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**Drifters, Party Boys and Incumbents: The life patterns of male street-based sex workers**

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**Abstract**

This paper is based on a qualitative study of male street-based prostitution. It suggests that the street-based sector is more varied, with sellers adopting a wider range of working practices, than is commonly acknowledged in the literature on male prostitution.

Drawing on data from Manchester, England I identify a number of 'life patterns' among male street sellers that reflect varied working practices based on issues around rational decision-making and the sex worker's relationship to place and environment. The discussion has implications for urban policies around street-based sex work but also for a more general understanding of male sex work in international and comparative perspective.

**Keywords:** environment, male sex work, prostitution, rational decision making, urban studies

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## **Introduction**

Historically the political and policy emphasis on the regulation of female sexuality meant that the boundaries and particular working practices of male sex workers (henceforth MSWs) remained relatively hidden and under-scrutinised (Dennis, 2008; Minichiello & Scott, 2014; Weitzer, 2009; Whowell, 2010). Early research into male prostitution emphasised its psychopathological nature. Issues around low intelligence, psychosexual development, cognitive abnormalities, sex role confusion and personality defects were often claimed in such studies (Coombs, 1974, Dietz, 1978; Freyhan, 1947; Ginsberg, 1967). This perspective gradually gave way to sociologically oriented analyses, that while taking a more sympathetic approach, nevertheless continued to depict male sex workers somewhat stereotypically as delinquents who were engaged in what is termed survival sex (Luckenbill, 1986; Allen, 1980; Weisburg, 1985). More recent research in this genre has identified a range of factors associated with male prostitution including a history of physical and sexual abuse, foster care, dysfunctional family backgrounds, homelessness and a lack of educational opportunity (Davies & Feldman, 1999; Minichiello, 2007; Bimbi, 2007; Dorais, 2005). A number of behavioural characteristics of MSWs have also been noted. These include heavy drug and alcohol consumption, involvement in petty criminality and a tendency to drift in and out of prostitution (Atkins, 2013; Dorais, 2005;

Calhoun & Weaver 1996; McCabe 2011; West, 1993; Calhoun & Weaver, 2001). Other researchers have begun to document the intersection of the digital economy and male sex work, suggesting that the rise of the Internet has largely displaced commercial sex away from traditional solicitation venues such as the street (Ashford, 2009; Walby, 2012).

Bimbi (2007) notes how the second wave of research into male prostitution was heavily geared to identifying the typologies of different categories of seller where ‘researchers would describe these categories as types and attempt to differentiate subtypes within and across categories’ (p.18). Nevertheless, many of these studies sought to compare the characteristics of male sex workers who worked in *different* sectors. For example, an early study by Caukins & Coombs (1976) compared male on-street and off-street prostitution and categorised MSWs as ‘street hustlers’, ‘bar hustlers’, ‘call boys’ and ‘kept boys’. Similarly, Dorais (2005) constructed a typology of MSWs who worked for escort agencies and those who worked the street in Montreal and Quebec City. What is of particular relevance in Dorais’s study concerns his identification of a number of ‘life pattern’ characteristics that are typical of particular categories of MSW. These life patterns are ‘based on sex workers feelings and emotions, their images of self and clients and their mode of entry into the profession’ (Dorais, 2005: 36). While Dorais’s typology is not directly comparable to the situation I describe below, the notion that the particular working practices of MSWs can be identified through life pattern characteristics remains a useful exploratory device.

Relatively few studies have systematically attempted to differentiate the characteristics of sellers *within* a particular mode of sex work although Allen (1980) did acknowledge the existence of pejoratively termed ‘delinquents’, ‘throwaways’ and ‘drag queens’ who worked the street. A key aim of this paper therefore, is to highlight the variation in male street-based sex work and move beyond the one-dimensional portrayals of such MSWs that are highlighted in some of the studies mentioned above. In order to demonstrate this variation I develop an

alternative typology of the life pattern characteristics of street-based MSWs in Manchester, England.

The paper is structured as follows: I provide an outline of the conceptual framework adopted in the paper before discussing the research methodology adopted for the study on which it is based. I then move on to the substance of the paper that provides an outline of the 'life pattern' characteristics of several types of male street seller in Manchester based on observational and interview data. In the conclusion I suggest that the discussion has implications for outreach work with male street sellers and prostitution policy in Manchester but also note that it has relevance to the comparative study of male commercial sex in other jurisdictions.

