Evoking images of females as providers of sexual fantasy and/or sex acts and of males as the consumers or organizers of the commercial exchange (Bimbi, 2007; Van der Poel, 1992), sex work has generally been conceived in the sociological imagination in relation to heterosexual norms, with women as the providers of the sex acts and males as the consumers or organizers of the sexual exchange. Reviewing existing literature, this paper explores the myriad discourses that have served to regulate male sex work, categorizing modes of regulation through a discursive lens. Although male sex workers were historically exempt from the formalities of the criminal justice system and regulatory techniques such as mandatory medical examinations and licensing, the prohibition of homosexuality constituted a symbolic act that discursively constructed and reinforced notions that male sex workers were sexually deviant, pathological and contributed to the spread of HIV.

KEYWORDS PROSTITUTION, MALE SEX WORK, REGULATION, HOMOSEXUALITY, DISCOURSE

While scholarship indicates that male sex work is likely as historically entrenched as female sex work (West & DeVilliers, 1993), sex work has generally been conceived in relation to heterosexual norms, with women as the providers of the sex acts and males as the consumers or organizers of the commercial exchange (Bimbi, 2007; Van der Poel, 1992), sex work has generally been conceived in relation to heterosexual norms, with social inquiry largely limited to the study of women as sex workers (Dennis, 2008; West & DeVilliers, 1993; Wilcox & Christmann, 2008). While empirical studies on male sex work only emerged within the last half century (Bimbi), it is erroneous to assume that the existence of men employing their sexuality in commercial exchange is a recent phenomenon, or that its need for regulation was never posited within the literature (Smart, 1978; West & DeVilliers). Scholarship indicates that male sex work is likely as historically entrenched as female sex work (West & DeVilliers), evidenced by accounts of men providing sexual services in ancient Greece and Rome, where, in some cases, it was licensed and taxed (Bimbi; Ringdal, 2004; West & DeVilliers).

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FROM PATHOLOGY TO CHOICE
REGULATORY DISCOURSES AND THE HISTORIC CONFLATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY AND MALE SEX WORK

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Although analogous to its female counterpart, the provision of sexual services by men was not always regarded as a significant social problem (Scott, 2003). Coeval the emergence of the category “adolescent” (Scott), societal conceptualizations of normative male sexuality and sexual identity developed as the exchange of sexual services by men to other men became synonymous with the problematic of homosexuality (Kaye, 2003; Scott; Weeks, 2007, 1981). The historical transformation of regulatory narratives structuring male sex work involves a complex nexus between sexual, psycho-social, medical, and most recently, labour discourses. As a means to bridge available research, this paper commences with a general outline of scholarship on male sex work, followed by an overview of concomitant regulatory discourses—sexual, psychological, medical, and labour—conceptually integrating them within broader narratives of social regulation.

**Analytic Framework**

The data presented in this article are derived from a synthesis and analysis of scholarly literature on male sex work. Following the world-systems theory geographical classification utilized by Dennis (2008), this paper focuses specifically on literature stemming from the “core” region (Western Europe, North America excluding Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand). A search was performed using Sociological Abstracts on Scholars Portal (ProQuest), a large social science database for articles in peer reviewed journals, with any of several keywords, including *male sex work, male prostitution, sex work, prostitution*. Given political, economic, and socio-cultural differences, articles detailing the global male sex work industry in geographic locations outside of the cited geographical purview were excluded.

Within this paper, I use the term *discourse* to refer to the different ways that “social entities and relations [are] construct[ed] or constitute[d]” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 3). Discourse, then, does not simply reflect social reality, but actively constructs it (Fairclough). Theorizing surrounding discourses, particularly their constitutive and disciplinary effects, owes much to the writings of Foucault (1978), who conceptualizes discourse as dealing with more than just words and texts, but also accounting for the “social and political context and differentials of institutional power” (McLaren, 2002, p. 90). According to Foucault, discourses create regulatory spaces in which identities are formed, reinforced, and reproduced. These discourses, amounting to an omnipresent disciplinary regime, are employed as a means to maintain social control over, in this instance, various gendered and sexed conceptions and practices to guarantee that identities are suited to heteronormativity.

