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Ylva Grönvall

The Purchase of Sex

Perceptions, Experiences, and Social Work Practices

THE PURCHASE OF SEX

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Perceptions, Experiences, and Social Work Practices

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By Ylva Grönvall

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to explore sex buyers' perceptions and experiences of purchasing sex, and to study how the purchase of sex is constructed as a social problem in Swedish social work practice. The empirical material consists of interviews with 30 men with experiences of purchasing sex and with ten social workers conducting counselling or outreach work with men who purchase sex. The dissertation is a compilation thesis that consists of four papers, that have been published in international peer-review journals.

The first paper focuses on how men who buy sex as one-time visitors navigate between commercialization and intimacy in a national context criminalizing their actions. The paper explores the construction of meaning and intimacy in commercial relationships for Swedish men buying sex, and how these men describe relational practices and strategies used when they purchased sex. The second paper explores the construction of intimacy among men engaged in long-term transactional relationships with women. The paper focuses on the meaning of transactions for intimacy in long-term paid sexual relationships.

The third paper explores how men who purchase sex in a context in which their activities are criminalized understand and perceive risk. The paper focuses on individual assessments of risk in relation to experiences of crime, exploitation, and stigma. The fourth paper aims at exploring social workers' understanding of the purchase of sex as a social problem. The study focuses on social workers' approaches to the purchase of sex in relation to values, professional practices, and political goals, and how they navigate these aspects in their encounters with individuals who purchase sex.

The four papers show how individual experiences are understood, navigated, and conceptualized in relation to social interaction and social norms. The participants in both sub-studies navigate between their own experiences and perceptions,

moral values, and social norms in regard to the purchase of sex in Sweden. Both the sex buyers and the social workers conceptualize and make sense of the purchase of sex based on their individual experiences as sex buyers or as social workers meeting sex buyers, but they also relate to normative ideas about the purchase of sex and about 'sex buyers'.

TACK

Varje dag till och från jobbet cyklar jag igenom Malmös mest förvirrande cykelkorsning, ett vältrafikerat cykelstråk i centrala Malmö där Kungsgatan och Kaptensgatan korsas. Den är byggd som en fyrvägs korsning men med en lyktstolpe i mitten, vilket gör att ingen säkert vet om det är en korsning eller en rondell. Detta medför stor förvirring och rätt märkliga situationer när olika typer av cyklister möts i rusningstrafiken. Männen i lycra på sportcyklar, trötta småbarnsföräldrar i ekipage stora som en mindre bil, försiktiga pensionärer och tonåringar med händerna bakom ryggen behöver alla ta sig igenom korsningen (eller rondellen) med skallbenet intakt. Folk hanterar detta olika och jag har under årens lopp roat mig med att kategorisera olika förhållningssätt till denna korsning/rondell. En del bestämmer sig helt sonika för att det är en korsning och tar sig an den utifrån trafikreglerna för en korsning. En annan del kör samma approach men bestämmer sig då för att det är en rondell. En tredje grupp kör efter devisen stört först och bara plöjer igenom oavsett alla andra trafikanters tolkningar av trafikplatsen. Den sista delen förhåller sig avvaktande (kanske alltför förvirrade av situationen, eller med en särskilt utvecklad självbevarelsedrift) genom att de försöker tolka hur de andra trafikanterna definierar kors-dellen och sen följer trafikreglerna som de gissar att medtrafikanterna cyklar efter.

Då och då stöter man på några unikum som hittat en helt egen approach till denna förvirrade punkt i Malmös kärna. Ibland stöter man på personer som i stunden sadlat om till trafikpolis och som står still med sin cykel vid sidan av och ropar ut (lite skiftande) trafikregler till förbipasserande. En dag mötte jag en snabb kille på cykel som med ett brett leende sträckte ut hela armen rakt fram som för att understryka att det var framåt han skulle. Och ibland stöter man på de villrådigaste och försiktiga typer som blir så överväldigade av hetsen och kaoset att de bara blir stående och inte kommer igenom kors-dellen. Detta är såklart uppbyggt för

krockar, konflikter och farliga situationer, vilket uppstår då och då men förvånansvärt sällan.