Before we begin the discussion it is perhaps useful to note a point of information in relation to the legal situation regarding prostitution in Manchester. Like the situation in England and Wales generally, prostitution per se – whether on or off street - is not illegal, however, a range of associated activities such as solicitation, kerb crawling, brothel keeping and so forth are. In practice, providing prostitution stays within clearly defined areas and does not constitute a public nuisance, the police in Manchester will rarely take enforcement action against male (and female) sex workers (interview with Greater Manchester Police officer; Manchester City Council, 2014). Nevertheless, the police do keep a look out for underage MSWs based on issues around child protection and these young males are referred to outreach NGOs or social services.

### **Theorising male street-prostitution in Manchester**

The discussion locates the analysis of male street-based commercial sex in Manchester within two broad conceptual literatures. The first relates to the theory of rational decision-making among male street-based sex workers developed by Calhoun and Weaver (1996) that is drawn from broader classical theories in sociology and criminology. In overall terms Calhoun and

Weaver's aim is to problematise the determinism inherent in some accounts of male sex work that claim young men are pushed into selling sex by structural factors such as poverty. As they note '...poverty is insufficient to explain why young males choose to enter and remain participants in this type of activity. Many other males share a similar disadvantaged position, but for unknown reasons choose not to engage in this behaviour' (1996: 201). What this position allows us to do is to foreground notions of agency and choice in sex work (O'Neill, 2001; Sanders et al, 2009; Minichiello et al, 2013) and to acknowledge that while some of these 'choices' may be tightly circumscribed, young men nevertheless weigh up the benefits and costs of selling sex against a range of other options (Calhoun & Weaver, 1996: 211-14). It is in this sense that the 'subjective expected utility of male prostitution is perceived to be greater than the potential risks' (Calhoun & Weaver, 1996: 212).

While one can accept the agency implied in Calhoun and Weaver's (1996) analysis it nevertheless needs to be tempered and complemented by a more structural narrative. In other words, for MSWs rational decision-making takes place within a predefined set of structural constraints. As such, the second conceptual anchor point relates to a discussion of the role of space and place in the establishment and perpetuation of sites of prostitution. Certainly there is a long history of research in this area dating back to the Chicago School of sociology in the 1920s and 1930s which noted the ways that deviant behaviour can be shaped by the social and physical environment of the city (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Reckless, 1933) More recently, notions of space and place have been used to good effect by urban geographers and sociologists to explain the role of prostitution in the making of 'urban orders' (Hubbard & Sanders, 2003; Hubbard, 2000) but also to explore the social organisation and ecology of red-light districts (RLDs) (Weitzer, 2014).

The situation that I describe below resonates closely with Weitzer's (2014) description of a mixed-use RLD given the intersection of male street prostitution with a range of

entertainment and social spaces used by a mainly gay clientele (bars, clubs, saunas, sex shops) around Manchester's Gay Village [henceforth 'the Village'] where many MSWs congregate and spend their time. Spaces are not neutral and both act and are acted on by those that inhabit them in a kind of symbiotic relationship (Keith & Pile, 1993). Indeed, other studies of male sex work in Manchester have gone some considerable way in highlighting how 'place' – the Village – provides the environmental backcloth for MSWs to engage in a range of sexual choreographies (see Whowell, 2010 for a discussion). In terms of the dynamics of this spatiality, place and identity are bound to each other and 'are co-produced as people come to identify with where they live, shape it, however modestly and are in turn shaped by their environments, shaping distinctive *environmental autobiographies*' (Giesecking et al, 2014: 234. Italics in original). It is these environmental autobiographies that I suggest exert a differential influence on the life-patterns of particular categories of male street-based sex workers in Manchester.

### **Research Methodology**

The findings presented here form part of a larger study that sought to explore the regulation of commercial sex in four European cities.<sup>1</sup> Manchester was chosen because it is largest city in the north of England and forms the epicentre of the Greater Manchester Built Up Area with a population of around 2.5 million (Office for National Statistics, 2016). Because of its size the city has an established commercial sex scene involving both male and female sellers.

