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SEX TRADE AMONG MEN: NEGOTIATING SEX, BODIES AND IDENTITY CATEGORIES

COMÉRCIO SEXUAL ENTRE HOMENS: NEGOCIANDO SEXO, CORPOS E CATEGORIAS IDENTITÁRIAS

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ABSTRACT

Commercial sex is a marginalized and highly stigmatized activity in Brazilian culture. In this article we aim at investigating the discursive strategies used by young men who trade sex in order to resist stigmatization and social exclusion. We interviewed 24 young men who trade sex in a medium sized city in Brazil. Discursive strategies used by the interviewees to avoid social stigma could be summarized as (1) a reduction of sexual activity to its commercial sense by employing a conceptualization of masculinity that focuses on moral values and disregards sexual intercourse, (2) an emphasis on the anatomic characteristics as a criterion to delimit sexual identification categories, and (3) a shifting of sexual systems from one based on sexual object choice to one based on sexual aim. The discussion highlights that the interviewees were actively negotiating with normative assumptions of sexuality and thus producing either its subversion or conservation.

Keywords: sexuality; sex discrimination; juvenile prostitution.

RESUMO

O comércio sexual é uma atividade marginalizada e altamente estigmatizada na cultura brasileira. Neste estudo, buscamos investigar as estratégias discursivas utilizadas para resistir à estigmatização e exclusão social por jovens homens que participam do comércio sexual. Entrevistamos 24 jovens engajados no sexo comercial em uma cidade de médio porte do sudeste do Brasil. As estratégias discursivas utilizadas pelos entrevistados podem ser resumidas em: (1) redução da atividade sexual ao seu sentido comercial, por meio do emprego de uma conceituação de masculinidade centrada nos valores morais e desvinculada do intercurso sexual; (2) ênfase nas características anatômicas como critério que delimita categorias de identidade sexual; e (3) mudança do sistema de classificação sexual baseado na escolha do objeto sexual para um sistema baseado na atividade sexual desempenhada. Destacamos que os entrevistados estavam ativamente negociando com os padrões normativos de sexualidade, produzindo tanto sua subversão quanto conservação.

Palavras-chave: sexualidade; discriminação sexual; prostituição juvenil.

Sex trade among men is a marginalized and highly stigmatized activity in Brazilian culture. It is also overlooked in national scientific studies, specifically when compared to the number of studies about women who trade sex (Santos, 2010, 2011). In this article we aim at investigating the discursive strategies used by young men who trade sex in order to resist stigmatization and social exclusion. As our discussion unfolds, we expect to challenge two common trends in scientific and cultural representations of sex trade among men. The first one refers to the common narrative that associates sex trade with poverty and victimization. The second one is related to the tendency

to understand someone's identity as a byproduct of his/her sexuality. The use of the words *male prostitute* (or *male prostitution*) can be highlighted as a mark of this tendency once it transforms a sexual practice into an occupational and/or identity category. Although scientific literature broadly uses these terms, young men who we interviewed rarely would do so. As we could see in our interviews, young men who trade sex constantly articulate their narrative about their life and work in response to these two trends.

In order to challenge these two common trends, it is useful to view scientific knowledge as a cultural

production, which is to say that scientific knowledge is contingent upon time, context and the conventions of a specific community.

The postmodern shift in social sciences has allowed us to understand each scientific text as a narrative, rather than a blunt report of a stable reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Gergen 1997, 2009). As narratives, scientific texts are designed to convey a message; they are built with words and within language styles, with characters playing certain roles within a certain set of events. Every narrative carries the voice of its author and, as the author speaks, his/her voice is immersed in the history and culture that allows it to be reasonable. Every narrative is partial, limited, and constrained by the very values it helps to create. As a narrative is written, or as a story is told, the reality in which we live is created (Law, 2004).

