

Intersections of Sex and Power in Research on Prostitution: A Female Researcher Interviewing Male Heterosexual Clients

In spring and summer 2001, I interviewed clients of prostitutes for a study aiming to unravel the secrecy that surrounds these men and to investigate the ways in which masculine identity is discursively reproduced through (or performed in) commercial sex. For this project, I conducted twenty-six interviews with male heterosexual clients in Germany, mostly in Berlin. The considerations that I discuss below circle around a number of symbolic aspects of power and sexuality—symbolic, that is, because the actual power relations between the participants and me were marginal. Nevertheless, even though the only actual power they had was to disguise and the only actual power I had was related to the way I was going to interpret their stories, power relations such as those between men and women and between researchers and participants were present via symbolic representation. They materialized in and shaped the interview situation. They turned out to be much more complex and fluid than researchers have previously acknowledged.

In this article, I will explore these power relations in more detail. After my introduction, I will divide this discussion into four parts that are very much intertwined with one another. Thus I will have to jump backward sometimes and take up the thread again. In the first part, I investigate issues related to the sensitive nature of prostitution and the precautions a researcher must take in order to guarantee anonymity to her research subjects and to make the men feel comfortable enough to talk openly. In the second part, I examine the context that creates the desire to confess. In the third part, I explore the cultural practices that position women as listeners to masculine needs, and in the fourth part, I investigate the sexualization of the situation and how the researcher can be unwillingly

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woven into interview stories through the participants' erotic fantasies. Throughout I will show the complexity of power relations and how they were intersected by eroticism. I will argue that it is not possible to theorize power as being in the hands of either the researcher or the researched. Instead, power operates as a fluid process that is not possessed by anybody. Before I start, however, I will give a brief introduction to the problematic.

One important strand of feminist social research has been developed around the discussion of bringing to voice the position of marginalized people (Mies 1978). The perspective from below has been privileged because it promises to provide knowledge that brings about social change (Harding 1993). In this context, researchers are described as either equal to or more powerful than their participants. Although there is some danger of romanticizing the voices of the marginalized (Haraway 1990), this perspective on power does sensitize the interviewer to the needs of respondents.

My participants, however, did not belong to any marginalized group *per se*, which prompted me to develop a different reflection on methodology. All participants were white men and native Germans. However, my sample reflected a broad cross-section of society according to the criteria of age, occupation, and place of origin (Eastern or Western Germany).¹ There was a slightly higher participation, relative to the general population, of persons with a university education. This might be because people with a university education have a higher salary, which means that they can more easily afford to visit prostitutes.² Another reason might be that university-educated people know academic environments and have less fear of contact with academic research. The needs participants displayed were mainly related to their sexuality and, for some, to conflicts they experienced over paying for sexual services.

It has been argued that sexuality in general, and with it male sexuality, is oppressed (Queen 1997). A guilty conscience could be seen as a result of this oppression. However, I cannot see that male sexuality (at least in quantitative terms) has been oppressed in Germany. On the contrary, the discourse of the strong male sexual drive is still very widespread, and the

¹ The locations where the men I interviewed met prostitutes showed some variety: porn cinemas, brothels of different sizes (also flats with two to three women working), hotel or home service, streetwalker. They paid between DM 50 and DM 1,200 (€25 to €600; US\$33 to US\$792) for different services, which were rendered in one meeting of different lengths. The frequency of their visits was very different: between once a week and twice in their lifetime; six participants claimed to have stopped activities in commercial sex (though obviously they were still checking advertisements to find mine).

² In their study on HIV and clients of prostitutes, Dieter Kleiber and Doris Velten (1994) come to the same conclusion.

fact that it is a historically grown discourse that in Europe came up only at the end of the eighteenth century (Kucklick 2004) has seldom been acknowledged. This discourse, however, is related to homophobia and the sexual double standard, since women as well as homosexual men were constructed in opposition to heterosexual men. As a result, male heterosexual clients cannot be seen as sexually oppressed. Their needs are not expressions of oppression but rather an expression of the dominant discourse of masculine heterosexuality. This discourse is oppressive for other forms of sexuality but not for that of heterosexual men. This is particularly the case in Germany, since prostitution has not been illegal since the nineteenth century. When I conducted the interviews, federal law still described prostitution as “immoral.” This law was changed shortly after I finished my interviews; the term *immoral* was cut out. Thus, I conducted the interviews during a period in which prostitution in Germany happened to be discussed even more openly than before. Nevertheless, despite the fact that men have legal access to prostitutes and that prostitution is sanctioned by society, many of my participants felt that their commercial sexual activities were not acceptable within their private social environment. As a result, some interviews had the character of coming-out stories. Coming out with something considered unethical made participants vulnerable, and, in this respect, as a researcher I felt a special responsibility. However, they came out with something they were allowed to do—even though they felt ashamed. The facts that visiting prostitutes is allowed and that the sex industry provides a market that caters to the needs of heterosexual men are signifiers of their privileged position. Furthermore, participants would not only talk about their needs but would actually project them onto me. This in turn made me, as a woman and a potential object of their desire, potentially vulnerable.