Since the research was exploratory it was determined that participant observation would permit the researcher to observe MSWs in their natural 'work' setting, noting how they passed their time in the Village as well as observing interactions with each other and with clients. Consequently, over 130 hours of observations were conducted around the main solicitation areas for male commercial sex (described below). Observational techniques have been used to good effect in the past to study marginal and hidden populations, including sex worker populations

(Calhoun & Weaver, 1996; Dorais, 2005; Davies & Feldman, 1999; Atkins, 2013; Whowell, 2010). The second phase of the study involved semi-structured interviews with representatives from various organisations and stakeholder groups involved in the *Manchester Prostitution Forum* (see Manchester City Council, 2014). These organisations are identified in the paper with permission and include police and city council officials and two NGOs that are involved in outreach work with male street sellers (Men's Room and Lifeshare)<sup>2</sup> as well as organisation that deals with violence against sex workers (National Ugly Mugs). The interviews were digitally recorded with the respondent's permission.

Given that the observations necessitated spending considerable periods of time around the Village the researcher became known to a number of MSWs who would often sit at his table and chat if he was having a drink outside a bar in the area. This provided an opportunity to ask MSWs if they would like to be interviewed for the study and providing they gave verbal consent arrangements were made to conduct the interview at a later date. This usually took place in a nearby coffee shop, a bar in the Village or sometimes in a McDonald's restaurant. These informal interviews lasted between one and two hours and took an unstructured format. Data were recorded in handwritten field notes using shorthand (Pitmanscript). A total of 15 MSWs were interviewed in this way. Seven other MSWs were happy to chat conversationally to the researcher but did not want to participate in any kind of interview. In order to preserve anonymity I use pseudonyms for all sex workers referred to in the paper.

It is important to note that I cannot make any claims as to the representativeness of the sample given that this is a notoriously difficult undertaking when dealing with marginal and hidden populations (Dorais, 2005; Davies & Feldman, 1999). Nevertheless, the sample of MSWs interviewed (15) represents approximately one quarter of the total number (around 60) of male street-based sex workers that are estimated to work in the city with some regularity according to one NGO (Lifeshare).



In terms of the demographic profile of MSW respondents, both outreach NGOs noted that it would be rather unusual for a young male from a minority-ethnic background to sell sex on the streets of Manchester. Consequently, the majority of MSWs interviewed were white British (14) with one coming from Ireland originally. With the exception of this Irish MSW most sex workers grew up in the Greater Manchester area (9) but five stated that they had arrived in the city from other towns / cities in the north of England. All were aged between 18 and 22 with the mean age, 19. Seven MSWs were currently unemployed with some claiming welfare benefits, three had part-time jobs in the hospitality sector, one worked in an office, one worked in construction, two were studying part-time at a local college and one was attending University. All the MSWs had undertaken formal schooling but just under half the respondents (7) had left school without achieving any GCSEs (the UK post-16 qualification). The remainder had obtained some GCSEs with one MSW completing his A-Levels (the UK post-18 qualification). A small majority of MSWs (8) identified as heterosexual and said that they were living with a girlfriend or female partner. Two said that they were bisexual; three indicated that they were homosexual, and two refused to comment on their sexuality. Most of the MSWs spoken to had been selling sex for a relatively short period of time with three stating that they had been doing this for less than six months; seven stated just under a year, with five working for over a year. The longest period that any MSW had been selling sex for was eighteen months. A majority of MSWs lived in rented or supported accommodation (8), three lived with parents, with the remainder stating that they lived with friends or another family member (grandparent, sibling). No MSW said that they were homeless at the time the research was conducted. Two MSWs had previously served short custodial sentences for selling stolen goods and recreational drug dealing respectively.

## **The life patterns of male street-based sex workers in Manchester**

Historically male street prostitution in Manchester operated from an area referred to by locals and promoted by the city council as the ‘Gay Village’ (Figure 1) (Atkins, 2013; Atkins & Laing, 2012; Whowell, 2010)).

### **Insert Figure 1 about here**

Since the late 1990s the Village has become increasingly gentrified and cosmopolitanised (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004) and incorporates over fifty venues including gay bars, restaurants, clubs, saunas, sex shops, fast food takeaways, hotels, and convenience stores. Several bars in the Village also feature male strippers on weeknights in order to drum up business. While the area is promoted as a ‘gay’ space all manner of people socialise there including many heterosexuals because of its lively night-time economy and relaxed licensing laws (Atkins, 2013; Binnie & Skeggs, 2004). While some MSWs still solicit from the vicinity of the Village itself the gentrification of the area has dispersed male sex work out along the canal towpath (Figure 2) extending to an area known colloquially as ‘the bridge’ (Figure 3).

