Socio-cultural risk? Reporting on a Qualitative Study with Female Street-Based Sex Workers

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Abstract

Risk narratives are of increasing importance in contemporary social life in that they help in understanding and anticipating the shifts that characterise our late modern landscape. Our qualitative research explores risk as it relates to violence toward street-based sex workers in a suburban Australian setting. Female street-based sex workers represent a highly stigmatised and marginalised group. International studies report that they experience high levels of sexual violence perpetrated by male clients and our empirical work with street-based sex workers in Adelaide, South Australia concurs with this finding. Despite many creative and specialized skills workers reported drawing upon to minimise the risk of violence to themselves, we argue that a socio-cultural lens is vital to viewing risk in this context. We argue that in order to effect change, risk must be disembedded from increasingly individualized discourses, since it is through the personalisation of risk that violence becomes legitimised as an occupational hazard in street-based sex work.

Keywords: Sex Work, Prostitution, Risk, Gender, Gendered Violence, Socio-Cultural Risk Theory, Disembedding Risk

Introduction

1.1 Sex work has been defined as “the explicit and direct exchange of sexual services for monetary gain” (Vanwesenbeeck 2001, p. 243). Unlike ‘indoor’ sex work which includes sexual exchanges undertaken through brothels, escort agencies and privately arranged work, street based sex work occurs where the initial contact between worker and client is made on a public street. This mode of work remains highly criminalized in Australia. In South Australia street-based sex work is prohibited under the *Summary Offences Act 1953.* Despite a trend towards societal liberalisation of attitudes to sex work, street workers remain perceived as the deviant ‘other’ not only among the general community (Woodward et al. 2004) but by many indoor sex workers (Murray 1996). Street-based sex work is associated with a range of complexly inter-related experiences of disadvantage and marginalisation which are likely to impact on well-being. For example, research in Australia, New Zealand and Canada has pointed to the significant over-representation of Indigenous women among street-based sex workers (Harcourt et al. 2001; Plumridge & Abel 2001; Lowman 2000). Other life experiences or circumstances that have been found to correlate with involvement in street-based sex work include childhood abuse and/or neglect (Surratt et al. 2004; Valera, Sawyer &Schiraldi 2001; Dalla 2001), leaving home early (Woodward et al. 2004; Roxburgh et al. 2005), early school leaving (Plumridge & Abel 2001; Woodward et al. 2004; Surratt et al. 2004) and homelessness (Weiner 1996; Jeal & Salisbury 2004; Harcourt et al. 2001).

1.2 This paper is based on a qualitative study of street-based sex workers in Adelaide, South Australia. We begin this paper by examining how street-based sex work has been investigated in the social and medical sciences and note the influences of the former on raising risk as an occupational issue requiring harm minimisation intervention. The dearth of theoretical and empirical studies investigating women’s agency within discourses of risk is noted and our small contribution to such knowledge is placed within the context of relevant existing literature. We then move to discuss the methods for our study before critically examining participants’ narratives in relation to risk. The paper concludes by arguing that risk ought to be considered in relation to broader socio-cultural contexts, including gendered inequality, as well as agency and biography. These factors should remain at the forefront of empirical and theoretical work which seeks

to reduce or address the risks associated with street-based sex work.

Risk and Sex Work: Individualized Harm

2.1 Risk has featured prominently within sex work research, with women selling sex positioned as both risky and at risk. Much of the sex work literature entails a perspective of risk focused on subjective decision-making and embodied behaviours (Sanders 2005). Internationally a high proportion of sex work studies are concerned with the transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (see Vanwesenbeeck 2001; Sharp 1994; Estcourt et al. 2000). Other research has explored variables impacting on the safety of commercial sexual encounters, primarily through the consideration of individual risk factors such as illicit drug use. Given the differing international (see, for example, Surratt et al. 2004; Weiner 1996; Church et al. 2001; Jeal & Salisbury 2004; McKeganey & Barnard 1996; Harcourt et al. 2001; Woodward et al. 2004; Roxburgh et al. 2005) and situational patterns of drug use, these studies underscore the importance of incorporating broader societal and situational contexts in analysing risk experiences. However the overwhelming focus of such studies on the risk behaviour of individual workers works to eclipse what is categorised as socio-cultural risk.