This problematic was already present during phone conversations with respondents who called me after they had read the advertisement I had published in local newspapers. The very first caller confronted me with all the various problems related to sexuality that would emerge during the interview process. Hemming and hawing for a while about how while one talks about one’s sexuality one might feel very aroused, he finally asked me whether I would be able to tolerate it if he masturbated when and if this arousal occurred. As he was the first caller to respond to my ad, I wondered if all callers were going to be like that and what I would have to put up with if I was really going to carry out this research. Before I started this project, I was aware that emotions often come up during the process of storytelling, but I did not yet have clarity about what that meant in interviews on sexuality. After he asked me this, I felt simultaneously powerless

and curious, disgusted and adventurous. Was it necessary to tolerate men masturbating in front of me in order to get “authentic” information? Since the caller wanted to think about whether or not he would participate, we agreed that he would call back another time. Then, when we talked again, I decided to say “yes” to buy some time and think more about it. However, my “consent” made me feel extremely weak and powerless. I was trapped in a conflict between sexual permissiveness and resistance against this outrageous request, which would situate me unwillingly in the position of a sexual partner. I finally canceled the interview after I received an e-mail from him stating, “If it is not too absurd for you, it would be nice of you to wear a skirt that allows your legs to be seen.” This e-mail, in addition to his request not to be recorded, made his sexual interest very clear, making it impossible for me to work with him.³

I received more such calls asking for sexual services. One man asked, after I had explained the procedure, “May I also show you my penis then?” Another potential participant introduced himself as obsequious, wanting to call me “Madam” or “Mistress.” Still another man asked whether he could have a “little punishment” as a reward for the interview. I did not agree to any of these requests. However, unlike with the first caller, I did not feel powerless at all but realized the enormous emotional need on the other side. I got a firsthand sense of organized sex-workers’ frequent claim that it is they who are in control and not their clients.⁴ However, these requests also show that men feel they are allowed to ask for such favors, which again marks their position of power.

Fortunately, the respondents who contacted me afterward were prepared to give interviews without obviously drawing me into their sexuality. Additionally, all potential and actual participants always remained polite. Nevertheless, since I did not know beforehand who would turn up, I had ongoing concerns about my security, especially after phone calls in which not only the interview situation but also I was sexualized. Deborah Lee (1997), who did research on sexual harassment, discusses problems very similar to those I encountered. Because of the dangers her research entailed, she decided to conduct interviews only in public spaces. This was not possible for me because I recorded all the interviews and wanted

³ Julia O’Connell Davidson (Davidson and Layder 1994) describes an interview in which an interviewee actually started masturbating. This was at the beginning of her research on prostitution. Unfortunately, she does not expand on these methodological problems of interviewing clients of prostitutes.

⁴ For instance, Liz Highleyman argues that even a woman working as submissive is in control of the situation (1997, 148).

participants to talk openly about their sexuality, which would have been difficult in a public space. However, conducting interviews in respondents' homes—which is a method prioritized by many feminist researchers (e.g., Finch 1993)—was also not an option for me. Neither could I conduct interviews in my home. Instead, I met with clients in friends' private offices. Certainly, it would have been useful to get more intimate information in a surrounding—like interviewees' homes—in which they felt more comfortable. However, this could have implied that I was also sexually available. Apart from this, partnered participants who went to prostitutes secretly certainly would not have wanted me to come to their homes. For the same reason (potential sexual availability), I had to take care not to be too friendly and not to have too much rapport, which in other interview settings would be considered a necessary prerequisite for successful research.

The sensitivity of prostitution

What is common sense in the social sciences—that the interview situation ought to be “as confidential as possible” (Lamnek 1989, 67; my translation)—was crucial in mine, since “prostitution is still a sensitive social taboo area” and participants are “anxious about being able to preserve their anonymity” (Kleiber and Velten 1994, 46; my translation). Even though, as I mentioned above, prostitution in Germany is not illegal, only a few of the participants of my studies had ever talked with others about their experiences with prostitutes.⁵ The danger of being ridiculed, of losing their partners, or of both appeared to be too great.⁶ Furthermore, I observed that it was not always the fact of actually going to prostitutes that male clients concealed but rather the particular sexual practice carried out with a prostitute or—as in one case—the inability to have sex with a prostitute. Male clients kept these details secret not only from women but also from other men.

In order to make participants feel comfortable and to make the interview as easygoing as possible, I followed a certain routine. When somebody called me, I first introduced the research project and myself. I then explained the procedures and assured confidentiality in order to establish some kind of trust. To those men who participated, I offered drinks and sweets as an icebreaker and guaranteed in writing that recordings were necessary only for transcribing, that only the written text would be pub-

⁵ Hydra (1991) and Kleiber and Velten (1994) observed the same phenomenon.

⁶ This is also mentioned in Hydra 1991.

lished, and that all the texts would be kept anonymous. This happened before the interviews started.

Apart from this problematic of anonymity, certain details might have remained undisclosed during interviews because participants told their stories according to what they believed was relevant information. As Georg Simmel points out in his sociology of secret societies (1908), we do not give a complete account of what is happening in our consciousness when we tell each other something. He argues that we communicate only the “useful bits” that we know will be understood. Ken Plummer also points to the interactive character of storytelling. He looks at the stories told as “joint actions” (1995, 20)—one actor is the storyteller; the other is the coaxer who “[brings] people to the edge of telling a story they might never have told before, and [coaches] them to tell it in a certain way. . . . Coaxers can play a crucial role in shifting the nature of the stories that are told” (21). As a consequence, in any research project, one has to consider the interactive character of storytelling and the fact that participants alter their stories according to what they think the interviewer expects to or can bear to hear, according to how they believe she is going to interpret what is said, and according to how what is said will be perceived by the wider public when the study is published. In order to be as open a coaxer as possible, I decided to use the methodology of narrative and unstructured interviews, in which the researcher simply gives a stimulus at the beginning. Within this framework, participants could structure their stories off the cuff and choose for themselves which parts were more or less important and at what point they felt comfortable enough to talk about a particular event. Only when participants stopped talking did I ask further questions that could help them clarify their stories.