### **Insert Figures 2 and 3 about here**

Both the towpath and ‘the bridge’ are somewhat ambiguous sexual spaces, being solicitation areas for paid sex as well as cruising areas for unpaid sex (Atkins, 2013; Whowell, 2010).

In the remainder of the paper I identify a number of life patterns that are associated with male street-based sex work in Manchester. These are derived from the participant observations

and triangulated with interview data from MSWs and NGOs. I suggest that that these ‘life patterns’ are not *just* linked to the innate characteristics of the sex worker but are also reflected in differences in their working practices which are determined to a significant degree by the sex worker’s relationship to place – the Village. In this sense, I propose a broad typology of male street-based sex workers that reflects the following life patterns:

(1) *Drifters*: young men who drift in and out of sex work sporadically and who do not participate in the social life of the Village. The Village is perceived entirely in instrumental terms as a way of earning money quickly.

(2) *Party Boys*: young gay identified men who frequent the Village mainly for its social life but who occasionally partake in commercial sex if a particular opportunity arises.

(3) *Incumbents*: young men who maintain a constant presence in the Village and who sell sex with some regularity. Incumbents enjoy the social life of the Village and sometimes participate in other money-making activities besides selling sex.

It is important to note, however, that this typology is presented in an ideal-typical fashion for heuristic purposes and in practice there may be some movement between the categories. As I describe below, depending on the circumstances some drifters may eventually become incumbents but in other cases – as with party boys – this category remains relatively immutable.

### The Drifter

Out of the sample of 15 MSWs interviewed four can be classified as drifters. Drifters sell sex sporadically and are not a permanent fixture on the male sex worker scene around the Village. They are often responding to dramatic events in their lives such as sudden unemployment, homelessness, family or relationship problems or some other temporal situation that requires immediate action (Price, 1984; Davies & Feldman, 1999; Atkins, 2013). Drifters perceive the Village entirely in instrumental and utilitarian terms as a place where they can make

money quickly. As has been acknowledged in other studies, young men who drift sporadically in and out of selling sex are likely not to be gay-identified (West, 1993; Davies & Feldman, 1999) and of the four drifters identified from the sample, three claimed to be heterosexual and one claimed to be bisexual. All but one of these drifters claimed to have left school without any qualifications. Both drifters and incumbents (described below) affect the demeanour of the ‘Sally Lad’<sup>3</sup> eroticised in gay circles with a readily identifiable dress code that comprises hooded tops, tracksuits and brand-name (i.e. Nike or Adidas) sports footwear (Brewis & Jack, 2010; Whowell, 2010). In part, this is the standard attire of the (urban) working-class British male but this dress sense is also something that is actively contrived by MSWs to solicit business and which forms an essential part of their sexual choreographies (Whowell, 2010).

Those MSWs who drift sporadically in and out of selling sex can be illustrated by the case of Paul (21). Paul explained that he had been made redundant from his job as a construction labourer: ‘the boss just calls me in one day and says I’m no longer needed... And I’m going like what the fuck!... What will I do now?’ For Paul, who stated that he was heterosexual and lived with his girlfriend, it was his sudden unemployment and the resultant loss of income that was the key precipitating factor for his decision to enter into commercial sex.

Paul had few employment options outside of manual labouring having left school without any qualifications. He alternated between casual labouring and selling sex if a particular household bill arrived that needed to be paid urgently and as he suggested: ‘I come down here when I need cash, simple. When I get it I go home...I don’t hang about’. As such, Paul led a rather solitary existence in the Village and had absolutely no interest in socialising with other MSWs. In terms of rational decision-making Paul perceived the area in a utilitarian fashion as somewhere he could earn money quickly. Furthermore, while he expressed some distaste for what he was doing he nevertheless felt that the money was easily obtained: ‘Well its not something that I really like doing, but I still do it... It’s easy money like, you get used to it’.

Other studies have noted how some heterosexual MSWs who sell sex to other men engage in a form of cognitive dissonance (Dorais, 2005) and ‘boast of their appreciation for the female gender and a preference for sex with women’ (Calhoun & Weaver, 2001: 216). Certainly Paul was at pains to emphasise his heterosexuality and refused to be drawn on what sexual activities he performed with clients. He did not acknowledge what he was doing as ‘work’ let alone acknowledge his status as a sex worker and simply drifted in and out of sex work as need and circumstance dictated.