2.2 Broadly speaking, socio-cultural perspectives dominate sociological scholarship across a range of sub-disciplines however there is variation in the degree to which agency is theorised within these traditions. Noting this diversity, our interest in the socio-cultural perspective is specifically related to risk. The work of Deborah Lupton examines socio-cultural risk theories, emphasising that both our risk practices and understandings of risk are produced through social and cultural processes (Lupton 1999a). Socio-cultural accounts examine "how specific actors (or sub-groups) within a certain socio-cultural setting construct their risk understandings as part of their interactions with others, albeit within the broader frame of social structures" (Lupton (1999a, p. 27)

2.3 Emphasising the socio-cultural location of risk entails moving away from a perspective that sees street-based sex work in the context of individualised risk to one that calls for a greater scrutiny of the social factors that 'make' inequality and promote gendered violence against sex workers.

2.4 Client violence as a significant work-related hazard for street-based sex workers has gained increasing attention among researchers in recent years. Internationally, female street-based sex workers have been found to experience very high rates of physical and sexual violence at the hands of clients. Although only a minority of actual encounters involve violence (McKeganey & Barnard 1996), a staggering one third of the 33 street workers in a Queensland study reported that they had been raped, and one third that they had been physically assaulted by clients on more than one occasion (Woodward et al. 2004). Almost three-quarters of the 43 current and former street workers in an American study reported experiencing multiple forms of assault while working (Dalla 2006). In comparative research, street workers in Britain had experienced each type of physical or sexual violence investigated more frequently than had indoor workers. Just under half of outdoor workers had been slapped, punched or kicked by clients, with a similar proportion reporting rape or sexual assault (Church et al. 2001).

2.5 Though there is much to be gained through exploring the literature in which harm or risk to sex workers is considered, the empirical research generally implies an understanding of risk as a static, objective and measurable phenomenon, relating primarily to the decisions and actions of individuals. Socio-cultural theories of risk (Lupton 1999a) have not often been applied by sex work researchers internationally (Hart & Barnard 2003).The problem with dominant approaches is that they do not adequately provide analyses of social and structural inequities. Essentially, the available literature fails to adequately theorise risk in relation to the political, legislative and social conventions which code street-based sex work as deviant. It is crucial that violence directed towards street-based sex workers be analysed with reference to the broader socio-cultural context, as made sense of by the workers themselves.

2.6 A relatively small body of sex-work research has attended to the situationally-dependent nature of risk, and to the social and cultural contexts through which risk experiences and perceptions are produced. Varying experiences of client violence across different modes of sex work have been found to reflect a range of broader factors, including differences in the social and spatial organisation of indoor and outdoor work (Sanders 2005). Street workers are particularly vulnerable in that they usually work alone, often in cars parked in secluded locations (Perkins 1991; Lowman 2000). Qualitative studies suggest that broader gendered relations of power underpin men's violence against sex workers, which often arises through conflicting expectations of the encounter and which party is in control (Barnard 1993; Whittaker & Hart 1996). Attention has also been drawn to the relationship between the criminalisation of street-based sex work, disproportionately targeting (female) workers rather than (male) clients (Harcourt, Egger &Donovan 2005), and women's risk of violent victimisation. Internationally, prohibitive policies and active policing have increased the vulnerability of street workers to occupational risks, particularly client violence (Sanders & Campbell 2007). Illegality has been found to compromise women's ability to implement safety strategies (Barnard 1993) and to reinforce gendered dynamics of power which facilitate male violence against sex workers (for example, O'Connell Davidson 1998; Lowman 2000; Blankenship & Koester 2002).

2.7 Some qualitative studies have explored the ways in which street-based sex workers attempt to reduce work-related physical and emotional harms. Women have reported using their experience and 'intuition' or 'street smarts' to assess a man or situation's potential for danger (Roche, Neaigus & Miller 2005; McKeganey & Barnard 1996; Hart & Barnard 2003; Dalla 2006) as well as reducing the likelihood of conflict through interpersonal strategies such as assertiveness and humour (Waddell 1996; Pyett &Warr 1999; Sanders 2005). Whittaker & Hart (1996) found that many workers seek to enhance their safety by building a regular clientele, although street workers may have fewer opportunities to do so than indoor workers (Perkins 1991). Some women working from the street may use their relationships with others in their protective strategies, such as information sharing between workers about risky clients, recording clients'

number plates for each other, or the use of male minders (Barnard 1993). However, studies which emphasise women's agency and the socially-mediated nature of risk are comparatively rare within the street-based sex work literature.