Even though I integrated the fact that storytelling is an interactive process, my interview methodology made use of the common asymmetrical relation between researcher and researched: while participants were talking and giving information about their sexual lives, I was just listening to them. Many feminist researchers have criticized this methodology because in research on marginalized groups it is a way to establish hierarchy between researchers and researched, since participants give information while researchers remain silent (e.g., Oakley [1981] 1997; Finch 1993). That I would give information about my own private life only very sparingly in order to keep the distance had a tangible influence on some of the interviews, as I sometimes felt participants’ curiosity, and, certainly, the fact that I did not have anything to confess to them marked my power position. However, the interviews were also a “positive sanction” (Rothe 1997), since sex purchase is something participants would rather not talk

about openly, and this very secrecy creates a need to talk about it, as the following quote from Dieter, one of my participants, shows: “For me it is a psychological necessity that I can just get it off my chest, and at home I can’t do this, obviously.”

Participants reacted very differently to this opportunity. Some started talking immediately, whereas some never gave information of any depth, and still others needed more assurance and opened up only slowly. This was often signified by participants wondering aloud “if they should say it” (Michael). Some of them just told a bit and then waited for—or even asked for—new questions: “Well then, next question” (Paul).⁷ Others criticized me for asking detailed questions, for instance asking, “um, do we become precise again?” (Peter). All these difficulties can be related to the fact that participants were not necessarily used to social scientific research methods, did not know how to articulate sexual issues, or felt ashamed to do so, which was consistently expressed through phrases like “how can I put it” (Peter), or “it’s difficult to analyze” (Peter). Those who had studied at a university were generally more talkative, more skilled in coping with a social research project. Participants without much knowledge about academic environments were less sure of how much space they could take for themselves. They needed more time to find out how much they could say and how open they could be.

This points to another aspect that needs to be addressed here. Michael Schwalbe and Michelle Wolkomir (2001) analyzed men’s behavior in interview situations and concluded that, for male participants, an interview is not only “an opportunity for signifying masculinity” but also “a peculiar type of encounter in which masculinity is threatened” because a stranger asks questions (92). I am very skeptical of using the term *threatened masculinity*, since it gives the impression that masculinity is a stable entity men can rely on, without questioning the existing power relations between men and women. However, I read this interview process as an irritation to socially dominant perceptions of masculinity. Being looked at, investigated, makes one feel uncomfortable. One suddenly becomes different, special. Hence, in the constellation of a man being interviewed by a woman, the sense of the male looker and the female looked-at is subverted, as is the related notion of active versus passive. In my particular research project, this was intensified since I asked the men about their sexuality, an important aspect of identity in the contemporary Western world, and they might have been afraid of being rejected. This might be one reason for participants being hesitant to talk.

⁷ I translated all interview quotes from German to English myself.

Apart from that, some interviewees might have also concealed things intentionally. For instance, when I assured people (in writing) that all locations and personal names would remain anonymous, some answered that “one would not say anything identifiable in such a research, anyway.” Thus, even though interviewees talked freely about their experiences, my impression was that some men concealed issues quite consciously.⁸ They may have done so in part in order to avoid situations they felt would be too shameful for them as well as for me.

Of course, stories are not only told for the listener but also for one’s own “self-assertion” (Schütze 1987, 39). Sexual stories in particular are at once informative for the listener and a relief for the storyteller in his or her search for redemption (Plummer 1995, 34). Talking about one’s sexuality can also be a pleasant and seemingly innocent turn-on (as one of my participants admitted). Both motives played a part in participants’ desire to confess.

The desire to confess

Prostitution is surrounded by secrecy, and clients are usually not prepared to reveal their regular or irregular commercial sexual activities. For this reason, Roland Girtler (1994), an Austrian sociologist, noted the difficulty of finding prostitution clients who are prepared to participate in a study. However, through my preliminary research, in which I talked to several prostitutes and had the chance to talk to some clients, too, I recognized among clients an extreme desire to talk about being a client. Just by going to pubs and telling people about my plan to do a study on clients of prostitutes, I collected many stories of heterosexual men having used the services of prostitutes at least once. And this still happens whenever I talk about my research. It is as if these men have a compulsion to take the opportunity and unravel their more or less well-kept secrets about having been involved in commercial sex. Additionally, my being a researcher and

⁸ The primary texts that led me to this observation included Posocco 2004 on secrecy cultures in contemporary Guatemala. At the beginning of her fieldwork, Silvia Posocco felt like she was being interrogated instead of interviewing people. Although she needed access to a community and although the issues of secrecy are slightly different, I see some parallels here. First of all, interviewees may be distrustful and not as open as a researcher might wish them to be. Second, interviewees might observe and question the interviewer from this distrustful position, and interviewers might have to undergo a series of tests to gain access. Third, Posocco’s account questions the assumption of a powerful researcher, since interviewees decide how much they will disclose. I underwent a similar process within the individual contacts and interviews.

a woman implies, for these men, an interesting mixture of meanings, specifically, that I am supposedly neutral yet still endowed with apparently feminine characteristics, such as being a good listener, respectful of their needs, and a potential sexual partner.

