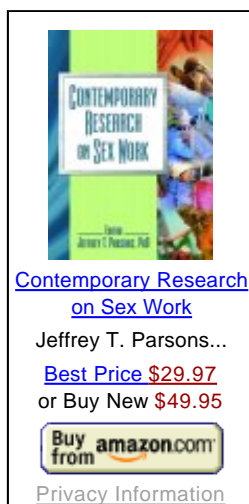


Contemporary Research on Sex Work

Jeffrey T. Parsons, Ph.D. (Editor)

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Contemporary Research on Sex Work features 11 papers which strive to improve understanding of the lives of people involved in the sex industry. The book diverges from tradition by moving beyond a preoccupation with examining HIV risk among street-based sex workers and a perception of sex workers as “deviants.” A broad focus is ensured by including investigations into many aspects of sex work across cultures by social scientists of various disciplines employing different methodologies.

The facts and figures disclosed in the introductions of the papers provide the reader with excellent background information on the sex industry. For example, Morisky and associates (2005) state that “in the Asian sex industry, commercial sex-related activity has been transitioning outside of the brothel as legal pressures escalate and as customers perceive this pressure” and that “increasing proportions of female sex workers are now operating in such venues as beer gardens, bars, nightclubs, karaoke TV centers, massage parlors, or disco dance establishments” (p. 46). Similarly, Lewis and associates (2005) provide information about the Canadian criminal law as it applies to this industry. They reveal that while sex work per se is not illegal, a number of activities associated with it are (e.g. “communicating in a public place for the purpose of prostitution” [s. 213] [p. 148]). Sex work greatly differs across cultures, as do the challenges, objectives, and experiences of people within the industry. The contextual information provided in this book underscores these differences, so that the reader can better understand and appreciate the lives of the sex workers participating in each study.

While each paper offers the reader a unique perspective on the examination of sex workers’ lives, I found some articles particularly enjoyable. Busza’s (2005) qualitative investigation into how Vietnamese sex workers in Cambodia perceive risk was both informative and touching. It permitted the reader to gain an appreciation of the mindset, fears and priorities of the participants. By revealing sex workers’ aspirations to fulfil family obligations, despite many dangers (e.g., unsafe abortions and abusive police authorities), the reader develops a sense of admiration for the bravery, loyalty and determination of these individuals. The chapter also demonstrates the need for policy-makers implementing risk-reduction activities to incorporate the experiences, hopes and coping strategies of sex workers.

Lewis and associates’ (2005) examination of Canadian sex workers’ experiences of risk management and safety on the job

was interesting as it reveals the violation of sex workers' human rights. Article 7 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that all are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection. However, a female street worker participating in this study reported that one of the hardest parts of the job is "the cops and how they treat you, like you're the worst piece of shit on earth and they bug you" (p. 156). Similarly, another sex worker noted how the police "ignore" male sex workers and consider them to be "runaways" when they disappear off the street (p. 160). Article 5 of the Universal Declaration states that no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Transgender street sex workers described how they were denied this human right when "eggs, food, and insults were thrown from passing cars" (p. 157). I found this study very enlightening as it reveals the severity of the problems that accompany this occupation and the strategies adopted by sex workers to attenuate the risk (e.g. staying away from bushes). Such findings highlight the need for legislative and policy changes regarding sex work, some of which are discussed by the authors.

Another study which I found intriguing is Morrison and Whitehead's (2005) investigation into how gay-identified sex workers (mostly escorts) combat the negativity that surrounds their profession. Semi-structured interviews conducted with the men offer the reader a unique avenue into their psyche. The authors used quotations to illustrate sex workers' strategies of stigma resistance. For example, one interviewee emphasised that it was his decision to become a sex worker, stating that he had "the urge" and why should he "hold back" (p. 174). Another sex worker resisted stigma by distinguishing between escort work and street prostitution, saying when "you're a hooker...you work for drugs. [With] escorts...it's a little more...maybe a little class" (p. 176). Such insight is invaluable as it allows the reader to attain a fuller understanding of how sex workers perceive their working behaviour and deal with the stigma attached to it. While other studies convey sex workers' negative thinking, this study demonstrates male sex workers' positive thinking styles (an area often neglected by sex work researchers).

A few limitations to *Contemporary Research on Sex Work* warrant mention. First, the APA-style structure of the papers and the scientific language used limits the readership to well-educated people. Such terms as 'HIV seroprevalence' (p. 6) are not explained and may hinder understanding of the book's content. While the tables and figures clearly display the desired information, the editing leaves a lot to be desired in some places. For example, when Disogra and associates (2005) list the countries where large-scale surveys on male sex workers and their clients have been conducted, they state Thailand twice (p.183). Grammatical errors are also evident.

In conclusion, while some of the content of *Contemporary Research on Sex Work* could be better delivered, it is an intriguing, engaging and educational book. I would recommend this title as it offers the reader an opportunity to learn about the world of sex workers and provides interesting research findings from a previously neglected perspective. The book would serve as an ideal supportive text for human sexuality course coordinators or researchers interested in the area of sex work.

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