Financial compensation was not the only reason why drifters engage in commercial sex. George (20) explained ambiguously that he was ‘a bit bisexual’ and had his first sexual encounter with another man in a young offenders institution where he served a short custodial sentence for selling stolen goods: ‘I kind of liked it, just being with another lad... I wouldn’t come down here [to the Village] that often, but I would when the girlfriend’s away’. For George who was studying for an apprenticeship at a local college it was sexual *as well as* financial gratification that was the primary motivating influence (see also Dorais, 2005). As he explained, ‘Well I can’t really go looking for a shag if the missus [girlfriend] is about and I guess if I am going to do it I might as well get paid for it if you know what I mean’. George sold sex very sporadically (he claimed once or twice every three or four months) and saw no need to socialise in the Village or interact with other MSWs and as he stated: ‘I’m not interested in any of that stuff to be honest... I’ve no interest in what any of them other lads are doing’.

### The party boy

There is another population of male seller who periodically engages in opportunistic commercial sex as a by-product of their presence around the Village. Party boys represent a distinct category of MSW and were identified by NGOs and spoken to in the context of the interviews. While party boys are likely to be gay identified, unlike those incumbents (discussed

below) who might be gay identified, they do not frequent the Village primarily for the aim of obtaining paid sex. For them, commercial sex is ancillary to their presence in the Village for socialising and partying with their friends. For party boys selling sex is intimately connected to their presence on the gay scene and for some commentators male sex work can be a way of coming to terms with one's homosexuality (Davies & Feldmann, 1999) while Koken et al (2004) note that for some young gay men being offered money for sex was felt to be ego boosting. Compared to drifters and incumbents even the attire of party boys differs: Tracksuits, trainers and hooded tops are eschewed in favour of designer jeans and items of urban chic clothing that are associated with the lifestyle of the gay urban male (Altman, 1999).

It is difficult to estimate the numbers of young men who engage in opportunistic commercial sex in this way since like drifters their selling practices tend to be highly sporadic and they rarely engage with outreach workers: 'They are the lads that are more wary of interacting with us. So I don't think we are really accessing that group' (Interview Men's Room). Furthermore, it is doubtful whether party boys would acknowledge the label 'sex worker': Many of these young men 'haven't really thought about selling, but it is something that happens by chance and is linked to their presence on the gay scene' (Men's Room interview). For party boys commercial sex is sometimes negotiated in bars and clubs in the Village or around the canal towpath and the area near 'the bridge'.

For this population, selling sex is not necessarily something they intended to do, but they gradually come to realise that they *could* do, which of course is facilitated by their presence around the Village. In some cases commercial sex happens entirely by accident. Given the proximity of gay cruising and solicitation areas some young gay males who are cruising for unpaid sex along the towpath or near 'the bridge' sometimes get mistaken for sex workers and are approached by older men who are looking for *paid* sex (Lifeshare interview). The young man may make a decision to accept the offer of money or he may decline, but this decision is

contingent on the circumstances and because a particular opportunity arises. For example, the researcher met Greg (21) one evening near 'the bridge' where he was looking for a casual (unpaid) sexual encounter. Greg was in regular employment and had left school with a number of GCSEs and usually spent his weekends socialising and partying in the Village with friends. However, Greg conceded that he occasionally received payment for sex but this was something that often happened by chance and not something that he purposely set out to do. As he explained:

You're going to think I'm a right shit, but for me it's a power trip. If I'm on the towpath and an old bloke [man] comes up to me I tell him the highest figure I can think of for a laugh... Like a really mad price... hoping he will move on. If he says OK, then that's a different ball-game... I'm thinking maybe... It's me who is in control, and the idea that someone wants my body that much... is willing to give me so much money for it, kind of turns me on to be honest.... (Greg gay identified, office worker).

The idea that for party boys commercial sex is ancillary to socialising in the Village was also evident in the case of Adam (20). Adam was gay-identified and explained that although he was a student at a local University he also sold sex from the Internet when he wasn't studying for his degree. Like Greg, Adam socialised regularly in the bars and clubs in the Village with friends but occasionally he would be offered money for sex before he went home. As he explains, 'I sell sex off the Internet, it's the only way I can pay for Uni... But the very odd time when I am down in the Village I will get offered money too... If I like the look of them of course I am going to take it, why wouldn't I?' For Adam his foray into commercial sex was the product of a utilitarian cost-benefit calculation to keep his academic career on track:

I get more money from doing this than if I was working for minimum wage in a shop or something... Two hours with a client could set me up for the whole week. It means I

have more time to study. I don't have well-off parents who can give me money and without the money I can't study, it's that simple (Adam gay-identified, student).