I was convinced that I could make use of the phenomena I experienced in this preliminary research when I started to recruit participants for formal and recorded interviews. I found these participants in three different ways: through word of mouth, after publishing an advertisement in several local newspapers in Berlin, and in response to an article in one of the local papers. Thus the men joining my study were a self-chosen group. Dieter Kleiber and Doris Velten (1994), who did a study on the HIV risk behavior of clients of prostitutes and also recruited participants via advertisements in local papers, found that only “people who are especially prepared to give information will be ready to reveal their sexual secrets” (1994, 41; my translation). Likewise, in my research, respondents participated because the project had a “subjective topicality and/or relevance” (Kleiber and Velten 1994, 41; my translation) to them. Some men thanked me and told me that it was good “to get it off the chest” (Dieter). From the many stories on being a client I collected before and after my interview phase, I concluded that subjective topicality is very widespread, and I wondered increasingly about the reasons for this.

Plummer concludes that “people may tell their sexual stories as a relief from tension” (1995, 34). In some of my interviews, it was very obvious that participants joined the project because talking helped them to find some clarity about themselves. They found themselves in conflict between living out what they thought of as their desires, on the one hand, and the low social value of being a john as well as their own moral values such as faithfulness, on the other. The interview, therefore, released them.⁹ They had other reasons as well. They made use of the interview process “as part of a therapeutic encounter for ‘redemption and social reincorporation,’ through a desire to help science” (Plummer 1995, 34). They might have told their tales “through a desire of immortality, a desire for order, as special pleading or simple exhibitionism” (34). And “for many the telling of a tale comes as a major way of ‘discovering who one really is’” (34).

The fact that telling one’s sexual story can serve as “a voyage to explore the self” (Plummer 1995, 34) was an especially important incentive. This interpretation reveals more complex implications if the historical context that inevitably influenced this research project is considered: the devel-

⁹ Andrea Rothe (1997), who studied sex tourism in Thailand, also notes that, after the interview, participants appeared to be calm and relaxed.

opment of sexual sciences led to a culture of constant public as well as private confession (Plummer 1995). In *The History of Sexuality* ([1976] 1990), Michel Foucault argues that *scientia sexualis*, which was developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, refused to speak “of sex itself” ([1976] 1990, 53). It “concerned itself primarily with aberrations, perversions, exceptional oddities, pathological abatements and morbid aggravations” (53). It was not concerned with intensifying pleasure, with drawing “truth . . . from pleasure itself” (57) but with finding the truth about sex. As such, *scientia sexualis* was “subordinated in the main to the imperatives of a morality whose divisions it reiterated under the guise of a medical norm” (53); it “declared the furtive customs of the timid, and the most solitary of petty manias, dangerous for the whole society” (53–54). In order to find these “dangerous” sexual practices, *scientia sexualis* used a secularized version of confession. According to Foucault, confession is one of the major tools of power, since “the truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power” (58–59). This indicates that confession has become an everyday and compelling cultural practice that “has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships and love relations” (59). Furthermore, it is so common that it is no longer regarded as a tool of power: “The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, ‘demands’ only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of some kind of liberation” (60). In this sense, concealment is not only a means of disclosure but also the necessary condition for confession. Additionally, on the one hand, the scientific frame, with its anonymity, supposed neutrality, and contact with experts, holds the potential of ritualization, and the entire interview material is full of discursively ritualized statements about masculine and feminine sexuality.¹⁰ On the other hand, it is particularly this scientific frame that holds sexuality in its opposition, an object to research, never perceived as a tool to gain knowledge.

Within the same theoretical framework, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (1990) idea of the closet provides a slightly different perspective. For Sedgwick, the problem with sexuality is that it is so consistently examined through *scientia sexualis* that in daily life it is impossible to address sex-

¹⁰ Rothe (1997), too, was told by participants how important anonymity is.

uality in an ordinary way. If a person discloses his or her sexuality, it is immediately turned into an identity. This can silence people who do not completely follow what is widely seen as the heterosexual norm because they are aware of the inquisitory power potentially waiting to interrogate and judge them as either immoral or ethical, normal or deviant. People who are “deviant” are often denied the opportunity to talk casually about their sexuality without explaining and justifying it. Sedgwick (1990) points out that, along with the development of a homosexual identity, a heterosexual identity necessarily emerged. The heterosexual identity developed as a norm in which there are two opposite sexes, one with a strong sexual drive, the other with a weak sexual drive. Thus, in a manner similar to the development of the homosexual, the prostitute’s client was also produced, and wanting a lot of sex with many different partners came to be perceived as particularly male. Most arguments for prostitution follow exactly this logic: the need to satisfy a strong sexual urge. Unlike homosexuality, prostitution in Germany was never illegal (at least since the establishment of the nation-state in 1871 [Gleß 1999]) and has been organized for the benefit of (mostly) male clients (e.g., only prostitutes were examined for venereal diseases [Gleß 1999]). However, commercial sex is regarded as a deviant or at least ethically questionable sexual practice, possibly connected with shame and feelings of guilt. Additionally, some respondents were mask or foot fetishists or preferred sadomasochistic sex, which clearly marks them as sexually “deviant.” And even though the sexual sciences have become much more tolerant and permissive, in sexual medicine textbooks there is still a preoccupation with sexual intercourse and sex in marriage or at least long-term monogamous relationships (e.g., Beier et al. 2001). As a consequence, clients of prostitutes simultaneously fit and do not fit into categories of sexual deviance. Nearly all of the participants in my study were aware of this problematic, and either carefully considered where and when to disclose their experiences with commercial sex or were rebelliously and intentionally open about it. In this sense, coming to an interview with a social science researcher provided a unique opportunity for these men to discuss the issues in what they perceived to be a more neutral frame.