Denna hobbystudie brukar jag roa mig med när jag cyklar till och från jobb, men Kungsgatans kors-dell kan också ses som en metafor för hur sexköp kan tolkas, förstås och erfaras, vilket denna avhandling handlar om. Dessutom så kan korsdellen fungera som en omskrivning för hur arbetet med den här avhandlingen har upplevts. I perioder har jag bestämt svängt höger eller vänster, ibland har det lett avhandlingen framåt på ett säkert sätt, ibland har jag krockat med andra tolkningar eller förståelser. Ibland har jag försökt anpassa mig och följa med i andras förståelser och tolkningar. Under vissa perioder har jag känt att jag har behövt skrika från sidlinjen, bara älga på rakt fram – ibland med ett leende och armen som vägvisare, ibland som en manisk racer-cyklare i lycra. Och ibland har jag stått rådvill och överväldigad och inte vetat hur jag ska mäta med allt. Det finns en hel del medcyklister som har följt med på denna resa och som på olika sätt har hjälpt mig att förstå, tolka och ta mig igenom denna kors-dell.

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Det kan vara lite ensamt att hålla på med en avhandling och de olika sammanhang jag har varit en del av har både hjälpt mig i mitt avhandlingsarbete och gett mig en kollegial samvaro som jag uppskattar. Det har varit så värdefullt att ha fått vara en del av CSS. Det har gett mig ett sammanhang på universitetet för kloka och utmanande diskussioner och har gett mig många kloka kommentarer på olika seminarier. Jag är också tacksam för den kollegiala samvaron, både i lugnt vatten och när det har stormat. Det samma gäller FOSME, det har varit så roligt, givande och lärorikt för mig att få vara en del av detta nätverk. Tack till alla mina doktorandkollegor som kommit och gått under dessa år och som har förgyllt vardagen och seminarierna. Ett speciellt tack till några av er som också har blivit nära vänner. Ida, även om du inte är doktorand just här, jag är så glad att vi har följts åt under så många år och jag uppskattar så mycket att vara med dig. Camilla, detsamma gäller dig; vad hade Bull gjort utan sin Bill. Magnus, tack för din skarpa läsning av otaliga texter, din svårslagenhet i att lösa världsproblem och för din oerhörda kompetens i att tömma minibarar. Angelica, tack för din klokhet, din vänlighet och din outtröttliga lojalitet och stöttning, när det gäller avhandlingsarbetet, men framförallt när det gäller livet i stort. Jag är så himla glad att ha dig som vän. Dawan, tack för att du gör mig klokare, ödmjukare och får mig att bli en större människa. Jag är så tacksam att ha dig i mitt liv.

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ARTICLE OVERVIEW

- I. Grönvall, Y, Holmström, C & Plantin, L (2021). Doing trust work – the purchase of sex in a Swedish context. *Sexualities* 24(4): 654-672.
- II. Grönvall, Y, Holmström, C & Plantin, L (2021). The construction of intimacy in long-term commercial sexual relationships in Sweden. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 24(4):451-465.
- III. Grönvall, Y (2021). Purchasing Sex in Sweden – A Risky Business. *The British Journal of Criminology* 62(2): 396-412.
- IV. Grönvall, Y (2022). Social workers' navigation between repression and social support for men purchasing sex. *The European Journal of Social Work* 26(5): 803-814.

INTRODUCTION

It was as a social worker meeting individuals involved in commercial sex that I first came into close contact with the purchase of sex. I did outreach work with sex sellers in the street environment, I conducted counselling with individuals who were selling sex, buying sex and/or consuming pornography, and I worked as the county coordinator against human trafficking. However, my main task was to conduct counselling with men who purchased sex. As a counsellor, I met a diversity of men with different experiences and life situations, and with different attitudes and strategies in relation to the purchase of sex. All of those whom I met as a counsellor came for support voluntarily because they experienced different problems in relation to purchasing sex. Some of them had sought help because of the negative emotional consequences of purchasing sex, while others took contact because their partner had found out that they bought sex, which had caused a crisis in the relationship. Still others sought help when ‘external’ consequences had disrupted their sex-purchase activities, such as being arrested or exposed as a sex buyer. Most of the men I met purchased sex from women. I met clients who bought sex from women of different nationalities, in different arenas, and in different countries. Some had bought sex once, some for several decades, and I met men who bought sex as one-time visitors and as regulars. For example, I met Johan¹, who bought sex for the excitement and the sex and who regularly went to brothels in Copenhagen. Purchasing sex was not a problem for him until his wife found out and it caused a crisis in their relationship. I met Anders, who had been arrested and prosecuted for buying sex from minors. This had caused a major crisis within Anders’ family and in his own life in general. I also met Karl, who wanted to stop purchasing sex because it had negative emotional consequences. He was motivated but needed strategies to stop purchasing sex. I also met Erik,

