field, given its advantages over other varieties of sex work in terms of safety and earnings (McLean, 2013). Independent escorts in this context referred to men who operated independently on the Internet, without a

manager or brothel, and engaged with primarily male customers. Data from 20 interviews with escorts in Brisbane, Australia, were drawn upon. Job success was the aspect of the occupational environment explored herein. Results indicated that male independent escorting, in the sample, was an occupation defined by established hallmarks of job success, with clearly articulated characteristics to achieve these yardsticks. Independent escorting may be moving toward professionalization, away from the present stigmatized paradigm.

Sex as Work

Reflecting the primarily gay and bisexual orientation of participants in this study, the indicated literature centered

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on male sex workers (MSW) with a similar sexual orientation. Early MSW research framed the field as a form of employment, albeit a deviant one. Luckenbill (1985, 1986) indicated that the various forms of MSW represented a hierarchy. While Luckenbill (1985, 1986) highlighted varieties of sex work and the processes of mobility, he did not detail specific markers of success in the occupation or means to achieve these. A recent study argued that those who exhibited attributes parallel to masculinity were rewarded financially, and those who displayed features counter to masculinity were penalized (Logan, 2010). Using prices displayed on escort sites, Logan (2010) indicated that obesity, among other factors, reduced the rates escorts could charge. Obesity in men was argued to reduce the proportional size of genitals and caused nonmuscular breasts, and purportedly indicated lack of masculine control (Logan, 2010). Although pricing in the escort environment was likely more complex (Walby, 2012), Logan (2010) demonstrated that salary determinants existed in male independent escorting, possibly indicative of a shift toward a more liberalized occupational framework. Wage structures were just one fragment of the occupational framework of escorting. This article seeks to explore another aspect of the employment environment, allowing for a broader view of the changing climate of the field.

Methodology

Following approval from the University Human Ethics Committee, escorts in Brisbane, Australia, were recruited for a semistructured interview. Previous qualitative scholarship indicated that new themes stopped emerging after 15 interviews, and an acceptable interpretive framework was developed after 24 interviews (Marshall, 1996). Based on Marshall's (1996) guidelines and a framework for homogeneous samples in qualitative research (Kuzel, 1992), a sample size of 20 was decided upon. No new themes emerged after the 17th participant and recruitment was carried out till the 20th respondent. An active and multipronged recruitment style was used (OliFFE & Mroz, 2005), comprised of emailing potential participants and advertisement through Respect Inc, which is a nonprofit community-based organization for sex workers of all genders, centered on the rights and welfare of sex workers in Queensland, Australia. Through this organization, it was possible to reach sex workers of various gender identities and modes of work (street, brothel, escort), and the project was advertised specifically for escorts on Respect Inc's mailing list. Men were invited to participate through email addresses listed on escort sites. Websites contained a listing of profiles; and escorts could easily be contacted by customers through listed email addresses or site-based messaging systems. Emails were sent to 150

escorts and provided the purpose and description of the project; and those who were listed across multiple sites were filtered out (Morrison & Whitehead, 2007).

The email provided a link to a KeySurvey form, an online survey platform that exists on encrypted university servers (WorldAPP, 2015). Participants entered a pseudonym and contact number on the form, and the sampling criteria was as follows. Age (>20 years) and length of time they had been in sex work (>2 years) were noted to ensure that participants were not breaking any laws related to underage sex work (Sanders, 2006) and that they had sufficient experience in the field (Parsons, Bimbi, Koken, & Halkitis, 2005). Participants also indicated whether they identified as male, whether they made contact with the majority of their clients independently (sole operators) and without third party involvement, such as pimps or agency owners/managers (Koken, 2012). As indicated, only independent escorts were selected as this variant of MSW is believed to be the direction the field was heading, given its significant advantages over every other form of sex work (McLean, 2013). Eighteen (90%) participants filled up the form and all were eligible, based on the indicated criteria. Flyers were also placed at the Respect Inc office and two participants (10%) were reached through this method.