Understanding scientific texts as contextual narratives allows us to question the pictures of reality that we privilege in our culture and opens debate about the implications of such constructed realities. It is in this spirit that we ask: What is the story that has been told about young men who trade sex? What cultural understandings does this story convey and with what effects? What can we learn about our social values as we critically examine these stories? Asking these questions may eventually encourage us to broaden our discourse in order to entertain a more complex description of this issue and may help us to question which stories haven't been told, and why.

The social construction of "male prostitution"

Scott (2003) argues that it was only in recent times that sex trade among men was rendered socially problematic. Based on an historical reconstruction of the discourse on "male prostitution", he points out that, in the 19th century, the subject was addressed as a moral problem associated with gender deviation or undesirable class boundary crossing. The social responses to it were both medical and legal, but poorly organized and inconsistent. It was only in the mid 20th century that scientific discourse attempted to address the subject with a presumed value-free approach – the hallmark of science. The quest endured by these early scientists was to find the etiological explanation of a problem often described in terms of intergenerational sex and financial exploitation. "Prostitute" was seen as the result of a perverted adult.

As the medical discourse about homosexuality gained popularity in 20th century, "male prostitution"

began to be described in a more complex way, within a discourse that associated commercial sexual activity with identity categories. The way in which "prostitution" was categorized depended upon the peculiarities of the activity, and "street prostitutes" were seen differently from escorts, those in brothels, or so-called kept-boys. The "professional prostitute" was described as a perverted adult who deliberately choose an activity in which he could transform a pathological sexual inclination into a way of living. In contrast, the "street prostitute" was described as a victim of the seduction of perverted men, poor social conditions and weak family bonds (Scott, 2003). This discourse was aligned with the emerging post-war concerns on population and sexual control that worked to construct the category of adolescent and that attracted scientific attention toward family organization in North America.

Kaye (2003) argues that before the popularization of sexual identity categories such as heterosexual and homosexual, "male prostitution" was an activity performed in terms of economic trade, but also as a recreational activity in North America. Some working-class men would engage in what they identified as a pleasant activity in order to supplement their income. With the emergence of sexual identity categories and its popularization, performing commercial sex with another man brought the risk of being identified as a homosexual, and thus, being placed in a socially discriminated category. In order to avoid the stigma, one would only engage in "prostitution" if he had very strong financial reasons. As a consequence, the financial aspect of "male prostitution" was emphasized while the possible pleasure and entertaining dimension of the activity had to be strongly denied.

Historically, different portraits of "male prostitutes" in scientific discourse evoked different forms of action that ranged from medicalization or surgical intervention (i.e. lobotomy) of the perverted sociopath to crusades to save victimized middle-class children from the dangers of an uncontrolled and anti-family sexual practice. Such interventions would directly affect the main character of these narratives, the "prostitute" himself, and would indirectly regulate the performances of those who were playing "in the background". Thus, at the expense of the "prostitute's" body and identity – among other archetypes of a vicious sexuality created by scientific discourse – social sexual practices were confined within the straight limits of family, heterosexuality and monogamy – the only safe place where one could be at the same time sexual and normal (Foucault, 1988).

In the Brazilian context, academic narratives about male sex work are still very limited. A search in

Brazilian main academic database indicates only one paper that addresses the theme, focusing on healthcare issues and the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) (Santos, 2011). However, the investigation of female and transvestite sex commerce is much broader and can indicate relevant issues to discuss “male prostitution” as well, especially when it surpasses the common concern with the prevention and transmission of STDs.

Studies on “female prostitution”, informed by gender theories, highlight the importance of considering categories such as gender, body, right and race in the analysis of commercial sex. Instead of reinforcing the traditional victimizing portrait of women who trade sex, some studies describe sex commerce in terms of work and income production (Pasini, 2005; Rodrigues, 2009) and a tensional field of identity descriptions, especially for immigrant women (Mayorga, 2011). On the one hand, sex commerce allows women to work, make money and create an identity as a worker (in opposition of a housewife, for example). However, on the other hand, there is still a moralizing discourse that prevents these women from taking full advantage of their right over their own bodies, limiting the emancipating potential of this activity. When questioned about the possibility of the legal recognition of prostitution, some women highlight the advantages of working in a safer, more hygienic place and having formal access to workers’ rights, while others resist the idea of considering sex as work due to their moral values (Mayorga, 2011).

