

Review: Male Sex Work and Society

The more things change, the more they stay the same. A cynical perspective, possibly, but this sentiment played insistently on a feedback loop as I read *Male Sex Work and Society*, a volume of research edited by Victor Minichiello and John Scott.

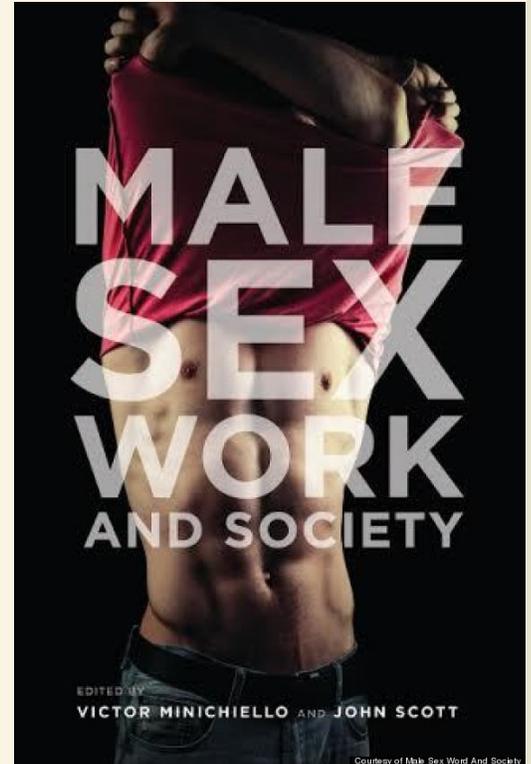
The aforementioned cynicism cannot be attributed to the editors' approach to the subject, or to their compilation of the research — both of which were exemplary — but rather to the implications of the research findings themselves.

As a whole, *Male Sex Work and Society* provides the reader with a solid, comprehensive look at the studies intent on gaining more insight into the lives of male sex workers. From history to marketing to policy and regulation, the pages run thick with personal narratives, statistics, research findings, and ground still left uncovered. The editors also dedicated an entire portion of the volume to the global implications of male sex work, with contributions from Africa, China, Russia, Latin America, Germany, and Ireland, in addition to a hefty offering from the UK.

Most of the studies drew the standard conclusions:

- Engaging in sex work can be risky.
- Societal perspectives of sex work relegates sex workers to the fringes and negatively impacts male sex workers at a higher degree than female sex workers.
- The stigma around sex work can impede a worker's willingness to seek support services. If there are support services, gaining access remains a challenge.
- Most pop culture representations of male sex workers are antiquated, if at all relevant to lived experiences.

Yet even though most of the findings came as no great surprise, it was the small but impressive subset that proved enlightening:



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- The market for male escorts is not primarily driven by gay concentration in that market but, rather, the size in general of the market itself.
- There does not appear to be a price premium for an escort that fits any masculine ideal. Additionally, prices do not seem to depend on ethnicity or aesthetics, aside from weight and body build. Nothing remarkable even to indicate that penis size influences market value.
- The facets, complexities, vulnerabilities, and policies that have historically impacted female sex workers are equitable to those impacting male sex workers.

And therein lies the problem. What the studies in this volume underscore is our chronic need to keep things the same regardless of how much has changed. Study after study after study reflected findings that suggested the challenges sex workers of any gender face are the same challenges of every disenfranchised population. The stigma. Presumptions. Scripted identities. Marginalization.

Historically, on a global scale, we've seen the implications of such challenges when forced upon contexts more layered and dynamic. Ethnicity is layered and dynamic. Race is layered and dynamic. Gender is layered and dynamic. And sex, inclusive of all things sexual, is layered and dynamic. The running theme throughout most of this collection is the harm such challenges impose on the lives and identities of male sex workers.

In its entirety, this collection provides the most comprehensive purview of research on the subject matter. However, what makes *Male Sex Work and Society* so unique is not necessarily the research but rather the breadth of the research collected. It appears as though the volume graces every imaginable aspect of male sex work and society.

The only limit is found in Chapter 9, "Mental Health Aspects of Male Sex Work." This chapter provides only a cursory overview of mental health aspects, offering not much insight beyond the larger perspectives surrounding violence, drugs/alcohol, and the overall impact of stigma. A slightly formulaic approach to mental health.

As a mental health worker, the challenges facing marginalized populations are often what generates the need for mental health services in the first place. Historically, we've seen this as a society. Marginalization hurts people, which in turn hurts our communities. And if we were dealing with history, the relevance of such findings could be easy to dismiss. But these research findings — one of the most impressive things about the collection — are reflecting current opinions; current statistics; current regulations.

This socio-cultural homeostasis continues to fail the layered and dynamic contexts this

volume of work explores. A cynical perspective possibly but, given the latitude of the research and the depth of the studies themselves, "the more things change, the more they stay the same" might begin to evolve from a statement to a question. And when it does, this work could very well shift the answer from "yes" to "no."

Michelle Manning is a licensed professional clinical counselor, LPCC, in Albuquerque, NM. She has been a member of AASECT for eight years. Prior to becoming a therapist, Michelle worked as a personals manager for an Albuquerque weekly magazine, gaining much insight into the lives of clients and escorts advertising in the weekly's "alternative section."

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