Interviews were conducted at cafés or participant homes and averaged 45 min. Escorts reviewed an information sheet and signed a consent form in line with university ethics guidelines. All details were kept confidential and pseudonyms were used. Semistructured interviews were utilized as they allowed participants to share their thoughts and permitted the researcher to delve into the meanings that underlay various concepts and terms (Murray & Sixsmith, 1998). Such methods enabled participants to elaborate on their life experiences and thoughts, providing a cohesive image of the processes involved in MSW, without probing by the researcher (Parsons et al., 2005). Interview questions were developed based on past research with Australian male independent escorts (Minichiello et al., 2002; Scott, Minichiello, & Meenagh, 2015), discussions with Respect Inc, and the theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). The interview was divided into two sections. The first part of the interview had to do with building rapport and establishing whether participants viewed sex work as a form of work. Questions such as "Say I am an outsider to escorting; can you describe it to me?" and "How might escorting be considered a form of work?" were asked. The second portion of the interview sought to understand participants' notion of success in the field, with questions such as "How do you define success in your field?" and "What characteristics are needed to attain success?" Questions in the interview schedule were reworded and simplified where necessary, matching the

topics brought up by the participant, wherever possible. This was done by listening closely to the participant and reflexively constructing a dialogue bounded by the research framework (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). The interviews were recorded via electronic recording devices, or only notes taken if the participant preferred. At the completion of the interview, reimbursement of 50 Australian dollars (AUD50) was provided. After the incentive was given, participants were passed safe sex materials and a booklet on harm reduction, provided by Respect Inc. Participants were then thanked, and the researcher asked if they could refer suitable friends to the study (Sanders, 2006; Seib, Fischer, & Najman, 2009). Interviews were transcribed and uploaded to NVivo10 for coding and subsequent analysis.

Much of participant dialogue surrounded achievement within the field and was thus organized into the overarching theme of job success. Within the theme of job success, participant dialogue generally concerned yardsticks for achievement and the characteristics necessary for these. The discourses were couched under two main subthemes: markers of and attributes for success. Quotes and ideas were organized around the larger subthemes, which gave rise to concepts such as resilience and confidence. The relevant MSW literature was treated as data to situate the findings in the broader context of sex work research. Once the study was completed, all printed-out email and telephone contacts were shredded, along with deletion of email correspondence. The quotes were edited for grammar expression where this did not change the meaning of the statements provided by the participants. It must be noted that, as a qualitative sample, participants cannot be considered a representative sample of Australian male independent escorts but rather as a subsection of the career-oriented variety.

Demographic Profile

Most participants (19, 95%) were White; and one was of East Asian descent. Seventeen participants (85%) were in their 20s and three were in their 30s. On average, men had been working for 2.25 years. All participants were from middle-class backgrounds and 19 (95%) had grown up in large cities (>1m population). Escorts usually saw five clients a week, charging AUD250 to AUD300/hr. Participants primarily saw older (40s+) male clients, typically described as wealthy men married to women, and, on occasion, had engagements with heterosexual couples. Participants usually offered anal and oral intercourse, both insertive and receptive. Apart from these activities, participants occasionally performed fisting, spanking, aspects of Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Submission, Sadomasochism (BSDM), kissing, mutual masturbation, and massages. All participants reported regularly using safer sex practices, specifically condoms for anal and

vaginal intercourse. Most (19, 95%) indicated that they were gay/bisexual, and one identified as straight. The gender and sexuality of the participant's noncommercial partners was not asked; but two of the participants indicated that they had female partners. The demographic profile was largely similar to previous Australian research (Minichiello et al., 1999, 2002); and there were no particular demographic considerations that made the participant sample dissimilar from past studies.

Context

It must first be noted that global numbers of sex workers are difficult to identify, due to lack of access and visibility (Shaver, 2005; Vandepitte et al., 2006; Weitzer, 2009b). About 8% of sex workers in Europe are male (TAMPEP, 2009), but numbers varied in constituent nations. Fifteen percent of Polish and Romanian workers are men, but very few MSWs exist in Finland, Denmark, Estonia, Austria, and Lithuania. In Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, and North America, less than 10% of male adolescents receive recompense for sex work (de Graaf, Meijer, Poelman, & Vanwesenbeeck, 2005; Edwards, Iritani, & Hallfors, 2006; Lavoie, Thibodeau, Gagné, & Hébert, 2010; Pedersen & Hegna, 2003; Svedin & Priebe, 2007). Despite the lack of exact MSW numbers worldwide, the global nature of the field was apparent in a variety of contexts, controls, and government regulations (Aggleton & Parker, 2015; Minichiello & Scott, 2014).