If we consider the historical oppression of women in the Brazilian context, and the different expectations created in relation to how a man or a woman should be, we have to suspect that sex commerce for men is a radically different experience than it is for women. Social discourses about masculinity situate work, sex and right over the body very differently than the discourse about femininity; therefore, they circumscribe limits and possibilities that cannot be equivalent.

In the last years, some Brazilian researchers have studied sex commerce among transvestites. For Pelúcio (2005), the meaning of sex commerce among transvestites can be related to (1) a demeaning activity in which one becomes involved only in extreme situations, (2) a way to gain access to better life conditions and social ascension, (3) work in which one can produce income and develop social relations.

In the same way that female prostitution must be understood in light of women’s oppression in a society of patriarchal values, the analysis of sexual commerce among transvestites cannot disregard gender issues. In

the case of transvestites, the continuous construction of identities challenges the presumed gender binary and at the same time disarticulates the naturalized connection between sexual desire and the genitally-defined body (Jimenez & Adorno, 2009). This identity construction includes passage through stages of recognition of effeminate traits, learning how to dress up and behave, dominating a new and peculiar vocabulary, and body modifications (Pelúcio, 2005). The study of transvestite sex commerce highlights how the body of a transvestite cannot be reduced to a “product for sale” but is a central aspect of one’s gender construction and an anchorage of identity discourses (Bento, 2006).

In sum, contemporary Brazilian narratives about sex commerce (among women and transvestites) tend to discuss the issue under the light of gender relations, privileging in the analysis, categories such as rights to work, subversion of naturalized notions of identity and challenges to the stable connection between body, sexuality and gender expression. These categories seem to be important to be considered in the analysis of male sex commerce as well.

As presented above, “male prostitution” has been described differently in response to particular contextual and historical demands. It could be a discourse that portrays the perverted corruptor of family values that at the same time reinforces the boundaries it is supposedly corrupting - in times when family strength was socially and politically important. Or it could be the sign of a particular identity founded upon sexual preferences – in times when sex and sin were being transformed into sexuality and pathology, two important concepts for the establishment of an emerging social governing structure founded on reason, knowledge and individuals (Foucault, 1988). It could also be a discourse about health concerns and public health policies when the AIDS epidemic offered a new reference to understand and think about sexuality or, more recently, it could be the discourse of labor and work (Bimbi, 2007).

Emphasizing the shifts in scientific discourse on sex trade among men does not simply mean that it is a single phenomenon that has been approached, reported and narrated differently in different times and contexts. More than that, it means that different cultural and scientific accounts of it produce different phenomena; scientific texts delineate not only the cultural outlook on sex trade among men, but contribute to the regulation of its practice, economy and dynamics. Thus, scientific texts are narratives that actually produce the phenomena under the guise of telling the “facts”. Recognizing the generative power

of such stories is a pre-condition to a reflexive and ethical approach to social issues.

Sexual identity discourse and the delimitation of normalcy

In the Brazilian context, sex trade among men is commonly perceived as a highly discriminated activity performed mostly by and to gay men. The association between male prostitution and homosexual identity seems to be predominant in both scientific and common sense discourse (Taquette, Vilhena, Santos, & Barros, 2005). Despite contemporary changes toward social inclusion and the development of human rights movements, the common portrait of gay men in Brazilian imagery is still saturated by stigmatization (Moscheta & Santos, 2010). In public discourse, male homosexuality is often addressed as a “censurable option” of a weak, ill, perverted, abnormal and/or victimized individual. Historically, social exclusion resulting from this representation has forced homosexuals (men and women) to concentrate in ghettos, where they can live out their desires away from the vigilant eyes of a society based on patriarchal values. Obviously, in big cities, the tolerance for homosexuals is much more evident and the boundaries of the ghettos are more permeable. However, there is still a very intense relationship made between homosexuality and promiscuity, as if they were synonyms. A common representation in Brazilian culture is that sex trade equals promiscuity, and therefore, the logical and discursive deduction is that men who trade sex are homosexuals.