2.8 Additionally, only a small number of studies have sought to gain an understanding of sex workers' own perspectives in relation to occupational risk. Such research suggests that some women may come to view violence as a normative experience towards which they feel a degree of fatalism; that is, violence is viewed as an unavoidable aspect of street-based sex work (Surratt 2004; Roche, Neaigus & Miller 2005; Pyett &Warr 1999). The current study seeks to contribute to this research by exploring experiences and perceptions of occupational risk among street-based sex workers in suburban Adelaide through the lens of socio-cultural risk theories. Empirically documenting how risk is conceptualized and negotiated by these workers re-inforces the need to consider risk within its broader socio-cultural context. Further, our research points to the importance of exploring how specific, localised contexts, conditions, practices and relationships are associated with sex workers' well-being. Given that sex workers' own stories are often overshadowed within research (Shaw & Butler 1998), our study seeks to prioritise local street-based sex workers' own understandings of occupational risk. We contend that a consideration of the material implications of these risk meanings is crucially important in addressing the welfare needs of these women.

Methods

3.1 The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with nine women currently working as street-based sex workers in Adelaide's suburbs. The majority of women interviewed had worked in the sex industry for between six and eight years. While two-thirds had some experience of indoor sex work, several commented that not having to split earnings with an agency and being your 'own boss' are significant advantages of the street. All of the workers reported either currently injecting heroin or having done so in the past. Five participants indicated that they started sex work to pay for heroin. Factors mentioned by the other four women such as homelessness, supplementing a pension and being 'breached' by Centrelink (refused welfare payment) point to their socio-economic vulnerability. Additional descriptive information about participants has been omitted to protect their anonymity.

3.2 All of the women worked from one or two roads in Adelaide, with two women also mentioning opportunistic work along other main roads. Most participants worked at night, reflecting client demand and also reducing the visibility of any activity. For a significant majority, the imperative was to earn enough to fund their drug use. One third of the sample reported working every night. While 'shifts' varied considerably depending on business, women regularly worked from early evening to the early hours of the next morning, seeing an average of five or six clients. The seven women who had ever been arrested had been charged with soliciting offences an approximate average of four times.

3.3 An information sheet about the study, inviting interested women to make contact with the researcher, was distributed to street-based sex workers over a two-month period by a sex worker health promotion/harm reduction service operating outreach in the area. Interviews were held during the day at a time convenient for the participant, in an office either at the sex worker service or a local primary health care service, with the sex worker service assisting some women with transport to attend where required. The interviews were between 30 and 90 minutes in length, with an average of approximately 45 minutes. Consistent with ethical practice (National Health and Medical Research Council 2007; O'Brien & Madden 2007; Liamputtong 2007), participants were reimbursed 30 dollars for their time being interviewed and their valuable contribution to the study. Although the interview schedule provided a guiding framework, it was designed to facilitate a non-directive and adaptable process in which questions could be reframed for understanding as required and participants could pursue topics flexibly. Participants either chose or were allocated a pseudonym, distinct from any pseudonym used for work purposes. Women were reminded at the commencement of the interview that they could choose not to answer any questions and to stop the interview at any time. Participants were informed that a representative from the sex worker service was available (either in person or by telephone) should they need to debrief, and a list of free, professional counselling services was provided. Interviews were audio-taped with the woman's consent and later transcribed. The transcripts were then thematically analysed using strategies consistent with an interpretive approach to qualitative research (Silverman 2006; Mason 2002; Grbich 2007; Minichiello et al. 1995). Ethics approval for the research was granted by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee.

The risk of client violence: Just part of the job?

4.1 Almost all of the participants in the current study considered being physically assaulted the primary risk to their well-being at work. Five women had experienced at least one significant violent incident since starting sex work and recounted being bashed, threatened with weapons, held against their will, and/or raped. Although infrequent, this victimisation suggests the fundamental vulnerability of women within Adelaide's street-based sex industry as it is currently organised, discernable through several women's narratives.