There is much variation in MSW throughout Australia, depending on the city, region, or state (Scott et al., 2015). Prostitution is not illegal, but regulators have deemed that all related acts, such as soliciting and brothel operation, are under the purview of law enforcement. A complex web of legislation governs sex work, varying by state: decriminalization (New South Wales); licensing (Victoria, Queensland, Northern Territories); criminalization (South Australia, Western Australia); and registration (Australian Capital Territories). Sex worker community-based groups favor decriminalization, while licensing was supposed to prevent criminal elements from entering the field. Criminalization was not supported by law enforcement or society and was perceived to be ineffective (Weitzer, 2009a). Activists, namely, the Prostitutes Action Group and Prostitutes Collective, campaigned for workers' rights in the 1970s. Both MSWs and female workers are represented by several organizations, such as Scarlet Alliance, Magenta, Vixen, Respect, and SWOP. Most escorts are located in Sydney, followed by Melbourne and Brisbane (IBIS World, 2014; Weitzer, 2005). In the state of Queensland, where Brisbane (population of 2.3 million) is located, independent escorting is legal, but it is an offence to publicly solicit for the purposes of sex work. Sex work conducted in a licensed brothel is legal in Queensland.

Any other form of sex work is illegal. This includes unlicensed brothels or parlors, street workers, two sex workers sharing premises (even if the workers both work alone in split shifts), and outcalls provided by a licensed brothel (Prostitution Licensing Authority, 2006).

Results

Two themes that arose from participant dialogues were markers of job success and attributes needed to achieve success. Participants first spoke of the markers that defined success in escorting, followed by the attributes needed to attain these hallmarks of success. All participants described the yardsticks of job success in escorting similarly: regular clientele and income.

Making money and making sure that people like think highly of me. The amount of clients, and that would be the success (Evan, gay).

40% of success can be the money. But also, a good one is someone who can keep getting the same client at the end (Philip, gay).

Regular clientele seemed to indicate success in the field:

Once you start getting repeat clientele that's when you know that you have done well. If you keep getting different people every time, then you are not doing your job (Nick, straight).

In addition, regular clientele allowed participants to gain more income per encounter:

Repeat clients are important because after few times with the same clients, they will just start paying you more (Kyle, gay).

In addition, to ensure regular clientele, participants needed to exhibit a combination of skills and techniques:

It's a little bit funny but if you have can have a relationship, a little bit of personal touch in there, it's always good and the people come back to meet me (Joe, gay).

Income also connoted success. Participants varied on wages indicative of success. Some stated dollar amounts, such as AUD1,500 to AUD5000/week, while others indicated that if one's escort earnings matched the wages one could earn outside of MSW, success was attained:

If you are doing it fulltime, I think it's called success when you are getting as much as you could from your alternatives (Chris, gay).

Overall, job success in male escorting was defined by two markers: income and regular clientele. Participants then

further elaborated on the attributes needed to achieve these measures of success. The process of escorting required a participant to shrug off physical and emotional strain:

There are plenty of times something would happen in the field of escorting and I would go, "How can I be doing this?" But then you would and then that client would be good and show you that it's actually something worth doing (Evan, gay).

Participants also stated that the field required one to be independent:

You really need to have an independent look and to be able to read people in that sense (James, gay).

In addition to discourses about coping with strain, and independence, participants also spoke about confidence:

You have to be self-confident and care about yourself enough to have boundaries in place so that you feel safe (Peter, gay).

You need to be confident in bed (Peter, gay).

Confidence seemed key to escort success and allowed for clients to feel comfortable and relaxed:

Because confidence is pretty much everything. If you don't have confidence, you don't feel up to choosing clients, you don't feel you are going to do well, you just feel bad about yourself (Malcolm, bisexual).

Participants also spoke about the competitive nature of escorting. Some participants attended courses to improve their communication skills or watched instructional videos on how to make their voices sound younger:

I went to learn how to communicate with others. There was a course that teaches you how to communicate in the hospitality industry (Joe, gay).