Clearly, the imagery about sex trade in Brazil, specifically between men, is not centered on money and labor. Instead it is focused on identity and sexual identity categories as if the act of buying or selling sex would tell much about someone’s sexuality, and as if knowing someone’s sexuality would be the same as knowing their true self.

This association of identity and sexuality is a product of the 18th century discursive change that located sexuality within the Christian focus on confession, concerns and control and at the same time, elevated it to the core of human existence (Foucault, 1988, 1992). The emerging scientific discourse of the following centuries embraced the task of understanding sexuality given its importance to the Darwinian comprehension of species evolution. Krafft-Ebing (1886/1999), for example, produced a complete classification of sexuality and its deviations that subsidized Freudian articulations between sexuality and mental health (Moscheta, 2011). In Foucault’s (1988) argument, the

scientific discursive production about sexuality that emerged since the 19th century defined the limits and confinements of what would be considered a normal sexuality by the definition of its abnormalities.

Therefore, we could say that in a society’s imaginary geography, the “sexual abnormal”, such as gay men and “prostitutes”, are outcasts; they belong to a foreign territory whose frontiers define the rules and values. These imaginary territories, called ghettos, are spaces of exclusion and exception that work to confirm the borders that regulate what is accepted, included and normal. They are as rejected as necessary for the comfortable sense of normalcy of those that stand on the other side of the border. The comfort comes not as much from the sense of normalcy but rather, from the quiet conviction that there is no-thing “there” to be thought about. Normalcy produces a peaceful silence that allows one’s identity to be described in other terms than its sexuality. On the contrary, those in the ghetto are continuously compelled to talk, for being in the ghetto is taking the risk of having your identity defined in terms of your sexuality. We assume that, since “male prostitutes” are considered social outcasts, they have to articulate their identity discourses within terms of sexuality.

One of the most compelling aspects of this articulation is the construction and reconstruction of ideas about masculinity. From its position at the margins of moral agreements within Brazilian society, sex trade among men is a practice that jeopardizes normative assumptions about masculinity. We understand masculinity as a set of socially constructed ideas about the proper role of a male body (J. W. Scott, 1988). Therefore, masculinity - as femininity - varies according to the location and time of a given culture, as well as along someone’s life span, ethnic group and economic status. However, one of the most ubiquitous ideas about masculinity is its compulsory association with heterosexuality (Badinter, 1993). Masculinity is defined not only as opposed to femininity but to homosexuality as well (Medrado-Dantas, 1997). In this sense, sex trade among men becomes an interesting site of study to understand the discursive processes of construction and deconstruction of masculinity.

We also assume that identity discourses are tensional, since they comprise a battle between the personal attributes one is trying to prove one possesses and the stereotyped assumptions usually made about oneself – or as Goffman (1986) described it, a dispute between the actual social identity and the virtual social identity.

Therefore, in order to avoid the high cost of stigma, men who trade sex have to defy, resist and

reconstruct the hegemonic discourse of sexuality, identity and masculinity. Thus, in our discussion we want to highlight the active resistance and incessant negotiation of men who perform a socially discriminated activity. As we will show, this negotiation is sometimes subversive/creative and, since nobody can completely step out of culture, it is sometimes reactionary/conservative. Both forms of negotiation can help us to understand how sexuality is articulated with power and identity categories, and to imagine what might be transformative possibilities.