> *(A client) took me up the hills and basically beat the shit out of me, he raped me, and then took (my) money and left me out there…I was just a mess. And there was nothing I could do about it.* (Kate)

> O*nce you're out there you're on your own and you know that…You're just on the streets, you know, and you just hope you don't get hurt…* (Amy)

4.2 In addition, a number of women discussed the potential for conflict and danger arising through differing expectations of the commercial sexual encounter.

They're having trouble with getting hard…so they go over their time and then you say "time's up mate, sorry you didn't come" and (they're) like "you're finished when I'm finished", you know? But you've just gotta deal with it. (Sonya)

You've tried your might on them and they're not happy with the service, like "I want my money back"…well, sorry dude. And they get pretty nasty… (Kate)

4.3 Both Kate and Sonya's accounts suggest that gendered inequality informs their everyday experiences of exchanging sex for money. The complex relationship between gender and sexuality speaks to "one's bodily and material existence" (Smith, 1987p. 97). In the current study, the manifestation of violence was very much viewed by participants as an ever-present risk. There have been much theoretical work in Australia that seeks to better account for gender. For example, Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987) helps to frame nation-based notions of masculinity including the imbuing sport-based violence with masculinity (for example, seeNewburn and Stanko, 1994). However, just as hegemonic masculinity has been recently reconceptualised in light of global and social shifts (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Beasley, 2008), it is important to recognise the continuing presence of traditional gender roles in late modern life, and the ongoing marginalisation of women.

4.4 Some of the workers interviewed for the current study reported viewing violence not only as a risk that may or may not materialise, but as an inevitability of street-based sex work. This suggests that participants perceived that they had invited this risk and its consequences through their participation. For example, in relation to verbally abusive and rough treatment by clients, Jasmine commented:

But then you're doing the work so I suppose you really gotta put up with it.

4.5 These accounts are in stark contrast to the claims made about detraditionalisation. Through detraditionalizing theories of late modernity, an historically significant sense of agency is ascribed to actors. This enables them to reflexively engage with conscious deliberations about how to live and who to 'be' (see Giddens 1992). Women's roles have been argued to have shifted from being shaped by expectations relating to tradition to being less tied to tradition and instead open for individual negotiation (see, for example, Giddens 1992). The broader social contexts in which these changes have been argued to have come about have been positioned as making way for an increasingly reflexive and agential individual. The problem with depicting detraditionalization as permitting unbounded choice is that it not only fails to recognise continued material inequalities between men and women (see Skeggs 1997) but it threatens to disembody selfhood completely (McNay 2000).

4.6 As McNay argues, the degree to which late modern conditions can be said to have transformed our ability to interpret the social world in new and increasingly reflexive ways must be tempered by an understanding of material and social inequality. She argues:

In order to avoid an absolutization of the subject, any theory of agency must be placed within the context of overarching material and symbolic constraints. However, at the same time, these deterministic tendencies need to be counterbalanced by a hermeneutic understanding of the process of self-formation (McNay, 2000 p 80).

4.7 Participants' experiences of violent victimisation can be seen to be mediated by their perceptions of client violence as an occupational risk. Several women referenced the experiences of other sex workers, reflecting the social nature of meaning-making. The implicit understanding evident in the women's narratives is that because they are engaging in an illegal, stigmatized activity, the usual social sanctions against violence are not applicable. Indeed, workers' narratives around client violence portray a reluctance to involve the police or seek assistance from services. Kate goes on to say

I was embarrassed…I put myself out there and that's the risk I took so I felt uncomfortable about approaching anybody about anything

4.8 Further, several women blamed themselves if they were assaulted after deviating from some conceptualisation of ideal risk avoidance. Jade's comment in relation to being punched by a client is indicative.

It was my fault for jumping in the car 'cause there was two of them. It's always a no-no to jump in a car with more than one…

4.9 The women's risk narratives reveal an emphasis on individual choice and responsibility, reflecting dominant cultural discourses. In contrast, most interviewees, including those reporting a number of risk-minimisation strategies, tended to attribute the absence or avoidance of work-related violence to being "lucky". The women's narratives point to the morally-laden nature of risk meanings and the implications for workers' identity of their risk practices. In addition, they highlight the lack of control participants felt they had over their physical safety, suggesting the limitations of individual harm minimisation strategies as a response to risk, discussed further below.