The fact that historically male sex work was rarely formally regulated suggests that there is nothing inherently problematic with the act itself. Rather, prostitution, both male and female, is made governable by problematizing the actions and activities related to it, such as communication. By containing prostitution within particular associations (crime, violence, social disorder) it becomes a governable domain. For Rose, rendering a “population, a national economy, an enterprise, a family, a child or even oneself” governable, is a mat-
ter of “defining boundaries, rendering that within them visible, assembling information about that which is included and devising techniques to mobilize the forces and entities thus revealed” (1999, p. 33). It is through problematic associations that a domain such as prostitution becomes thought of as something that needs to be regulated. Analyzing the discourses that make a domain amenable to government elucidates “not only the systems of thought through which authorities have posed and specified the problems for government, but also the systems of action through which they have sought to give effect to government” (Rose & Miller 1992, p. 177). Problematic associations speak to those discourses that serve a regulatory purpose. In order to problematize, and thus regulate, male-to-male commercial sexual exchanges, discursive associations (non-normative sexuality, individual pathology, vectors of transmission) have been inextricably linked to the exclusion and control of homosexuality.

**Typologies of Male Sex Work**

Academic scholarship on male sex work is largely focused on street workers, likely resulting from their greater visibility and accessibility to researchers (Minichiello et al., 2001). Notable exceptions to this include empirical accounts of male exotic dancers (Boden, 2007; DeMarco, 2007; Tewksbury, 1994), escorts (Parsons, Koken & Bimbi, 2007; Salamon, 1989; Wilcox & Christmann, 2008), and porn stars (Escoffier, 2003). Comparative empirical analyses of males employed in the different sectors of the male sex work industry (Joffe & Dockrell, 1995; Minichiello et al., 2000), between female and male sex workers (Weinberg, Shaver & Williams, 1999), and sex workers and non-sex workers (Earls & David, 1989), have added to the growing corpus of literature.

Male sex work has been variously articulated within the literature. For Caulkins and Coombs (1976) there exist four types of male sex worker: street hustler, bar hustler, call boy, and kept boy. More recently, Van der Poel (1992) has expressed that male sex workers may be classified as pseudo-prostitutes, hustlers, occasional, and professionals. Categorization has also been informed by the diversity of sectors in which males are employed; for instance, Joffe and Dockrell (1995) note that most literature classifies male sex workers as escorts, masseurs, or street workers. This multiplicity of operationalizations has not been conceptually integrated, making it impossible to define the precise boundaries of what constitutes male sex work. Expressing this sentiment, Van der Poel (1992) argues that “over the years, anything even remotely resembling male prostitution has been called just that and new types are still being ‘discovered’,” including, for instance, the male hitch-hiker who “reluctantly suffer[s] the sexual advances of the motorist” (p. 261).

Although as argued academic interest in male sex work is relatively recent (Browne & Minichiello, 1996b; Satz, 1995), its narratives highlight not only the diversity of experiences within male sex work and between individual sex workers, but also emphasize how male sex work itself is variously conceptualized and brought into the public domain. A prominent and recurrent feature of the literature is an emphasis on discourses related to homosexuality, individual pathology, and conduits of HIV/AIDS. Although rarely formally po-
licised or regulated, discursive regulation broadly accomplished the same feat—to contain and confine male sex workers within the social imagination. Recently, discourses of male sex work as work have served to shift narratives of moral and medical regulation, to regulation based on labour.

REGULATING MALE SEX WORK

There is a widely shared, if also frequently contested, truism that sex work is the world’s oldest profession (Richards, 1982; Satz, 1995; West & DeVilliers, 1993). If sex work is to be considered the world’s oldest profession, then it follows that its policing and regulation are the world’s oldest concerns. An assessment of the historiography of prostitution and its regulation illustrates not only the ahistorical nature of sex work (West & DeVilliers, 1993), but also the intrinsic role of normative narratives of sexuality and gender to its regulation (Scott et al., 2005). Despite its association with gender deviation and social disorder, male sex work, unlike its female counterpart (Scott, 2003), was not regarded as a public concern until the emergence of a particular language surrounding sexual identity allowed for “normative assessments and judgements to be made concerning particular classes of male prostitute” (Scott, p. 179). As a result, broad distinctions emerged between heterosexual/masculine and homosexual/effeminate (Scott), altering the ways in which male sex work was understood and targeted for regulation.