Method

This research is part of a larger project that aimed to investigate the construction of sexuality among young adults. We included young men who trade sex in the scope of this inquiry because health concerns where, at that time, a priority in the research group's agenda. The general aim of this inquiry was to generate an understanding of the participation of young men in sex trade that would allow health and social workers to better address the increasing number of AIDS cases in Ribeirão Preto, Brazil. However, as the research unfolded we understood that health prevention strategies would be better tailored if we gain more complex descriptions of the process of constructing the narratives these young men create about their life and work. In particular, in this investigation, we revisited the *corpus* of the original research of Santos (2010) with the purpose of identifying the discursive strategies used by young men who trade sex in order to resist stigmatization and social exclusion.

The city of Ribeirão Preto is situated in the countryside of the State of São Paulo, Brazil, with a population of over half a million inhabitants. It is the major city in the richest region of the country yet it displays great inequality in the distribution of income. The economy is based on agribusiness as well as health and educational services. In the last decade, the city experienced the influx of a large number of immigrants from different parts of the country. This influx increased the number of unemployed persons, and consequently increased socio-economic differences. The city presents one of the highest levels of HIV infection in the country mostly due to drug use among adolescents.

We started our investigation interviewing 24 men who admitted to trade sex, ranging in age from 17 to 29 years in Ribeirão Preto. These young men were recruited through newspaper advertisements and by direct approach on the streets. We approached the research field during night excursions in different

weekdays. During these excursions we talked to the potential participants and presented the research, not worrying about having the participant's decision to be interviewed. Usually this decision would come later, in a second meeting, or by suggestion of another participant. Considering the vulnerability present in the life situation of these young men, and the consequent need to be self-protective, the main purpose of the night excursions was to build trust among them. Seeing us frequently, talking to some of their friends helped to diminish the suspicion about our interest in them.

Once they agreed to participate, we negotiated the conditions of the interviews such as time and location. Most of the interviews were conducted at night and at a safe and secluded place according to the participants' convenience. We used a set of semi-structured questions that covered topics such as: family, professional activities, education, prostitution, health, safe-sex practices, sexuality, prejudice and discrimination, dreams and plans for the future. All the interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed afterwards.

The epistemological presumptions that underscore this work are not those that affirm the existence of a single reality waiting to be uncovered by the research. On the contrary, and informed by a social constructionist stance, we tried to create an understanding of male sex commerce that would generate new possibilities for actions, specifically considering the STD prevention strategies. This pragmatic and anti-essentialist orientation demanded a method that could be defined as an "action" that produces a reality using a set of devices, which include theory (gender and identity) and technology (interviews, categories, clusters of meaning) (Law, 2004). Thus, we used clusters of meanings and thematic axis as strategies to explore the interviews, oriented by an unfolding and pragmatically driven approach (Moscheta, 2011).

We used the transcriptions to generate an understanding of the meanings these young men attribute to their activity, that is, how processes of stigmatization are involved in their practice and how identity categories are created and understood in the interplay of social relationships. To this end, we started by annotating on each interview every aspect associated with identity and gender issues (i.e. words and expressions used by the interviewees to refer to "how they see themselves" and "how they think others see them") Afterwards, we clustered the annotated aspects of each interview into an integrated list of categories informed by central terms offered by the literature and organized it into three axes: body/anatomy, virility/

masculinity and sexual identity categories. These three axes helped us produce an understanding of male sex commerce that questioned the traditional portrayal of victimized, abused and marginalized men.

In the analysis that follows, we explore these three axes illustrating each of them with selected quotations from the men we interviewed.

Living at the border: What is it to be a man?

Most of the clients of men who trade sex in Brazil are other men. This makes it easy to assume that in order to engage in sex trade, young men would either identify themselves as homosexuals or at least recognize having some sort of homosexual desire or pleasure. That is the hegemonic cultural understanding of male sex trade (Santos, 2011). However, as we could see in the interviews, it is far from being that simple. Masculinity appears to be a very valuable cultural concept - one that nobody would like to lose and one that no one is willing to give up. In order to maintain this safe and unquestionable cultural benefit and at the same time engage in commercial sexual practices that challenge it, men who trade sex have to constantly struggle with their definition of masculinity.