4.10 Despite seeking to illuminate the broader social, economic and political contexts in which these women's choices are enacted, we are not suggesting that their accounts are devoid of agentic action. Participants reported negotiating risk in a variety of ways within each client transaction. Overwhelmingly, the great majority of risk-minimisation strategies discussed by the women reflected their concerns about client violence. Almost all mentioned strategies relating to the location of jobs, most of which take place in cars. Participants commonly preferred not to go too far away and to be near lit, populated areas so that

they could access help if needed. A few reported ending the job if the client would not go to her location. However, women mentioned going to places which seem to deviate from their preferred scenario, such as outer suburbs and non-residential areas, as well as their own and clients' homes. The interviews suggest that women's sense of control over this aspect of the encounter varies between women, and across specific situations. Lisa mentioned "getting worried" when a client drove her to a remote location because of his concerns about the police, while Susan felt "sort of defenceless" when taken to isolated areas. Jasmine felt at increased risk when her bail conditions meant going to locations outside her "comfort zone". In choosing locations a number of women weighed risks to their safety against the risk of discovery by other members of the public.

> *You're in danger of your safety when you're in an industrial area and there's not much happening around you, but…I don't want children to pick up on what we're doing. (Jade)*

4.11 Interviewees also reported rejecting some prospective clients following an assessment of risk. With only one exception, women mentioned the sharing of information about troublesome or dangerous clients among workers on the street. Further, most reported making judgements about the potential risk posed by men using an "instinct", "sense" or "feeling" as well as applying a variety of "rules". Examples provided by more than one participant included perceptions relating to age ("the older they are the safer they are"), a man's 'look' or attitude (for example "rough" or "pushy") and perceived cultural background. A couple of women also mentioned feeling suspicious if clients deviated from an expected 'script'.

> *They're just acting funny (and) won't ask the price…the main thing a customer is meant to ask is "what's the price?" first… (Jasmine)*

4.12 In addition, a number of women discussed the importance of presenting to clients as confident and in control, both in minimising the potential for conflict over the terms of the transaction but also in their efforts to promote men's compliance.

> *If I'm not in control, then forget it…I just tell 'em how it is…about money, everything. So there's no misunderstandings… (Kate)*

> *(You) play it like you're an expert…but in actual fact you're feeling quite the opposite but you dare not show that bit because then they could intimidate you… (Susan)*

4.13 Two of the women mentioned using 'gentling' strategies with clients to lessen the likelihood of aggression, such as massage, being soothing and patient, and the use of compliments and humour. However, one woman's narrative suggests the limited usefulness of these assessment and interpersonal strategies.

> *The situation out there, you just don't know who you're with. You don't know their temperament, their character. (Susan)*

4.14 As Susan's and other participants' narratives suggest, the assessment of risk is an ongoing process. British social theorist Margaret Archer's work helps to make sense of this process. Her qualitative work seeks to understand the relationship through which structure affects agency and this process is described through the ongoing 'internal conversation'. The internal conversation is, she argues:

> ...the modality through which reflexivity towards self, society and the relationship between them is exercised. In itself it entails just such things as articulating to ourselves where we are placed, ascertaining where out interest lies and adumbrating schemes of future action (Archer, 2003 p 9).

4.15 Archer's work is helpful in identifying social inequalities through framing human interaction in both individual and social spheres which are in dialogic relation to one another. Though her focus on internal cognitive processes has been argued to detract from the importance of social interaction to self-making which " result[s] is an undersocialized picture of selfhood and agency" (Gronow 2008, p 244), her work is helpful to better understanding the narratives from this study. Archer argues for the importance of individual sense-making processes in her conceptualisation of the connection between social structure and individual agency. She says that it is vital to consider cognition in order to understand how these two come together. She says:

> Reflexive deliberations constitute the mediatory process between 'structure and agency', they represent the subjective element which is always in interplay with the causal powers of objective social forms (Archer, 2003 p 130).

4.16 What we have seen in participants' accounts is their reporting on the ways in which the risk of violence is evaluated through a constant dialogical interplay between the social conditions in which the work is immersed—this includes the physical environment as well as the broader social context of street-based sex work—and biographical conditions such as prior knowledge of particular 'punters' as well as participants' own life experiences. These are mediated in an ongoing fashion through what Archer calls "the internal conversation" which is the thought processes that bring these together.