One important question is whether this compulsion to confess to oneself and others in order to find one’s inner sexual “truth” gives power to the researcher. On the one hand, one could certainly say yes, since interviewees come to the interview with an emotional need. On the other hand, they confessed something that was never forbidden but merely seen as immoral. Engaging a prostitute has not been accepted as something an individual man one knows should do, but it has always been accepted

in general. Hence, the dangers these clients faced were minimal compared to dangers people are confronted with when they come out as gay or lesbian. However, my informants hardly seemed to be conscious of their power position compared to the social position of gay or lesbian people, nor of their power position in relation to women and other “others.” The important question is whether concealment in this case is about being minoritized or about the privilege of having a position that basically allows one to be silent about one’s “deviant” sexual position. Additionally, confessions about sexual deeds are always mixed with eroticism, so maybe concealment just adds to the thrill. It is more exciting to do things that are forbidden, and it makes one feel good to do things that deviate from what one thinks is the norm. The dilemma lies in the question of whether sex purchase—despite its social and legal status—is a so-called sexually deviant behavior that, like homosexuality, needs moral liberation or whether, instead, it is an exercise of power, an opportunity for men to opt out of private and personal conflicts.

It is important to note here that the way Foucault theorizes it, confession does not happen only as the result of an outside force such as a person like me conducting the interview. It also arises from an internal wish to speak, to articulate feelings, deeds, and so on, in order to clarify one’s own identity, of which sexuality has become one of the most important aspects. Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) argue that an interview is a site where masculinity can be reproduced. This is very intriguing when linked to Plummer’s contention as follows:

No longer do people simply tell their sexual stories to reveal the truth of their sexual lives; instead they turn themselves into *socially organised biographical objects*. They construct . . . tales of the intimate self, which may or may not bear a relationship to a truth. Are their stories really to be seen as the simple unfolding of some inner truth? *Or are their very stories something they are brought to say in a particular way through a particular time and place?* And if so, where do they get their stories from? Once posed this way, the sexual stories can no longer be seen simply as the harbingers of a relatively unproblematic truth. (1995, 34)

Thus, masculinity is not to be seen as the “real” or “inner” truth of the interviewees but as something constantly reproduced in the interview setting through the content of their stories as well as through our interaction.

This is certainly not new, but nevertheless it is a perspective that needs

to be further developed in feminist as well as mainstream social studies on center (as opposed to marginal) positions. The fact that researchers are involved in their research and, hence, also in the interview situation is something feminist theorists in particular have pointed out. However, this has usually happened from the perspective of research on marginalized people. In the context of research on privileged positions such as heterosexual men who pay for sexual services, the researcher cannot remain outside either. She joins the discursive reproduction of gendered identity to a certain extent, even if she would rather stay innocent.

Homophobia and women as better listeners

I asked all prospective participants whether they preferred to be interviewed by a man or a woman. None of them wanted to be interviewed by a man, and many indicated that they preferred to discuss this particular topic with a woman.¹¹ Participants also mentioned this preference during their interviews, saying, for instance, “Well, with men it’s like this . . . that everybody wants to boast somehow” (Dieter). Or, “To be frank, I would rather discuss this with a woman instead of a man” (Christian). Why is that? Why do men prefer to talk about their sexuality and the conflicts they have with it with a woman instead of a man? To answer this, two issues need to be addressed: homophobia and the empirical “fact” that “women frequently operate as facilitators to male speech. That is to say that women do tend not to interrupt but rather to encourage and help the flow of men’s talk” (Smart 1984, 155).

According to Michael Kimmel, “Homophobia is a central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood. . . . Homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men” (2001, 277). Thus, the development of a heterosexual identity includes the rejection of being potentially homosexual. During the course of the nineteenth century, the exchange of intimacy between men became a sign of being homosexual (Eder 2002). This exchange of intimacy can happen bodily as well as verbally (by talking about one’s feelings). In addition, talking about sexual experiences can arouse sexual feelings, which—according to this logic—have to be avoided. As a result, in my analysis of the interview data, I found a subtle homophobia among participants. As the quote from Dieter above shows, participants frequently reported that men boast when

¹¹ Graaf et al. (1996) reported a similar experience in their quantitative study about the transmission of HIV in which they interviewed male heterosexual clients of prostitutes.

they talk about sexuality to other men. Another participant told me, “This is my private affair and I am not going to talk about it [with any other man]” (Gerold). Both boasting and remaining silent are strategies to avoid intimacy.