Unlike its female counterpart, male sex workers were not historically subject to periodic medical examinations and strict rules administered by police (Peniston, 2001; Smart, 1978), effectively ignoring their existence. Although authorities suspected certain men of selling sexual services, records listing “male prostitute” status do not exist (Peniston; Ringdal, 2004) though working-class men were frequently charged with misdemeanour offences (Peniston; Satz, 1995), such as “importuning by males” or “indecency between males” (Smart, 1978, p. 7). Generally male sex workers are arrested with less frequency than female sex workers, are less likely to be found guilty, and when tried, receive shorter sentences (Satz). That homosexual sex work was “fairly concentrated” and “offend[ed] relatively few people” served as explanations why female sex workers were more likely to face prosecution than males (Richards, 1982, p. 131fn). It appears that historically male sex workers were not regarded as culpable until a special concern for male (homo)sexuality developed. Male sex work was then targeted as a way to control homosexuality and “rid the street of overt displays of prostitution” (Weeks, 2007, p. 53).

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1 Satz (1995, p. 78) argues that this is a “mistaken idea” that “supports and embodies the widely held belief that men have strong sex drives which must be satisfied—largely though gaining access to some woman’s body.” If sex work refers to an instance of a commercial exchange of services, Richards (1982, p. 88) contends that “it is misleading to interpret [...] patterns of promiscuity among primitive peoples as forms of prostitution, for such peoples attached little value to virginity”—connoting that commercial markets, and thus the development of sex as a commodity, are coextensive with the emergence of urban civilization.
According to Weeks, both prostitution and male homosexuality were policed using similar or related legislation since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which effectively served to criminalize all private and public forms of male homosexual activity (2007, p. 49). As a result, even where there exist criminal records of “male prostitution,” it is impossible to disaggregate male sex workers and male homosexuals, as they were historically conflated (Smart, 1978). The concern, however, was not with the actual act of engaging in male-to-male sexual activity per se, but by “the experience of homosexuality as a stigmatized category” (Weeks, 1981, p. 130). Homosexuality itself became the target of regulation, and both homosexual males and males who engaged in homosexual prostitution were assumed to be predisposed towards deviancy, corruption, and sexual degeneracy (Weeks, 1981). It has been theorized that the existence of male prostitution has largely been neglected as a result of implicit taboos of homosexuality that threaten the conceptual integrity of male sexuality (De Cecco, 1991; Ringdal, 2004). Males are socially constructed as “all-powerful, potent and macho when it comes to sex” (De Cecco, p. ix), thus for a man to sell, or purchase, sex from another man threatens this conceptualization, as “men are not supposed to be the objects of lust” (De Cecco, p. ix; Phoenix & Oerton, 2005; Satz, 1995).

By referring to the regulation of male sex workers, I am not referring to state codification and enforcement but rather those unwritten norms, values, and taboos serving to regulate human and social behaviour. Regulatory frameworks, the collection of rules that allow or restrict certain human actions create sexed subjects, that is, how “the sex that is done is understood or integrated into people’s sexual lives” (Phoenix & Oerton, 2005, p. 8). These frameworks construct normal and natural sex as occurring privately within a heterosexual, marital relationship largely focused on the genitals of both partners (Phoenix & Oerton, p. 10). The focus of this review is to highlight the myriad articulations of male sex work and the different categories and concepts by which male sex work itself, through its regulation, is constituted. It is the attempt to categorize what constitute normal and natural sexual activities, that have lead to regulatory discourses that conceptualize male sex work within broader narratives of homosexuality that are imbued with assumptions of the perverse, the pathological, and the diseased.

**Sexual Regulation: The Problematic of Homosexuality**

In many respects, the history of the study of male sex work is coterminous with the psychological study and pathologization of homosexuality (Bimbi, 2007; Kaye, 2003; Koken et al., 2005; Weeks, 2007, 1981), emerging in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the increasing prevalence of gay men offering to pay for the sexual services of working class men led to societal prohibitions on all homosexual persons and activities (Kaye, 2003). For Weeks, it is “significant that writings on male prostitution began to emerge simultaneously with the notion of ‘homosexuals’ being an identifiable breed of persons with special needs, passions and lusts” (1981, p. 113). Homosexuality and male sex work have been intertwined through narratives of promiscuity, sex without commitment or reproduction; challenging governing discourses surrounding sexual exchange,
“turning it from something engaged in by *normal* men into something only *queer* men practiced” (Kaye, 2003, p. 2, italics in original) and into a subject of investigation. With regards to regulation, the “deviance” of men providing sexual services for financial gain was ancillary to the supposed “deviance” of homosexuality (Weeks, 1981, p. 31).

