A Sociological/Anthropological Approach to Men Who Buy Sex

A review of

Paying for Pleasure: Men Who Buy Sex

by Teela Sanders


Reviewed by
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Paying for Pleasure: Men Who Buy Sex, written by a professor in the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds, is a continuation of the author's work on the societal role and meaning of prostitution and other forms of commercial sex. In 2005, the author conducted a study and wrote a book on female sex workers. This book expands those findings and framework to explore the role and meaning of commercial sex for male clients.

This study and book approaches the topic of commercial sex from an advocacy and political perspective. In addition to differences in how the topic is approached, the study utilized a different methodology than what is typically employed by psychologists.

The study interviews were heavily influenced by an anthropological perspective as opposed to a validated, objective interview or questionnaire protocol. Further, the author's
advocacy approach attempts to decriminalize the area of paid sex for both the male clients and the female sex workers. Although the writing contains excessive social science jargon, it does challenge the reader to take a more complex view of prostitution and other forms of paid sex. The reality for many, if not most, men is that there are complex psychological and relational meanings related to commercial sex outside of just “sex for pay.”

One major weakness of the present study is that it was based on a convenience sample. There were 134 individuals identified as men who pay women for sex, but only 50 of these men agreed to be interviewed by the author. This response rate is low and likely biased. In this qualitative inquiry, the focus was not on therapeutic issues. However, as the author notes, the interviews appealed to men who “wanted to talk about purchasing sex as well as their private intimate lives and selves” (p. 28). The age range of male clients was 22–70 (the average age was 45), largely Caucasian from England. Half the sample was married or in a long-term relationship, and the length of time buying sex ranged from 1–33 years, with a mean of 9 years. Additionally, the sample was strongly biased toward well-educated (34 men in the sample had a college degree) middle-class men. Whether these results would generalize to working-class, high-school-educated males and men of different ethnic and racial backgrounds remains in question.

The results of these subjective interviews provide the reader with fascinating observations and hypotheses that can be used to conduct further objective, empirically sound research. For example, the author posits five key motives for paid sex: the capacity to purchase specific sex acts; access to a wide variety of women; the ability to contact women with certain characteristics; limited, temporary relationships; and the thrill of the activity. She also presents an insightful discussion of both “push” and “pull” factors toward paid sex, and she observes that the reasons for using sex workers can change over a lifetime. For example, over time the focus may shift to greater companionship needs as well as the development of openness to the woman helping the client function sexually.

A separate chapter explores the drastic changes that have taken place within the sex industry caused by the increased use of Internet technology. One of these changes includes the promotion of a problem-free fantasy approach to sex with no emotional, relational, or health concerns. The “triple-A-effect” of accessibility, affordability, and anonymity has had a dramatic effect on the role and meaning of paid sex, including the complex role of message boards and the Internet sex community.

Another major theme is the multiple roles and meanings, both in terms of intimacy and eroticism, for “regular” clients of sex workers. A particularly interesting discussion involves the “authentic–fake” dimension of mutuality. This discussion explores the division between marriage and sex, specifically describing marriage as a partnership with shared duties involving wives and children, and commercial sex as a complex mix of motivations for desire, pleasure, and eroticism. The exploration of these issues is certainly provocative and worthy of detailed empirical exploration.
The author spends two full chapters confronting the stigma attached to commercial sex, suggesting that in this case stigma is about differences as opposed to deviance. The author's strongest arguments focus on the movement to decriminalize commercial sex, both for the sex worker and the client. Sanders believes that it is not in the best interest of the sex worker, client, or society to adopt a prosecutorial approach to paid sex unless it involves an additional dimension such as human trafficking.

Traditionally, issues involving human sexuality have not received a high priority in psychological theory, research, or clinical practice. Perhaps because sexuality is such a complex, value-laden area (particularly in relation to sexual trauma, sexual orientation, abortion, and extramarital involvement), psychology researchers have often left the field of human sexuality to other disciplines. From our perspective, this is a major mistake. The paradox of sexuality is that healthy sexuality contributes a small positive role in individual and relational well-being, but dysfunctional, conflictual sexuality—and particularly sexual avoidance—can play an inordinately powerful negative role in subverting individual and couple satisfaction and stability (McCarthy & Metz, 2008).

The heuristic work of Sanders provides psychologists, especially social and clinical psychologists, with a variety of hypotheses to explore and further understand human sexuality as a multicausal, multidimensional phenomenon with large individual, couple, value, and cultural differences.

Reference