Since philosophers such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Joachim Heinrich Campe first did so in the late eighteenth century, there has been a tendency in Western society to describe men in emotionally negative terms (Kucklick 2004). For instance, men are assumed to be more selfish and cruel. Simultaneously, women have been increasingly constructed as responsible for relationships and endowed with the ability to love (Kucklick 2004). As a result, men who follow these rules depend emotionally on women, and most women actually have become better listeners. This is also present in feminist research. For example, Carol Smart regards the activity of interviewing as “intrinsically female” (1984, 155). This belief is shared by Janet Finch, who interprets listening as a female strength. She argues that “practice in research teams does suggest that research directors often regard women as especially suited to this task” (1993, 170). Thus, there exists a widespread assumption (often resulting in a sense of empirical factuality) that women are better listeners than men, leaving more space for men to talk. For the men I interviewed, the wish to be interviewed by a woman included a reproduction of these particular gender relations.

From this perspective, the desire to disclose can also be related to the relationship between the prostitute and her client. The interviewees themselves often compared talking to me with talking to a woman working in prostitution. Dieter, for instance, explained to me about going to massage parlors: “But one can also talk about a lot of things. One would never meet the girl or the woman again, or one does not have to, if one doesn’t want. It’s like I’m coming to you now and just want to talk about it.”

The first important aspect to mention here is anonymity. The second is that, in other studies, prostitutes frequently mention clients trying to meet a range of needs, such as a desire for intimate conversation (e.g., Girtler 1994). Thus, prostitutes act as emotional resources on many different levels. As a result they may be allowed insights into sexual practices that regular sexual partners do not know about. In my study, it often appeared that clients have less fear of being rejected or treated as abnormal when they go to prostitutes than when they talk to their regular sexual partners.¹² Many participants told me that they would like to be able to

¹² This can be seen in two different lights: First, the prostitute herself is in a sense excluded from society because of her sexual activity, even though it is not linked to her

talk about prostitution, their sexual desires, and their feelings to their partners. However, they were afraid to do so and regularly blamed their partners for not being understanding. This marks an interesting shift of the division of women between “holy” and “whore.” Because the prostitute functions as an emotional resource and takes on aspects of the stereotypical mother figure, she somehow becomes holy, whereas the private partner who displays her own needs is devalued.

Subsequently, participants’ desire to talk can be interpreted in the frame of confession, since prostitution is an area that is hidden from women who do not work in the sex trade. Even though some women also use the service of prostitutes or visit red-light districts in order to get an impression, the entire space of prostitution is much less accessible to women who are not prostitutes themselves. As a result, the confessional force could be seen as much stronger in relation to women than to men. Furthermore, in the process of establishing heteronormativity as opposed to sexual deviance, feminine identity has been associated with nature, the sexual, and the irrational and thus with emotions, feelings, desires, and so on. As a consequence, women appear to be much better suited to talking about these issues than are men.

This discussion shows that being interviewed, even in the conventional style of one person giving information, can be a positive sanction, too (Rothe 1997). In the case of my study, however, this positive sanction was simultaneously contradicted. The fact that a woman is not just listening selflessly to a man’s talk, that she is in the position of a researcher whereas the one who talks is being researched, subverts stereotypical roles and with them power relations. Women who were believed to be witches and, later, “hysterics” were seen as merely exaggerating typical female characteristics and have frequently been the research objects of men, particularly in terms of their sexuality (Braun [1985] 1999). However, the same did not happen to men. Instead, one could argue that “normal” masculine heterosexuality (in contrast to perversions) has not been investigated but endlessly repeated as the normal since the end of the eighteenth century.¹³ Additionally, in

own desire but to economic needs. Second, the john is the client of the prostitute; thus she actually earns money by listening to him, and like any other businesswoman, she does not want to lose her clients. Furthermore, she knows that she spends only a limited time with each person. As a consequence, she might be a more graceful listener than a partner would be.

¹³ The works of Christoph Kucklick (2004) as well as Philipp Sarasin (2001) imply this. Both analyzed discourses on masculinity and sexuality that occurred toward the end of the eighteenth and during the nineteenth century. Unlike the “pervert,” who was frequently interrogated (Foucault [1976] 1990), the “normal” heterosexual was described (or prescribed) by philosophers as well as by physicians working on hygiene.

Western (knowledge) societies expert knowledge has a much bigger weight than lay knowledge. Even though the men I interviewed were my informants, in my role as conductor of the research project, I was the expert.

This subversion, coupled with the wish to give a good impression, might have been the reason for my informants' insecurities. For instance, Michael introduced his foot fetish by saying, "I am wondering whether I should tell you." In every interview and with every step of increasing openness, the men risked putting me off and hence being rejected. So, before telling me more details, they tried to figure out how far they could go. This was, however, only the case for issues they *thought* were sensitive. Very often I had to listen to assumptions about how men and women are or should be. For example, Paul explained to me that "men react stronger to visual appeals" and "girls read romance novels whereas boys flick through porn magazines." Statements like these reflect collective beliefs about sex and gender that result in social relations that privilege men. The social relations Paul describes are power relations, relations that are especially visible in terms of sexuality. In general, interviewees showed very little awareness of their social position and used these descriptions of how men and women behave to consciously or otherwise disguise their social advantages, especially in terms of sexual arousal and gratification.