### The Incumbent

Incumbents are the group that outreach workers have the most engagement with and which also comprised the largest number of MSW respondents (9). Incumbents can be so named because (a) they maintain a constant presence around the Village and actively participate in its social and cultural life, (b) sell sex with some regularity though this is mediated by their participation in other money-making enterprises.

The category of incumbent encompasses a range of expressed sexualities. Out of this cohort five incumbents claimed to be heterosexual, one claimed to be homosexual and one claimed to be bisexual.<sup>4</sup> Just under half the sample of incumbents (4) had left school without any educational qualifications and reported a history of truancy and disruptive behaviour during their early schooling. A majority of incumbents were unemployed at the time the research was undertaken, although the picture is complicated slightly by the fact that several MSWs had actually left regular employment in order to return to selling sex (discussed below). Contrary to the situation identified among male street sellers in other jurisdictions (Dorais, 2005; McCabe, 2011; Minichiello, Scott & Callendar, 2013) very few MSWs in Manchester are addicted to hard drugs such as crack cocaine and heroin, although this was found to be very common on the female beat (Ellison & Weitzer, 2016). However, heavy alcohol consumption and recreational drug use (mainly cannabis) is a definite feature of incumbents around the Village. Many incumbents were observed regularly drinking alcohol and smoking cannabis along the canal towpath and the bridge (personal observations; interviews with NGOs; Whowell, 2010; Atkins, 2013).



For incumbents their regular presence around the Village also means that they are rather more exposed to the risks as well as the perceived rewards that go with the terrain of male sex work (Bimbi, 2007; Dorais, 2005). Some of these risks or negative aspects are relatively minor and include high levels of tedium and boredom (see also Davies & Feldman, 1999) and as Jamie (19) put it: ‘...you get really fucking bored if it’s wet and there are no punters [clients] about, and you are just walking your bollocks off for nothing’. But in other cases the risks can be quite serious. While undoubtedly some MSWs experience violence from clients (interview with National Ugly Mugs) they are more likely to be victimised by groups of other young men who come down to the towpath area to rob and attack men who are cruising for sex (interview Greater Manchester Police officer). For many MSWs the risk of violence is seen as ‘an occupational hazard, not something they can get help or support with’ (interview Men’s Room). Nevertheless, in order to emphasise the complex ways that young men ‘do gender’ (West & Zimmerman, 1987) Mark (19) who identified as heterosexual was at pains to highlight his own masculinity: ‘I’ve been chased by gangs of lads down on the towpath before, but it doesn’t bother me. . . . I’d lash out myself if I had to’.

Nevertheless in spite of the risk of physical danger many MSWs continue to sell sex around the Village. For incumbents the reasons are social as well as financial: The status of the Village as a mixed use RLD (Weitzer, 2014) means that for incumbents selling sex is closely linked to other forms of accentuated social interaction such as hanging out in each others company, going to a bar for a drink with a client, playing the slot machines, cruising the beat, and sometimes engaging in petty criminality or other money making enterprises (selling cannabis in the Village or scamming clients out of money). Of course, many incumbents frequent the Village with the primary aim of procuring paid sex but it is the social dimensions to male sex work that can be observed among this cohort to a far greater extent:

There is something about the lads in the Village that have established themselves over a period of time. They just feel comfortable being there. So it's really social... They like hanging out with each other, they will have a laugh with each other, they will sit and have a beer together. It is not just about looking for a punter [client] it's also about the whole social side of things (Men's Room interview).

It is also the case that some drifters may eventually become incumbents which is something that was acknowledged by outreach workers and it was pointed out that for some young men 'one-off' instances of survival sex are commonplace and come about 'because they need a bed for the night, or food, or have a bill to pay...' (Men's Room interview). However, it was also clear from the interviews with NGOs and MSWs that while street-based sex work may have started out about survival, it quickly becomes normalised, routinised and intensified even after these survival needs have been met (Calhoun & Weaver, 1996). Philip (22) who identified as heterosexual explained that he had initially been in regular employment but had drifted into commercial sex because of serious problems in his personal life. Eventually, however, he came to realise that selling sex offered more freedom and autonomy than his previous employment.