The task of identifying the sexual identity of male sex workers concerned early sexologists (Kaye, 2003), proving both “the subject of contradictory findings” and “extremely difficult” (Boyer, 1989, p. 154). While the majority of male sex workers are engaged in male-to-male sexual acts with their clients (Satz, 1995), identification as homosexual is not universal. The adolescent males in Reiss’ (1961) pioneering study did not consider themselves bisexual or gay but assumed that all of their clients were males. On the other hand, Minichiello et al. (2001) found that more than half of their 183 male sex worker participants self-identified as gay, while only 5.5 percent self-identified as heterosexual. Most studies, however, extend discussion of sexual orientation beyond the simplistic gay-straight dichotomy, highlighting the existence of “gay for pay” sex workers: men who claimed a normative heterosexual identity yet simultaneously engaged in homosexual activity (Boles & Elifson, 1994; Earls & David, 1989, Estep et al., 1992; Minichiello et al., 2001; Morse et al., 1991; Visano, 1987; Weinberg et al., 1999). Boles and Elifson suggest that the sexual behaviour of male sex workers should be understood through their self-identifications, rather than through the sexual activities in which they engage. Doing so would challenge binary categorizations of heterosexuality and homosexuality, deconstructing ideas that engaging in same-sex sexual activity necessarily implies homosexual self-identity.

Surveying then available literature, Earls and David (1989) note that the number of male sex workers reporting to be homosexual increased over time, with early studies reporting higher numbers of heterosexual-identified males (e.g., Coombs, 1974; Reiss, 1961) and predominantly homosexual identification in later accounts (e.g., Visano, 1987). This may be a result of various factors, including (a) increasing social acceptance of homosexuality and the higher incidence of male sex workers admitting their sexual orientation without fear of repercussion (Earls & David; Pleak & Meyer-Bahlburg, 1990); (b) increasing numbers of homosexual males using their sexual orientation for financial gain (Earls & David); (c) researchers’ reluctance to identify participants as homosexual due to the “notion of the heterosexual forced into sex with older men corresponded with medical and criminological discourses of homosexuality and their themes of child-adult sexual exploitation” (Scott et al., 2005, p. 323); and (d) more inclusive sampling selection methods applied to different sectors of the industry (Pleak & Meyer-Bahlburg, 1990; Scott et al.). Boyer (1989) notes that homosexuality itself may act as an impetus for entering the sex industry, enabling men to act on their sexual desires in ways that correspond with the cultural image of homosexuality, providing them with an identity. Research indicates that male sex work is not as heavily stigmatized within the gay community as it remains in the larger heterosexual community (Koken et al., 2005), accounting for the increased prominence of gay-identified men employed in the sex industry.
Psycho-Social Regulation: The Problematic of Individual Pathology and Socialization

Throughout the 1960s to 1980s theories of sex work focused on the aetiology of men’s involvement in sex work. As both sex work and homosexual sexual activity were constructed as deviant and abnormal (Scott et al., 2005; Krafft-Ebing, 1965; Visano, 1987) they were consigned to the regulatory rationalities of criminality or mental disturbance (Van der Poel, 1992). Indeed, during this era, homosexuality was not only coterminous with discourses of promiscuity, but with mental illness as well, the diagnosis of “homosexual” not removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders until 1974 (APA, 1974). Early contributions viewed male sex work as pathological and universally deviant (Coombs, 1974; Krafft-Ebing), and identified supposed predisposing psycho-social factors. Male sex workers were reported as marked by deprived socio-economic background, poor parental role models, and low intelligence, and having run away from home and school, lacking any marketable skills (Boyer, 1989; Coombs; Dennis, 2008; Reiss, 1961). They would experience familial violence, including sexual abuse, and earlier sexual debut with older sexual partners (Earls & David, 1989). Alcohol and drug abuse was cited as common (Morse et al., 1992), as were attendance in detention centres, criminal records, and a history of violence (Coombs; Visano). MacNamara (1965, p. 204) found that most male prostitutes within his study were between the ages of 15-20, had low intelligence and educational attainment, were illegitimate children raised in abusive households, and possessed several personality defects; that is, they were immature, irresponsible, and mentally unstable. Within this frame, any decision to sell sex would be informed by a combination of “coercion and comfort” factors, such as developing an independent personality, the experience of negative labelling, and the desire to gain the acceptance and attention of adults.