I was determined to not be easily put off by anything my informants told me. But this proved problematic. Smart (1984), who interviewed solicitors and had similar experiences in interviews with men, wonders whether by being silent she became an accomplice of sexism. On the other hand, Ann Phoenix (1994), who analyzed race relations in the interview process, recognizes that the racist comments or reactions of her interviewees were part of the discourse she was researching, and she was able to distance herself emotionally from them. I am convinced that I did a bit of both. On the one hand, I clearly reproduced sexism just by being a woman, listening to my informants, and even encouraging them to talk. On the other, I challenged them, because my listening had an intention of its own. I made them my research "objects." Furthermore, my aim was not primarily to challenge and change these individual twenty-six men but—like Phoenix—to research the very discourses they produced and thus to have a far bigger impact.¹⁴ The only thing I wonder is whether challenging such comments would have brought about more of the same sexist discourse.

¹⁴ The same ethical problem is discussed by Davidson (Davidson and Layder 1994), who mainly comes to the same conclusion: in order to sustain the discourse, one has to sanction sexism positively to a certain degree to make interviewees feel comfortable.

The appearance of eroticism

It is common knowledge that, when one talks about one's experiences, the related emotions become vivid again (Schütze 1987, 41). In the case of my research, this obviously would be dominated by sexual emotion. As I mentioned earlier, in some cases, sexual expectations surfaced over the phone, and I canceled those interviews. One participant told me about the erotic kick he got just from thinking about talking about his sexuality. For these men, either the research situation or I myself as a still anonymous person was already sexualized. For other participants, sexual feelings might have come up during the interview, and for some I might have been less central (or central in other functions), and they might have felt sexual desire not in response to me but in response to the process of narration itself. Alternatively, desire surfaced, and I became its object just because I happened to be there. And while participants were telling me their sexual stories, I was also reflecting on my own experiences, as one does when one is listening. I was not exempted from the effect of any emotions that might come up during this process. As a result, I was not completely free of sexual emotions either, and often the atmosphere was filled with eroticism, possibly leading to multiple mutual projections. This sexualization of the interview caused the main problems I had in terms of power relations as well as ethics. In this section, I discuss some examples of how I got integrated in participants' sexuality and how this troubled me.

Rolf, who at the time of the interview had still not recovered from a surgery that made him unable to control certain muscles, explained to me: "Yes, well to be frank, ehm, it can happen, you just have to look at me, and then I got, come to orgasm. . . . Yet, it can also happen that we 'torture' ourselves for two hours and nothing will happen. . . . Well, normal humans can control their sexual drives or their orgasm, I can't. . . . It can happen to me that while we are sitting here, I suddenly orgasm, yes, because I can't control it . . . without me thinking or imagining, seeing anything, it suddenly happens and I can't do anything about it."

When I asked Paul how he chooses a woman in a brothel, he told me, "certain issues of sympathy, antipathy, I could only, when I knew for sure that I am crazy about her, but could not, if, I would get a crisis, if she has freckles or short red hair, I would not like it, I could not do it then, I can't." In Paul's case, it is less obvious that he included me in his story. However, it becomes clear when I actually describe myself: I have freckles and had short hair, which in summer can appear rather red, when I conducted the interviews.

The quotes above are very different from each other. Rolf explains a medical fact that obviously has nothing to do with our relation to each

other and uses a very usual procedure of including a listener in one's explanation, whereas Paul is virtually insulting me. Rolf probably would not have done this with a man, as this would suggest homosexual feelings, whereas Paul could have been speaking to anyone, a man or a woman. Both quotes could signify, on the one hand, attempts to neutralize emotions in this situation by indirectly saying, "Don't worry. I don't feel attracted to you, even though there are some sexual feelings operating." Or, "Please do not feel attracted to me." On the other hand, they point to the fact that this interview setting inherited the sexualization of the encounter and hence the potential sexual objectification of me as the researcher.

In one case, I very obviously became the object of desire of one participant. Christian told me that sometimes he would ask shop assistants whether he could kiss their feet. Because at the time of our interview none of them had agreed, he told me he would like to know how a woman might feel when being asked this favor. I replied that I would find it quite awkward. Instead of giving up, he then asked me: "I would really like to know, if I asked you, could I maybe kiss your feet, Sabine, let's say, how would you react to this?" Similar cases are mentioned in the study on clients by the prostitutes' rights organization Hydra: "The men assumed our understanding of their form of sexuality; some, for instance, took the opportunity to give the interview in a woman's dress" (Hydra 1991, 24; my translation). However, the Hydra cases are not as directly related to the interviewer as was the case when Christian asked me whether he could kiss *my* feet. This means that I was unwillingly involved in his fantasies, since his request obviously crossed the border between researcher and researched in the way that he made use of me for his personal desire.

Schwalbe and Wolkomir interpret the sexualization of the woman-to-man interview situation as an attempt by the man to exercise control. It can take different forms: "flirting, sexual innuendo, touching, and remarks on appearance" (2001, 94). All of them may appear innocent, but they point to gendered power relations (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001). This is particularly the case because in the heterosexual context women frequently operate as sexual objects. Representations—as well as acceptance—of women as sexual subjects are still exceptions (e.g., Ussher 1997).¹⁵ In the case of my research, none of the participants ever touched me, but other forms of eroticization took place. Nevertheless, I am very reluctant to in-

¹⁵ In this case, the sex industry is no exception. Women are presented as seducers, but they never pester men with their desire.

terpret this only as a signifier of power and control in this particular interview context. Participants were vulnerable when they displayed their emotional neediness. As a result, in the cases when Christian asked to be allowed to kiss my feet and in the case when the prospective participant asked me on the phone if he could show me his penis, I did not feel overpowered at all but had the impression of being in control of the situation. Nor did I have the impression that it was an exercise of power over me. It was a request for an opportunity, a wish both men would like to have had satisfied but asked very neatly. It was more a question of an exchange of one favor for another. Nevertheless, it simultaneously was an exercise of power because men are in a social position that enables them to ask for such favors in the most innocent way.

