

Cecilia Benoit*, PhD, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada
Leah Shumka, Doctoral candidate, University of Toronto, Toronto, BC, Canada
Bill McCarthy, PhD, University of California Davis, Davis, Calif., USA
Mikael Jansson, PhD, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada
Rachel Phillips, Doctoral candidate, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada

Paper: Intimate Labors Conference, October 4-6th, 2007, University of California, Santa Barbara

Laborers, Mangers and Counselors: A Comparative Analysis of Intimate Work in the Sex Industry

Scholarly and lay generalizations about the intimate labor of people who work in the sex industry (PWSI) are often based on anecdotal evidence or observations of relatively small sub-populations – typically PWSI who frequent STI/specialized health clinics, are incarcerated or work exclusively on the street. Scrambler (1997: 112) describes this as the “paradox of attention” whereby we learn much about what is titillating or illicit about sex work, but little about its mundane, habitual nature. We continue to be caught up in the ‘sex’ rather than the ‘work.’ In this paper, we examine the frontline service work -- conceptualized as service provision to someone whose capabilities are enhanced by the exchange or varied needs met -- of a range of PWSI (escorts, exotic dancers, street workers, etc.) who serve paying customers in the form of physical appeal and/or sexual services. The data are drawn from a two-city (Victoria and Sacramento) longitudinal study of the nature and impact of working on the frontline in highly gendered and sexualized work environments. In the larger study we compare the experiences of PWSI with those of workers from two other occupations that also require extensive use of emotions on the job: hairstyling, and food and beverage serving. In this paper, we focus mainly on qualitative findings from respondents working in the sex industry, contextualizing them, where appropriate, with results on stylists and servers.

Our results show that PWSI draw upon their own emotional skills and the informal behavior rules practiced in their particular work venue (escort agency, home, exotic clubs and street) to negotiate the expectations of customers and, when present, bosses. While some of our respondents report feeling like their ‘hearts are managed,’ similar to Arlie Hochschild’s airline industry workers (1979), others speak about being skilled emotional managers, drawing upon different types of performances to resist and modify unwelcomed demands. Some respondents also express personal satisfaction with their provision of important services – ‘sexual counselor’ or ‘healthcare worker’ – when helping regular customers cope with psychological problems or practicing safe sex. In these circumstances, PWSI argue they make a positive contribution to society that ‘makes them feel good’. All three types of narratives—laborer, manager and counselor—are also invoked to varying degrees by the hairstylists and servers we interview, though they typically use different metaphors, describe different visual images and speak about different interactional dynamics in their accounts. Our findings underscore the need to study sex work alongside other types of frontline service work that rely on extensive use of emotions. Research that adopts this approach will improve understanding of workers’ varied emotional roles and their consequences in small service contexts and non-organized labor markets where there are few formal management rules and little or no organized training on how to act when delivering services to customers.