While not to discount the experiences of those men who have suffered childhood sexual abuse or who engage in sex work as a result of substance abuse, literature indicates that the characterization of all male sex workers as psychologically unstable, desperate, or destitute is tenuous (West & DeVilliers, 1993). Davies and Feldman (1997) note that while some male sex workers identified previous child or adolescent sexual abuse as a factor in their decision to enter the industry, the “data will not support the conclusion that the connection is causal” (p. 51). Psycho-social studies focusing solely on accounts of individual pathology have been challenged for their lack of methodological rigor (Browne & Minichiello, 1996b; Van der Poel, 1992) and for essentialist portrayals of male sex workers as social misfits desperate for money with a history of childhood sexual abuse (Scott et al., 2005), overemphasizing “problematic male sex populations (street prostitutes) at the expense of other relatively unproblematic male sex populations (independent escort)” (Wilcox & Christmann, 2008, p. 119). It has been suggested that a researcher’s objectivity may be influenced by the prevailing cultural attitudes towards homosexuality (Kaye, 2003; Koken et al., 2005; Weeks, 1981), resulting in sensationalistic accounts that reinforce stigma (Bimbi, 2007; Koken et al., 2005). Furthermore, by relying on binary assessments of individual psychology and pathology, oversimplifies
the many possible histories that male sex workers experience and neglects to account for the varying meanings possibly assigned to such experiences. Although such pathological characterizations may account for the experiences of some male sex workers, later studies refute such portrayals. Simon, Morse, Balson, Osofsky and Gaumer (1993) argue that psychological indicators, such as social alienation and personal inadequacy, more likely result from their working conditions rather than an innate psycho-pathological condition. Earls and David (1989) found “no evidence that the prostitutes came from broken homes any more so than the non-prostitutes group,” indicating that there was “higher family divorce and/or separation among the control subjects [non-prostituting males] than among the prostitute group” (pp. 414-415). Some male sex workers recount idyllic suburban childhoods, who decided to enter sex work to capitalize on their physiques (Dennis, 2008). Contrary to beliefs posited by early accounts focusing on the supposed pathologies and deficiencies, sex workers demonstrate “remarkable resilience and fortitude in maintaining emotional stability given the social aspects of their work environment” (Browne & Minichiello, 1996b, p. 36; Simon et al.).

Medical Regulation: HIV/AIDS Epidemic

While female sex workers were historically associated with the transmission of venereal disease during the early part of the 20th century, men employing their sexuality in commerce were infrequently linked with venereal disease (Kaye, 2003; Peniston, 2001). As known and suspected female sex workers were implicated into a regulatory system that involved periodic medical examinations and treatments, the existence of males engaging in similar behaviours remained unacknowledged (Peniston). Rather than identifying specific sexual acts as having the possibility of transmitting disease, campaigns against the spread of venereal disease during World War I warned men against sleeping with “loose women” (Chauncey, 1994, pp. 85-86). Taking advantage of the medical ignorance of the time, or believing the propaganda themselves, gay men occasionally informed potential partners that engaging in sexual intercourse posed no risk (Kaye).

The advent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic during the 1980s not only shifted attention toward homosexual men, but also focused attention on men who engaged in homosexual commercial exchanges (Brown & Minichiello, 1996b). The perception that male sex workers “play[ed] a pivotal role in the spread of HIV” (Joffe & Dockrell, 1995, p. 333) and constituted a “public threat” (Scott et al., 2005, p. 334) has led to a significant body of research attending to high-risk sexual behaviour and HIV/AIDS incidences among sex workers, attempting to understand risk perceptions and safe-sex practices employed by male sex workers (Brown & Minichiello, 1995; de Graaf et al., 1994; Earls & David, 1989; Estep et al., 1992; Joffe & Dockrell, 1995, Mariño et al., 2000; Minichiello et al., 2000; Minichiello et al., 1998; Pleak & Meyer-Bahlburg, 1990; Simon et al., 1993).