In some respects, my research experience reminds me of the fact that, until the seventeenth century, in Europe superiors could appear naked in front of their servants but not the other way around (Kleinspehn [1989] 1991). This can be used as a metaphor to explain one aspect of the relationship between participants and me as well as between prostitutes and their clients. This does not necessarily mean that the client is always in control of the prostitute or that he really is more powerful than she is. It does, however, mean that this symbolic is still present in the encounter and that it marks general privileges: men can show themselves “naked”; they can display their neediness, and women, like mothers, will care for them. Thus, the display of emotional needs is part of this very gender setting. This is even enforced if one thinks about what kind of emotional need is displayed. It is not fear, not a shock reaction; it is the wish for sexual pleasure and gratification. I do not want to argue against sexual pleasure, but in the context of prostitution this pleasure is a consumer good. Consumer goods, like sexuality, serve to perform one’s social identity (Cronin 2000). Furthermore, while consumer goods are luxuries, in the discourse on prostitution these luxuries are turned into urgent needs. Thus sexual desire can never be an innocent emotional need, one that is just “natural.”

In the same context, Schwalbe and Wolkomir advise interviewers not to use flirting as a strategy to establish rapport, because this may include “the distinct disadvantage of encouraging a participant to try to create an impression of himself as sexually desirable” (2001, 94). It might have been fatal if I had done this. The participants, however, flirted with me and thus created the same effect: they tried to appear sexually desirable. Besides, some men had a bad conscience for using prostitutes. In the case of a disputed area such as prostitution, it is very likely that clients will

want to appear as politically correct as possible. As a result, the general undertone of all interviews was “I am a normal man, and I am better than you might think I am.”

Conclusions

The interview situation was shaped by a number of forces. To begin with, prostitution still appears to be a sensitive area. On the one hand, it is accepted as fulfilling a male need, an argument that participants often used. On the other hand, individual men (at least those who participated) have difficulties in talking about prostitution, especially to their partners. As a result, the interviews were simultaneously shaped by participants' reluctance to talk about commercial sex, by their sense of having a right to make use of commercial sex, and by their bad consciences. Their stories were in effect coming-out stories. True, most participants would rather not talk about prostitution too openly. This concealment, however, is not only related to a threat. I even wonder if men would really risk their reputations if they came out as sporadically paying for sexual services. Certainly their partners would not like it, but would they risk losing their jobs? I believe instead that being silent about prostitution and maintaining the belief that one is doing something forbidden adds to the erotic thrill. It also creates the desire to talk about it. Doing something forbidden, particularly in sexual terms, makes one want to confess. This confession, however, entails two aspects. First, it relieves one's bad conscience, especially over lying to one's partner. Second, it provides an erotic kick. This erotic moment of confession, coupled with the lack of intimacy among most heterosexual men, again necessitates the presence of a woman as listener. As a result, the most prevailing force that shaped the interviews was the gendered relation between a woman as researcher and a man as interviewee. This gendered relationship was again contradictory. On the one hand, the interviews reflected the common notion of a woman as listener and facilitator of men's talk. Men could assert themselves because they were encouraged to talk about issues they usually cannot talk about. I even thanked them for coming and telling me (mostly) sexist stories and using me as the object of their sexual fantasies. On the other hand, this notion was challenged because the listening was generated by a research interest and was not aimed at helping participants.

Even though power in this particular setting was symbolic, a complex of power relations between the researcher and the researched surfaced. It was the men's own decision to participate, and they disclosed only what they wanted to disclose. They dominated with their construction of mean-

ing, and I agreed to it. In my role as a female researcher, this coincided with my sex and hence reproduced gender-stereotypical behavior. However, some men may have joined the project out of a need to renegotiate meaning. In this context, I also witnessed participants' insecurity during the interviews. I was in the position of the researcher and the interviewer. Thus, even though I used a nondirective style, they still answered my questions, and I directed their thoughts to a certain degree. They made themselves vulnerable by giving me an insight into intimate details of their sexual life. Even the request to kiss my feet brings the questioning person into a vulnerable position, since he indicates his desire and with this my power over him. Moreover, to keep silent and make the other person believe one feels sympathy can be an exercise of power as well as obedience to power. It is certainly a powerful position not to interrupt, because one wants to collect these discourses precisely.

In conclusion, I believe it is necessary to see different strands of power interwoven with one another rather than to theorize power as a unified phenomenon that is owned either by the researcher or the researched. If all these aspects of power are summarized—the constraint to confess, the inquisitory power of science, the relations between men and women concerning the right of speech and the right to have sexual desire—it becomes evident that there is not an either/or power relation between the researcher and the researched but that in the interview situation a “multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate” (Foucault [1976] 1990, 92) surfaced. The sphere in which power operated was not a neutral sphere somewhere outside of social space and merely reflecting it. Instead of simply giving men an opportunity to talk about commercial sex, the interview provided space to discursively reproduce sexual identity on both levels, through the actual content of their stories as well as through our interaction.

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