Not only did escorts improve upon themselves, some also attempted to undermine the competition:

I see that your profile is outdated and you have forgotten to update your information, I would deliberately not tell you. There are a lot of dirty tricks in place by other escorts or sex workers to try to destroy your business (Malcolm, bisexual).

A participant further elaborated on the competitiveness in the field, associating it with masculinity:

I think the competitiveness and the nature of how it is conducted are very strongly linked to the masculinity of the male escort profession. Certainly, among independent escorts there is very much a "lone wolf" mentality. When an

escort killed his wife and then suicided, I caught myself thinking "Well, at least that's less competition" (Malcolm, bisexual).

In conclusion, overcoming stain, independence, confidence, and competitiveness were important to achieving success in the field. The next section contextualizes the results in line with the relevant literature and provides understanding about the nature of job success in male independent escorting.

Discussion

The results were read against literature in the field and divided into two main themes, defining success and attributes for success. These themes indicated how male independent escorting was delineated by makers of job success as well as attributes needed to attain these markers.

Defining Success

Participant dialogue concerned the theme of job success. While conventional occupations had clearly defined markers of success, such as status and free time (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000), the relatively unstructured nature of escorting resulted in participants putting forth their own measures for success: regular clientele and income. It is not known what characteristics allow one to attain success in the case of escorting. The next section contextualizes the attributes participants stated were needed for success, in accordance with the broader literature.

Attributes for Success

Resilience, confidence, and competitiveness were proposed to be characteristics necessary for attaining markers of success. Independence and overcoming strain were coalesced into the overarching characteristic of resilience, defined as the skill needed for adapting to changing conditions, be they favorable or otherwise (London, 1983). Resilience was argued as necessary for achievement in the profession, connoting the ability to manage the processes of escorting safely and successfully. Without resilience, participants may quit the field and be unable to attain success. As participants operated alone, confidence was necessary in moderating safe outcomes, as a timid escort may allow clientele to engage in unsafe practices (unprotected intercourse, violence).

As one participant mentioned, the suicide of a competitor was welcomed, indicating that competition for clients was intense, and, consequently, great effort was required to attain markers of success. In many sites of marginalized men, camaraderie was common (Brake,

1985; Robertson, 2013). Comradeship did not appear to lend itself to independent escorting, perhaps due to the constant competition for clients (Gaffney, 2007). Due to the nature of independent escorting, instead of camaraderie, it is argued that some participants embodied a solitary warrior approach to the field. The "lone wolf" mentality indicated in the "Results" section implied that one functioned autonomously in a highly demanding climate, emblematic of the solitary hero (Falkof, 2012). In addition, escorts' endeavors to one-up each other may be construed as jockeying for greater status in the field (Campbell, 2000), thereby establishing themselves as the worthiest of client business.

Conclusion

This study has limitations. As MSW are generally difficult to access, the study is limited by a small sample size. Despite collecting a large amount of data from each respondent, the degree to which the data would be generalizable to the larger MSW population is unclear. In addition, respondents all operated in the same city in Australia. Although this presented a unique opportunity to understand job success in a particular jurisdiction, it may have also reduced the generalizability of the findings to the degree that escorts in this city differed from those working in other cities. Caution should be taken when comparing findings to those of other studies, to what may be occurring in the larger MSW population, or those working in other venues, such as agencies or bars. Ethnic and cultural diversity in the sample were also limited, in line with escort demographics of Brisbane. Future research will apply survey methods, possibly through social media, to reach a larger sample size. To improve generalizability, survey methods will be used to obtain a representative sample of the gay and bisexual community in Australia. Despite such limitations, the data provided insight into the nuances of job success. This article demonstrated that male independent escorting was defined by well-articulated hallmarks of job success, along with participant-established characteristics to attain these markers of success. Given that participants had a clearly conceptualized framework of success, it may be that, at least for the current sample, escorting was moving toward a professionalized occupation, away from current stigmatized considerations. With the move toward professionalized norms, a greater focus on escort welfare may occur, possibly improving the health and well-being of escorts (MacPhail et al., 2015).

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