That sex work constitutes a significant means by which HIV/AIDS spreads continues to stimulate academic scholarship. Rarely is concern in such studies focused on the safety of the male sex worker. Instead the latter is viewed as
transmitting “the HIV virus to heterosexual or bisexual clients, who then went home and infected wives, girlfriends and female prostitutes,” (Dennis, 2008, p. 18) spreading AIDS to the general (heterosexual and non-sex working) population. In a study involving 211 male sex workers, Morse et al. (1991) concluded that their results supported the contention that “male prostitutes serve as a bridge of HIV infection into populations with currently low infection rates through contact with both non-customer sexual partners and customers and thus indirectly to spouses and sexual partners of these individuals” (p. 535). With respect to assessing incidences of HIV/AIDS among male sex workers, existing research is contradictory. Compared to the non-sex worker population, some studies report a higher incidence of sexually transmitted infections (STI) among male sex workers (Earls & David, 1989; Estep et al., 1992; Morse et al., 1991; Pleak & Meyer-Bahlburg, 1990; Simon et al., 1993; Weber et al., 2001), highlighting increased likelihood of transmission (Morse et al.; Weber et al.), while others indicate that there exist no marked differences in STI rates between males involved in the commercial sale of sex and other groups engaging in similar activities, such as gay men with multiple sex partners (compare Minichiello et al., 1998).

Although it has been argued that male-to-male sex work may bring into contact “segments of the populations in which there is a high prevalence of HIV infection” (de Graaf et al., 1994, p. 28), it has been emphasized that engaging in sex work per se is not a risk factor. Much literature indicates that knowledge of HIV/AIDS is high among male sex workers (Earls & David, 1989; de Graaf et al.; Estep et al., 1992; Minichiello et al., 1998, Pleak & Meyer-Bahlburg, 1990; Simon et al., 1993). Comparative studies find that male sex workers possess considerable awareness of HIV/AIDS and safer sex practices, relative to the non-sex worker population (Earls & David). Some literature indicates that male sex workers are more knowledgeable of safer sex practices than their female counterparts (Parker, 2006) largely attributable to educational campaigns developed by the gay community. Irrespective of knowledge, however, male sex workers are increasingly vulnerable to disease transmission due to sexually risky behaviours such as inconsistent condom use with commercial clients (de Graaf et al.; Joffe & Dockrell, 1995), failure to use condoms with non-commercial intimate partners (Joffe & Dockrell; Morse et al., 1991; Pleak & Meyer-Bahlburg), and intravenous drug use (Browne & Minichiello, 1996b; Weber et al., 2001). Drug (ab)use may place male sex workers at additional risk, where desperation for money may compromise adherence to safer sex strategies (de Graaf et al.; Estep et al.; Minichiello et al.). Alternately, assertiveness and the feeling of having control and power over the commercial sexual exchange with a client increases use of safer sex precautions (Browne & Minichiello, 1996b; Joffe & Dockrell).

Contemporary research has challenged the perception of sex workers as transmitters of disease, supporting the stance that sex workers should be considered experts and educators of safer sex techniques. Browne and Minichiello maintain that “the sexual skills and safer sex strategies which sex workers adopt could be used educationally to inform the wider public about practising safe sex” (1995, p. 619). Considering sex workers, both male and female, to be
safe-sex educators is aligned with the discourse of sex work as work. Enabling sex workers to engage in, and have control over, commercial sexual transactions will enhance their ability and confidence to negotiate and demand safe-sex practices with their clients (Browne & Minichiello, 1996a; Joffe & Dockrell, 1995).

Regulating Labour: Male Sex Work as Work

Prior to the 1980s, men who provided sexual services for commercial exchange self-identified or were presumed to be homosexual (Bimbi, 2007). The HIV/AIDS epidemic lead to the inclusion of gay men in empirical studies of male sex work and the revelation that “engaging in sex is a legitimate source of income” (Bimbi, p. 10) rather than “a profession … not to be taken seriously” (Sagarin & Jolly, 1983, p. 28). As contemporary literature indicates, the decision to engage in male sex work is an occupational choice arrived at through rational and economic liberations (Brown & Minichiello, 1996b; Davies & Feldman, 1997; Parsons, Koken & Bimbi; Scott et al., 2005; Van der Poel, 1992; Wilcox & Christmann, 2008). It has been acknowledged that even during the 19th and early 20th centuries, engaging in homosexual prostitution was an occupational decision made by the men involved (Weeks, 1981). As sex workers demanded recognition, specifically that their voices be included in research and within social service organizations, the focus on sex-as-work became prominent (compare Bimbi).