4.17 However as interactionist scholar Plummer notes: "the social always invades the personal. But…the economic and material do too" (2008, p 17). For example, participants' ability to make unhurried assessments of clients prior to getting into cars was regularly compromised by the competing risks of exposure to police and the community.

I stand…where (clients) don't have to stop…that way they don't get busted by the police… (Margaret)

To be respectable (sic) to the public too I don't just stand on the streets with the doors open. I just jump in… (Amy)

4.18 Some participants also indicated that despite self-protective skills developed through experience, the risk of being short of money to buy drugs at times looms larger than risks to their physical safety.

Obviously you're desperate for the money so you take that little extra chance sometimes. (Kate)

Disembedding Risk and Violence against Women

5.1 Our research concurs with existing work which places female street-based sex workers as being at particular risk of violence (Perkins 1991; Lowman 2000). Yet this finding does not go far enough to question the broader structures that promote and maintain social, political and legislative environments that work to embed risks of physical, sexual and emotional violence within this work. Investigating the practices and behaviours of street-based sex workers, whilst enabling a better understanding of the day-to-day challenges and features of the work itself, does not adequately account for the pervasive presence of threatened or actual violence. Viewing risk as embedded in the individual, embodied work of street-based sex workers serves to legitimise it alongside other occupational hazards. Instead, disembedding risk from the work raises broader questions about the sociologies of gender and space.

5.2 As argued earlier, considering participants' own perceptions of risk through the prism of socio-cultural risk theories is vital to politicising and de-legitimising gendered violence in this context.

5.3 Consistent with other qualitative studies (for example, Surratt 2004; Roche, Neaigus & Miller 2005), participants in the current study seemed to view violence as a normative aspect of street-based sex work. Scholars have highlighted the gendered nature of both the ways in which risks are conceptualised and the specific hazards faced by women, in particular male violence (for example, see Chan & Rigakos 2002). Equally important to a consideration of sex work, socio-cultural approaches attend to the political functions that may be served by the ways in which risks are perceived. Risk knowledges work to maintain boundaries between certain groups and the deviant 'other', and are intimately connected with discourses of responsibility and blame (Douglas 1992). Street-based sex work is a highly stigmatised activity. Female sex workers in particular are thought to face significant challenges to their sense of self in breaking cultural rules of 'proper' womanhood relating to acceptable sexual expression and risk taking (Sanders 2005). The gendered stigma associated with the work can be seen to inform both the normalisation of client violence and participants' feelings of responsibility and self-blame, as well as women's subsequent reluctance to seek assistance from services or recourse through the police.

5.4 In addition, participants in the current study clearly perceived that they alone bear responsibility for minimising the risk of client violence in each encounter. Consistent with other research, risk minimisation strategies discussed by the women overwhelmingly related to interpersonal dynamics. It is interesting to note that although some women reported acting to minimise their exposure to the police or others, for example getting into cars without assessing a client or working in isolated places, no participant explicitly linked the policing of street-based sex work with their vulnerability to physical harm. We contend that this 'individualisation' of risk is prominent within cultural understandings of sexual violence toward women. Scholars have identified a trend within Western societies for social problems, and therefore potential solutions, to be conceptually located at the level of individuals (for example Beck 1992; Jamrozik and Nocella 1998).This can be seen in the pervasive emphasis on subjective, behavioural and psychological measures designed to minimise women's exposure to risky situations. For example a recent study into rape and sexual assault amongst college women advises that:

> Addressing psychological risk factors such as motivations for risky sexual behavior [sic] in risk reduction programs may help women better resist verbal pressure to engage in unwanted sexual experiences and allow them to better avoid risky situations (Messman-Moore, Coates, Gaffey, & Johnson, 2008, p. 1744).

5.5 Whilst our research acknowledges the individual and shared innovative practices that street-based sex workers employ to minimise interpersonal conflict, a more politicised, and socio-culturally contextualised understanding of risk is vital to challenging the status quo which supports street-based sex workers' vulnerability to gendered violence.