I came down here the first time because I lost my job and split up with my girlfriend, then I had to leave my digs, then my mother got sick... My whole life was fucked basically... I got another job, but packed that in too because it was crap and I can earn the same money down here for doing a lot less... I'd come down here a lot now... there's nobody telling you what to do and you can hang out with your mates... I might look for a job sometime but at the minute I'm happy here. I earn enough money to get by...

For some of these young men the Village exerts a powerful pull. The camaraderie of street life, the friendships and collegial relationships, the social interactions, the attention and flattery from clients and the status that selling sex sometimes conveys helps explain why incumbents are not only drawn to Village life on a semi-permanent basis, but also why so many of them find it difficult to leave. As Aaron (18) acknowledged, 'It's hard to explain really, but when I moved from [other large city] I came down here [the Village] looking for a bit of cash, but then you get to know some of the other lads, and the place kind of pulls you in... You know, its hard to walk away from it'. This of course has implications for devising exit strategies and for outreach work. For incumbents the Village has a certain seduction and both outreach organisations were able to recount numerous tales of young men who had made the decision to exit sex work and enter regular employment only to return to the Village after a short period of time. As the Lifeshare respondent noted, 'I have seen it so many times... Lads leave, and three or four months down the line they are back in the Village... I guess in a strange way they miss the freedom that goes with selling sex'. For some MSWs controlling their work schedule in ways that is not possible in casual low-paid employment is an important consideration in deciding to sell sex (see also Calhoun & Weaver, 1996; Dorais, 2005). For example, Gary (20) explained how he made the decision to sell sex after weighing up a range of employment options. As he suggested:

...I've had loads of shitty jobs, working in [fast food outlet] to a call centre... But I didn't stick any of them for more than three months.... I thought about it for a long time but I can't be arsed getting up that early to work for fuck all... At least here I come down when I want and go home when I want.

Due to their regular presence around the Village and the way they utilise space, incumbents have also developed fairly complex repertoires for earning money and selling sex is often only one facet of this (Davies & Feldman, 1999; Luckenbill, 1986; Dorais, 2005). For some MSWs,

these ‘creative behaviours’ (Ellison & Weitzer, 2016) involve processes of rational decision-making that weigh up the costs and benefits of selling sex against a range of other options which are of course, facilitated by the sex worker’s presence in the Village. These behaviours may include partaking in various forms of low-level criminality (often shoplifting) either individually or collectively, selling stolen goods, dealing recreational drugs around the Village (usually cannabis) and participating in various scams such as selling ground down Paracetamol (an over the counter pain medication) as cocaine, or conspiring to scam a client out of money without providing sex. One particular scam relates to a practice known as ‘clipping’. Clipping involves one MSW pretending to be underage with another threatening to report the client to the police. Ryan and James are MSWs and while Ryan is 19 he looks considerably younger. James (20) describes how the practice works, though in this case revenge was also a key motivation:

There’s a bloke always hanging round the bridge, and I went with him one night but the fucker only gave me £20 when he said he would give me £40. So I see him another night and I says to Ryan “jump into his car and I’ll run up to it” and then say “that lad is underage, I’m going to the coppers [police]”. . . We ended up making the cunt drive to a cash machine and got £200 off him.

It is vitally important to stress that this duplicity is by no means a core feature of all MSWs. In one case MSWs were observed performing an act of considerable kindness. For example, one Saturday afternoon the researcher was sitting on a bench along the canal towpath when a woman (clearly under the influence of drugs and alcohol) staggered up to a man who was sitting reading a newspaper and hit him hard across the face with a beer bottle smashing his glasses. Out of all the people on the towpath at the time it was two MSWs who ran up to the man to make sure he was not seriously injured. One tried to repair his glasses and the other held the woman (who was kicking and screaming by this stage) until the police arrived.