One discursive strategy is the reduction of the category of "man" to its anatomic aspects. Being a man or a woman is a matter of having penis or vagina (*A man is to be born like a man, to have a cock. Even if you sleep and wake up with another man, you are still a man. / The only difference is the sex, the vagina and the penis.*)

This strategy would preserve the individual from stigmatization and prejudice by way of the logical deduction: 'If I have a penis, I'm a man. If I'm a man, I can identify myself with the positive values socially attributed to men, no matter how and with whom I have sex'. Within this logic, categories such as "heterosexual" and "homosexual" wouldn't make sense, since one's identity would be defined according to the physical attributes and not to aspects of interpersonal relationships.

Defining masculinity as the possession of a penis may sound too simple or naïve; it can even be read in an anecdotal tone. But what the man who trades sex is doing when he uses this discourse can also be understood as reclaiming of a very powerful association. Wasn't it the beginning of it all - wasn't our identity initially defined at the moment a birth doctor proclaimed, "It's a boy/girl" -- based on the

simple fact of having a penis or a vagina? Consider, for example, the impact of a newborn born with ambiguous genitals. In such cases, an intense "corrective" machinery is initiated that involves counseling the parents and surgically altering the body to erase doubt and uncertainty. Fausto-Sterling (2000) describes the massive medical investment in adjusting human bodies into two different, clear-cut and exhaustive categories of man and women. Her description of numerous cases of premature medical intervention over bodies to maintain an artificial division of only two sexes is an argument not only for the power of medical intervention in producing a social reality but also an example of the prestigious place of scientific discourse.

In a society organized on patriarchal values, to be defined as a man means to be granted a certain set of benefits. When invoking anatomy as the bail of its masculinity, the interviewees are showing how privileged being a man can be and how body (or hormones and genetics) have been used in discourse as unquestionable markers of essentialized notions of what is a man and a woman.

Reducing masculinity to anatomy is an essentialist attempt; it equals sex and gender, and works to conserve its traditional boundaries. But, on the battlefield of the ghetto, this strategy can also be subversive, especially when it is used to resist the discourse that defines man by his ability to seduce, conquer and dominate women. Defining man by his genitals can be a discursive displacement that sets men free from stereotypical performances of gender, moreover those that reinforce oppression and opposition to women.

In Brazilian culture, masculinity is usually defined in its association to virility. The traditional accounts of virility in Latino culture would define man as a sexual conqueror, as someone able to seduce and always ready to perform sexual activities. The size of the penis, the number of sexual conquests and the restless (or deceptive) sexual performance are the favorite themes for jokes, insults and self-appraisal of Brazilian men. All these accounts are made with the assumption that the partner, spectator or object of this heroic enactment of masculinity is a woman. Thus, this repertoire of masculine definitions seems to be unavailable to men who perform sex with other men. The dis-association of virility and sexual performance with women has become a strategy used in the discourse of men who trade sex in order to reconcile sexual activity with the benefits of masculinity (*In my mind I'm a man and that's all. It's not because I'm going out with them that I'll become gay.*).

Therefore, the idea of masculinity surpasses sexual relations. Being man, woman or *bicha* is not determined by the kind of sexual relation one engages in, but it is sustained by values such as ‘hard-working’, ‘honesty’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘success’ (*Man is not only man... the person can be viado, fuck, give... if he is honest he is a man. / A guy to be a man has to honor... if he has a future, a good car... / To be a man for me, is fostering children, paying their school... paying the rent... A man knows how to express himself, how to buy a house, a fridge... Sometimes he doesn't have any pleasure with his wife, but he never misses bringing the milk, the food... / For me, being men is to honor one's commitments, to work...*).

Although this discourse can challenge the notion of masculinity based on sexual performance and expands it to the realm of social and moral values, it is strongly supported by traditional patriarchal values that place men higher on the social hierarchy than women. Thus, this discourse makes sense within a polarized frame that characterizes women with adjectives like tenderness, companionship, submission and frailty (*The difference is that man is tougher... woman is sweet, gives a good word, a good word that satisfy her man./ Woman is to be submissive to man, to dedicate completely to him and his family.*).