5.6 Closely aligned with discourses assuming individual responsibility for risk management is the cultural prominence of 'choice', exemplified in Kate's statement in relation to being raped: 'I put myself out there and that's the risk I took…'.In theorising the increasing multiplicity of life choices open to women, social theorists have made much of individualization and detraditionalization: Beck-Gernsheim, for example, argues these movements have combined to point to a process in which women have moved away from their traditional roles and more towards a 'democratic individualization' in which women's chosen subjective roles powerfully impact upon social roles (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Noted sociologist Anthony Giddens cites a number of factors including the rise of contraceptive availability as having transformed the sexual climate to one where 'plastic' sexuality enables women to focus more on pleasure and less on reproduction (Giddens, 1992). Indeed, theories of risk are firmly located within historical and social contexts that shape not only social life but subjective life along with intimate relationships and gendered behaviours. As Elliott notes:

> An active engagement with the self, with the body, with relationships and marriage, with gender norms, and with work: this is the subjective backdrop of the risk society (Elliott 2002, p. 298).

5.7 Yet arguments in which women are depicted as having a range of options available are critiqued for overplaying choice as a manifestation of the new social milieu (see Baker, 2008, 2010). Indeed, the concept of 'choice' as it applies to women and sexuality has become an enduring synecdoche with late modern feminist ideals at its heart. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to do justice to such arguments, promising work is being done in this area (for example, see Sullivan, 2007). For the purposes of considering risk alongside the broader social, legislative and interpersonal gendered contexts in which street-based sex work occurs, choice, and agency itself becomes a limiting concept. Indeed the splintering and individualization of gendered oppression has been an unintended outcome of the ways in which contemporary sexuality has been produced and maintained in broader social life and popular culture. Limits set by the socio-cultural backdrop are vital to consider when exploring risk in relation to street-based sex work.

5.8 Though Beck's theories of risk (1999) can be argued to contribute to the individualizing of potential harms, we propose that Beck's reading of class and fragmentation serves as a useful model for analysing risk for street-based sex workers. Indeed, Beck's critical engagement with the broader social structures is particularly relevant when thinking about risk and street-based sex work. Without gendered and political considerations of the structures and setting within which street-based sex work operates, risk becomes individualized which, in turn, solidifies the binds of oppressive structures. In relation to class, Beck explains how oppressive structures have become fragmented through discourses of individualization:

> Reflexive modernization disembeds and re-embeds the cultural prerequisites of social classes with forms of individualization of social inequality... the disappearance of social classes and the abolition of social inequality no longer coincide. Instead, the blurring of social classes... runs in tandem with an exacerbation of social inequality, which now does not follow large identifiable groups in the lifework, but is instead fragmented across phases, space and time (Beck 1997, p. 26).

5.9 Using this theory as a model for exploring violence and street-based sex work has two distinct applications. Firstly this means moving away from individualized accounts in which embodied behaviours and practices are used as a means to legitimise risk. Moving away from seeing violence in street-based sex work as a risk for individual workers or groups of workers is only one fragment of a wider picture. Secondly, appreciating the social space in which the work occurs helps to better understand how risk has become fragmented and de-legitimised: a process, incidentally, that echoes the social taboos around street-based sex work.

Conclusion

6.1 This paper has reported on a small scale qualitative research project which sought to better understand risk and street-based sex work through a socio-cultural lens. It is important to recognise the modest contribution this study makes to the international literature in this area alongside with the limitations to our study. Whilst our study focuses on gender and risk, some of the broader issues related to street based sex work remain important to research. Issues such as agency and gender have been theorised through our empirical work however broader factors such as spatial and regional variations can only be considered in relation to future research. How street-based sex work in Australia differs from other countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America can be extrapolated from various studies however more comparative empirical work is needed in this area.

6.2 Risk narratives are pervasive not only in academe but in everyday life in contemporary society. Despite scholarly work which has advanced our understanding of the shifts in attitudes towards women's sexualities and sexual behaviours, street-based sex work remains a highly stigmatised and marginalised profession. Risk that relates to violence is an important dimension to the work, not least for the harm it does to women individually, but because it represents structural inequity and injustice. As we have seen through participants' accounts in this research, broader social and systemic frameworks shape women's lived experience of sex work on the street, and serve to silence their accounts of violence. Individualised risk discourses maintain oppression and for street-based sex workers, serve to legitimise gendered violence as a feature of the work, as well as a necessary evil that workers themselves are responsible for avoiding. Until risk is considered through a broader socio-cultural lens that takes into account the complex relationships between gender, power and agency, research with street-based sex workers will continue to focus on individual strategies for avoiding harm without addressing wider socio-cultural and structural factors.

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