The cross-cutting dimensions to the male sex worker scene can also be illustrated by those MSWs who sell recreational drugs around the Village. As the Men's Room respondent explained: '...the lads selling weed [cannabis] or other recreational drugs are the lads that can earn quite a lot of money... but most of it goes on booze [alcohol] or the slot machines'. The choice whether to sell sex or sell drugs can be illustrated by the case of John (19). John explained that he mainly sold sex around the Village but because of the number of people who frequented the Village he occasionally dabbled in recreational drug dealing since he felt the risks of getting caught were relatively low. As he explained, '...if I've got a bit of cash, I'd sometimes put it towards a big lump of blow [cannabis] knowing I could make three or four times what I paid for it, by selling it around this place [the Village]'. However, in terms of rational decision-making John expressed no particular preference for selling recreational drugs or selling sex: '...It all depends really, sometimes I'm in the mood for business [sex], other times I get enough cash from dealing... It depends on who's about really I guess'.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has demonstrated the internal variation within the male street-based prostitution sector, a finding that has implications for academic study and policy development beyond Manchester and the United Kingdom. The discussion has developed Calhoun and Weaver's (1996) analysis in suggesting that the reasons for entry into male prostitution and persisting with it are in many ways the result of rational decision-making by MSWs. However, the MSWs relationship to place and their distinctive environmental autobiographies (Gieseeking et al, 2014) also need to be factored into this equation. It is clear from the various life patterns of MSWs that their relationship to Village life also dictates to a significant degree their engagement and involvement in commercial sex.

The discussion goes some way to challenging – or at least tempering - the stereotypical depiction of MSWs as passive actors who are victims of circumstances beyond their own making. Certainly there can be no doubt that many of these young men had serious problems in their lives but what was striking from the interviews and observations was how resilient and resourceful they were. Many MSWs were able to reflect on their situation at some length weighing up the costs and benefits of engaging in particular kinds of behaviour. Ironically it is this group of mainly working class males who in a sense exemplify the traits of self-reliance, initiative and entrepreneurship that are increasingly valued in neoliberal economies (Tyler, 2013). For some MSWs these cost-benefit calculations were simply financial, but for others they have to do with exploring and satisfying sexual desires and longings. In other cases the benefits of selling sex are weighed up against a range of other options such as petty criminality, scamming clients or dealing in recreational drugs. Many MSWs were acutely aware of their perilous position in the labour market and were making what they saw as a perfectly rational choice between the freedom and autonomy that goes with selling sex versus the low pay and poor working conditions of an increasingly casualised employment situation (Young, 1999).

The discussion also has implications for our understanding of the digital economy of commercial sex. In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the continued existence of a male street-sector in a large, highly developed Western European city (Manchester) suggests that we should be cautious about assuming that this mode of sex work has been challenged totally by the Internet. For some young men the street is very often the only medium accessible to them for financial, logistical and practical reasons. However, it is clear that for some MSWs selling sex is *also* about the camaraderie of the street that provides a sense of purpose and belonging in their lives, which is not afforded by the anonymity of the Internet.

The empirical context of this paper has implications for Manchester City Council's *Prostitution Strategy* (Manchester City Council, 2014) and other urban policies around sex work

insofar as it depicts a far more varied set of sex working practices among male street sellers than is assumed. The varied nature of male street-based commercial sex in Manchester has made it somewhat challenging for NGOs to engage effectively with MSWs since the strategy document is based on a rather homogenous approach to street work; seeing male and female street prostitution as analogous in many respects. As such, this discussion suggests that the male on-street sector demonstrates a higher degree of horizontal differentiation between different kinds of street-based MSW and their working practices than has sometimes been alluded to in the research literature and policy documentation.

Finally, the study suggests that we should be cautious about generalising about male sex work (particularly that which is street based) across jurisdictions since many MSWs display personal biographies and working practices that are highly place and context specific. For example, the fact that so few street-based MSWs in Manchester have hard drug addictions to either heroin or crack cocaine raises interesting questions in and of itself, but it is also at variance with the data on street-based MSWs from other jurisdictions. It is perhaps the case that only locally grounded empirical studies such as the present one can point to the nuances and variation within the sphere of male sex work.

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## FIGURES

Figure 1: The Village © the author, 2016



Figure 2: A stretch of the canal towpath © the author, 2014





Figure 3: The Bridge © the author, 2014.



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<sup>1</sup> The Policing and Regulation of Sexual Commerce: A Four-City Case Study”, British Academy / Leverhulme Trust. Graham Ellison was PI on the Project, Ron Weitzer was CI. Ellison was solely responsible for the data collection in Manchester and Belfast.

<sup>2</sup> None of these NGOs have any religious or political group affiliations and they maintain a strictly non-judgmental stance on the issue of prostitution.

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<sup>3</sup> In the UK the term ‘Sally’ is a somewhat pejorative term directed at young, generally urban working-class males. The term also has a particular resonance in gay pornography (see Whowell, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Two incumbents refused to discuss their sexuality with the researcher.