We could say that the discursive operations used by the men we interviewed are an active refusal of the victim portrayal. It is an active engagement in reclaiming power and agency. It challenges the common assumption that a man is defined by his ability of seducing and performing good sex with women. But this strategy is used only to the extent that it allows these men to reclaim some benefits traditionally conferred to men in a patriarchal society, but never to the point where these very benefits would also be questioned.

The third discursive operation the interviewees used may make this point even clearer. In order to avoid the stigma commonly attributed to homosexuals in Brazil, they redefined categories of sexual identity. Instead of using the traditional polarization between homosexuality and heterosexuality that considers the gender of the partner, they highlight the role performed during sexual intercourse. So, instead of identifying themselves as homosexuals or heterosexuals, these young men identify themselves as “active” or “passive” (*Only active. I don't touch men, nothing. I stay there in my male position. / I'm active. I'm very liberal, but active. / I only play active, I only penetrate and nothing more. / I work only as passive. So if they are looking for actives, it doesn't happen.*).

In this classification, the active role is valorized, as it allows the preservation of moral values such as virility, power and control, offering a lower risk of stigmatization and social rejection (*On the contrary, I consider myself much more macho, because I go there and fuck the man. / Giving the ass and like it, for me, it's not man. Man is the one who doesn't give his ass. / He says he is a man, but he looks for anyone to give his ass. I'm the fag, but it's him that holds more than 5 inches up in the ass. / If I lose my honor it will be bad. Sometimes you do that [passive role], take the money and the money goes away. But how about your conscience? Because you will have that thing inside of you: "Why did I do that?"*)

Identifying as ‘active’ would offer them a possibility to avoid social stigma. Once more, the sexual relation and the representation of sexuality are coated with patriarchal moral values that privilege the “powerful macho”; in essence, everything that is different is rejected, diminished and depreciated (*Women are always dominated by the men. So they [passive clients] want to be dominated by that man. So I go and I command, I speak louder and that's all. / I like to give orders. They want to pose as machos, but that time they are dolls. / [Telling a conversation with two other prostitutes who couldn't have an erection during group sex] "I am the passive here, and I had my cock hard and I fucked you two. What is it? Aren't you ashamed of posing as machos?" [laughs]*).

This valorization of the active role and diminishing of the passive one is also present in the client's imagination demonstrating the client's clear preference for young and active prostitutes (*He [client] wants to hear that I am active, because if I say I'm passive he won't go out with me. / I never say I am passive...*).

Making sense: Alternative discursive possibilities

This research was originally conceived to address the health vulnerabilities of men who trade sex in a region that presented an increasing occurrence of AIDS. It was important for us to hear the voices of those we thought were at risk and learn from them more effective ways of developing preventive campaigns on STDs. As we started the interviews, we were confronted with our simplistic reading of “male prostitution” (garnered from the dominant literature).

A powerful shift in our work was understanding the discursive nature of the research itself. As social scientists, we were creating a narrative about these men

and this narrative was “in dialogue” with a broader scientific tradition. Understanding the implications of that tradition and how our initial approach on the subject was immersed in the tradition allowed us to move beyond a deterministic understanding that matched “male prostitution” with victimization and poverty. Beyond that, what we learned from the interviews was that more than passive victims, these men were creatively struggling against stigma in order to reconcile their commercial sex activity with other men and a positive identity in a hetero-orientated society. Although sometimes true, this discourse of vulnerability and victimization can be misused in preventive health campaigns. In particular, the discourse of vulnerability and victimization negates the constant struggle of these men to create an image of power in an attempt to avoid identifying themselves as victims. The most compelling aspect of this struggle is its appropriation of socially constructed categories (such as hetero/homosexual, active or passive, men and women) in a subversive or conservative way. Above all, these discursive displacements show the fluidity of these categories, their availability to be used as a means of socially negotiated power and the constant need of social interactions to sustain them (Gergen, 2009; McNamee, 2006).