While the sex-as-work perspective was reported in historical accounts, contemporary research has focused on the professionalization of the industry. Sex work is considered to be a job to those who engage in the commercial sale of sexuality (Brown & Minichiello, 1996b; Minichiello et al., 2001; Van der Poel, 1992; Wilcox & Christmann, 2008). Male sex workers are increasingly adopting a “hospitality attitude towards their work” (Minichiello et al., p. 48), treating commercial sex as any other service-oriented business (Browne & Minichiello, 1996a,b; Minichiello et al., 2001; Van der Poel; Visano, 1987). Parsons, Koken and Bimbi (2007) indicate that several research participants “emphasized the importance of doing their own research prior to beginning work as an escort ... to get an idea of what the work ‘is really like’” (p. 225). In a review of academic research involving male sex workers, Dennis finds that such articles “involved the discourse of choice. They were never forced or coerced; they made career decisions” (2008, p. 19). Furthermore, it has been reported that some male sex workers strive to maintain a professional level of involvement with clients by observing an informal professional code of ethics (Parsons, Koken & Bimbi; Van der Poel; Visano) and intend on remaining in the occupation (Wilcox & Christmann).

It is important to note that not all male sex workers professionalize the industry or consider sex work to be a profession. Some literature indicates that street prostitutes hold less positive views of their income-generating activities than do off-street independent sex workers (Minichiello et al., 2001; Van der Poel, 1992). For de Graaf et al. (1994), the discrepancy between positive and negative attitudes towards sex work is not inherent to a specific sector of the sex
industry, but instead is related to substance use and abuse. Non-addicted street sex workers expressed positive feelings towards their work, while those that were addicted were more ambivalent or negative, intending to “quit work as soon as possible or ... already trying to do so” (de Graaf et al., p. 281). Neither population, with the exception of one respondent, considered sex work to be a vocation or professional job (de Graaf et al.). Both Van der Poel (1992) and Davies and Feldman (1987) indicate that professional aspirations among male sex workers are uncommon, perhaps stemming from the temporary nature of their work, the use of sex work as a secondary source of income, the lack of familial responsibilities, or the lesser degree of institutionalization of the male sex trade. It has been postulated that male sex worker are less likely to professionalize their work as the boundaries separating their “professional” and private life are vague, as they are more likely to develop friendships with clients, and as they are able to express their own sexuality freely through the course of their work (Browne & Minichielo, 1996b; de Graaf et al.). For many men, engaging in the sale of sexual interaction is a part-time endeavour, outside of full-time and permanent employment (Satz, 1995), which may provide another rationale for the lack of professionalizing their sexual labour.

These studies demonstrate that the meaning of sex work is not static, and that the decision to enter the sex industry is encapsulated within varying degrees of agency, choice, and professionalism. Every worker’s experience is different, as are rationales for engaging in sex work. While the primary motivation for entering the industry is cited as being economic gain (Davies & Feldman, 1997; de Graaf et al., 1994; Earls & David, 1989; Luckenbill, 1985; Minichielo et al., 2001; Scott et al., 2005; Wilcox & Christmann, 2008), others reasons include sexual satisfaction (de Graaf et al., 1994; Luckenbill), freedom and flexibility offered by the lifestyle (Earls & David, 1989; Wilcox & Christmann), curiosity and adventure (Luckenbill), participating in gay male subculture, or motivations arising from a larger constellation of deviant activities (Luckenbill; Minichielo et al., 2001; Visano, 1987).

Although all of the male sex workers in a study conducted by Wilcox and Christmann (2008) asserted that their choice to enter the sex industry was freely made, the notion of “free choice” was qualified in reflecting on their decision-making process.

If, however, one considers the life stories of the men in our sample, with one or two exceptions, there was something in their backgrounds which served to limit the choices open to them — education failure or personality characteristics meant that their ‘choice’ to participate in other, more legitimate, employment opportunities was limited. (p. 133)

Although this underscores the need for theorizing the notion of “choice” itself, it is important for researchers not to undermine the self-determinations expressed by sex workers. Even if made within a constraint of choices, the decision to enter into sex work should nevertheless be regarded as a valid choice. Certainly, the notion of “constrained choices” is not intrinsic to the decision of engaging in sex work, as limitations of career opportunities are evident across racial, classed, gendered, and occupational strata.
Viewing sex work as a profession has multiple benefits. Primarily, it enables men to understand their labour within the context of (socially constructed) acceptable masculine behaviour. Associated with discourses of labour and business, male sex workers are able to “capitalise on male sexuality as part of their creative ingenuity within the work ethic of society” (Browne & Minichiello, 1996a, p. 90). Secondly, professionalizing sex work provides sex workers with the assertiveness and confidence required to negotiate safer sex practices and maintain control over the commercial sex exchange (Browne & Minichiello, 1996a; Joffe & Dockrell, 1995). Finally, by conceiving of male sex work as an occupation “in which the risk of HIV and AIDS is little more than one of a number of occupational hazards” (Allman & Meyers, 1999, p. 74), it will enable policy-makers and enforcement to shift from current regulatory tactics emphasizing individual pathology, disease transmission, and sexual stigma, towards the promotion of healthy sexuality and occupational safety (Allman & Meyers). Viewing sex work as legitimate work does not necessarily imply that it will be regarded as an appropriate career option for everyone, as commonly levied in opposition; however, it will allow those who choose to enter, remain in, or exit the industry, to do so with greater security and autonomy and less stigma.

CONCLUSION

Reviewing existing literature, this paper has explored the myriad discourses that have served to regulate male sex work. Although male sex workers were historically exempt from regulatory techniques such as mandatory medical examinations and licensing, the prohibition of homosexuality constituted a symbolic act that discursively constructed and reinforced notions that male sex workers were sexually deviant, pathological, and contributed to the spread of HIV. Most recently, male sex work has been discursively constructed as a legitimate form of labour.

Although these divisions have been articulated within the literature, one must be cautious not to assume a linear progression of discourses that are neatly categorized, but rather as discourses, and subsequent narratives, that are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Earlier discourses, such as those dealing with promiscuity and disease, continue to exist alongside newer regulatory discourses of labour. The (in)congruence of these parallel and conflicting discourses most evidently manifests itself in the continuing debates over the criminalization, legalization, and decriminalization of the sex industry.

The fact that the “problem” of male sex work is secondary to the “problem” of homosexuality (Weeks, 1981), signifies that there is something located outside the discursive construction (i.e., the definition) of sex work, that presupposes the need for its regulation. That is, sex work itself cannot be regulated without being bounded to specific discourses (e.g., sexual deviance, individual psycho-pathology, mental malaise) arising from broader narratives of stigmatized homosexuality. As evidenced, male sex work was largely regulated as it represented a deviant (homosexual) status (Scott, 2003; Weeks, 1981), and not as a result of the specific acts that were being engaged in. Narratives of nor-
mative male sexuality were also implicit in the regulation of the male sex industry, as there do not exist social constructions accounting for male sexuality as “an independent capacity” (Satz, 1995, p. 78) available for commercial sale. Taboos surrounding homosexuality and male sex work serve to defend conceptualizations of men as “the active providers of sex rather than the passive receptors” (De Cecco, 1991, p. ix). In order to protect normative discourses of male sexuality, the existence of male sex work was effectively ignored, rather than emphatically policed. The “problem” of male sex work is, and has always been, a problem of its supposed effects, rather than an issue inherent within sex work itself, as has been suggested by the discourses deployed to justify its regulation.

Research on commercial sex work continues to disproportionately focus on women (Bimbi, 2007; Logan, 2010; Weitzer, 2010), with the possible result that male sex work contradicts conceptualizations of gender and sex inequalities or stereotypical gendered sexual discourses (Brown & Minichiello, 1996b). It is being argued that “male sex workers are difficult to conceptualize in current economic, social and gender theories of prostitution because all participants are the same gender” (Logan, p. 679). It is interesting to note that male sex work has generally been regulated informally through subtle modes of discursive regulation, and outside of the formalities of criminal justice. That a myriad of regulatory (psycho-social, medical, sexual) discourses continue to coexist and inform each other, creates an exciting new terrain by which to study and understand male sex work. Scott et al. (2005) note that we must acknowledge the changing context of the sex industry, including “shifts in public attitudes toward sexuality (including male-to-male sex) and a sex industry that is moving away from the streets and into mainstream service environments such as the Internet, the media and private agencies” (p. 337). Particularly with respect to male sex work, these changes have not yet been fully investigated. Furthermore, as qualitative research on male sex workers informing theories of sexuality and masculinity have recently emerged, Logan notes that “many quantitative questions whose answers could complement the qualitative approach remain unanswered” (p. 679), citing the lack of knowledge regarding the population size or geographic distribution of male sex work. Understanding the history and regulatory context of male sex work serves to permit more nuanced understandings of the industry, including further reflection on how men experience these informal modes of regulation through their labour.

References