The creation and shift of categories, as described above, also illustrates the necessity for society to organize itself from opposite poles, where sexuality is deprived of its plural and dynamic character, and is confined in the straight limits of apparently well-outlined and divergent categories. Confined in this territory of exclusion is where we find the basis of our identity and the shelter of our intimacy.

This struggle against the stigma of homosexuality in Brazil seems to be similar to other Latin cultures. Almaguer (1993) argues that Mexican homosexuals have adopted a lifestyle that favors the “heterosexual mug”: men must marry and have children, and keep their homosexual relations hidden. Freda (2002) points out that in Argentina a man is allowed to have homosexual experiences as long as they are not mentioned in public and while he fits into specific social patterns: ‘discretion, hard working, gentlemanly and artistic affinity’. Mendes-Leite (1993) presents some similar conclusions, describing Brazilian sexuality as “ambigusexuality”, as appearance plays an important role in delineating who is “straight” and who is not.

Discursive strategies used by the interviewees to avoid social stigma could be summarized as the reduction of sexual activity to its commercial sense by employing a conceptualization of masculinity that focuses on moral values and disregards

sexual intercourse; the emphasis on the anatomic characteristics as a criterion to delimit sexual identification categories; and the shifting of sexual systems from one based on sexual object choice to one based on sexual aim.

It is interesting to note that while these shifts can be subversive in the sense that they dislocate, to a certain extent, conventional assumptions on masculinity, they are normative as they preserve a binary classification that privileges the power of the “active male”, whilst disqualifying the other, be it a woman or anyone else that, in sexual intercourse, undergoes penetration.

We started this article presenting how scientific literature has approached “male prostitution” mostly from a perspective that describes the male sex worker either as perverted or as a victim. We have also questioned the presumed value-free position of modern scientific discourse and positioned ourselves as researchers actively engaged in producing an alternative narrative of male sex trade. We were not seeking a better picture of reality, since we assume that “reality” always entertains multiple, simultaneous and different descriptions (Law, 2004). Therefore, for us, the way we talk about a particular phenomena is more important than achieving a “true” understanding of this phenomena, for it is in our descriptions of it that we can generate and constrain possibilities, distribute and regulate power, conserve and transform the social world in which we live. In our narrative, the man who trades sex is resisting the dominant discourse. He is striving to produce a positive narrative about himself. He is reclaiming his power as a man in a patriarchal and male-centered society. What do we gain from this narrative?

It is a narrative that offers resistance to a discourse that pathologizes differences while normalizing and homogenizing the “others”. It tries to break polarized and over-simplified categorizations that have been historically associated with oppression of women, homosexuals and sex workers. In describing men who trade sex as participants in a broader social discursive network. We also question the taken for granted ideas of sexuality and gender in the dominant discourse. If these men are struggling to create a concept of “man” it is not because their masculinity is somehow defective or weak; it is due to their particular position on the margin of the dominant social values. It is in this territory that one is called to bring into discourse the otherwise naturalized concepts of sexuality and gender. They show that every masculinity or femininity is constantly dependent on discourses, relations, performances and institutions to sustain them - be it on a dark street corner of the ghetto or in any brightly

lit family home. This allows us to ask: What does it mean to be a man for the sex work client? What are the discursive resources that allow him to move in and out of the ghetto and keep his identity as a man? What are the resources that are called into action as he arrives back home and reproduces a performance of man with his (also performative) wife?

Finally, this narrative stresses the importance of taking into account the cultural uses of socially created identity categories in preventive health strategies. As we have learned, categories such as homosexual or heterosexual are less meaningful for men who trade sex than a description of intercourse in terms of active or passive roles. It seems that a sensitive approach would take into account the effort made by these men to preserve a masculine identity – an identity that is valued for its power over the “other”, for its performance of strength and domination. The challenge of working with STDs within this population is the challenge to introduce a discourse of vulnerability within a play of invulnerable performances.

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