¹ These are not their real names.

who bought sex from escorts but also had anonymous sex with men and had been exposed to physical and sexual violence in connection with this.

Even though I met a lot of men with different experiences both of purchasing sex and of a variety of consequences, there were other aspects of commercial sex that I did not come across as a social worker. I did not meet men who were content about purchasing sex, since they did not contact the social services for support. I seldom met men who purchased sex from other men, and I did not meet any women who bought sex. I rarely met sex-purchasing individuals who were involved in other criminal activities. I did sometimes meet pimps and traffickers, but not in my role as a counsellor. I rarely met men who said that they had been violent or abusive against sex sellers or that they purchased sex because they wanted to be violent or to obtain a feeling of power. These experiences of commercial sex do also exist (e.g. Deering et al., 2014), but I did not meet them as a counsellor for men who were purchasing sex.

As a social worker in this field, my role was to guide and support clients in their experiences and processes of change. I was able to focus on their lived experiences and place these in the foreground of the counselling. Even if the counselling differed depending on the clients' problems and life situations, the focus was directed at the clients' lives. The clients' life stories and experiences were diverse and complex, mirroring the diversity and complexity of circumstances and experiences found in commercial sex in general. But despite the variety in their histories, life situations, and paths forward, there was one common, recurring element. The clients whom I met were aware of, and related to, the public view of the purchase of sex and of who a 'sex buyer' is. The dominant picture in the media and politics contextualizes the purchase of sex as unwanted and wrong, both morally, legally, and emotionally. The public view of the purchase of sex as immoral, exploitative, and oppressive was something that the clients were aware of, and they related to the portrayed picture of the 'sex buyer' in different ways (cf. Kulick, 2005).

In the dominant discourse in Sweden, commercial sex is understood as being based on unequal gender hierarchies. It is framed within an oppression paradigm, in which women who sell sex are constructed as victims while men who purchase sex are seen as perpetrators (Erikson, 2011; Holmström, 2008; Hulusjö, 2013; Skilbrei & Holmström, 2013). The dominant political understanding in Sweden is of commercial sex as an expression of gender-based violence that objectifies and harms women (Erikson, 2011; Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017b). The seller is

viewed as a victim of structural oppression, while the buyer is held individually responsible for his actions (Hulusjö, 2013). This view has become the dominant understanding of prostitution in Sweden and is related to a shift from social policy to legal policy that has occurred in recent decades.

In general, commercial sex can be understood as a phenomenon that is constructed as a social problem, but how the phenomenon has been explained and targeted has changed over time and across different contexts. The purchase of sex is constructed as a social problem because it is viewed as a phenomenon and behaviour that is both widespread and harmful. It is viewed as a phenomenon that should be changed and that it is possible to change (Loseke, 2010). The construction of commercial sex as a social problem involves different, sometimes conflicting, interpretations and understandings of the actual problem and of its causes, expressions, and consequences – and in this regard, gender inequality can be understood as a dominant explanatory model in the Swedish context (de Cabo Y Moreda et al., 2021a; Loseke, 2010). Historically in Sweden, prostitution has been understood both as an issue of morality and public order and as a social problem. During the first half of the 20th century, men who purchased sex were invisible in the debate, but came to be conceptualized more in terms of needing support during the latter part of the century (Svanström, 2004b, 2006). As a result of this change in conceptualizations, there is a specialized field within social work practice that offers counselling or therapy to individuals who purchase sex. Thus, two parallel conceptualizations of the purchase of sex exist in the Swedish institutional context; it is viewed as a social problem that ought to be targeted via the provision of social support and as a gender inequality problem that ought to be targeted using legal measures.

However, the shift in the political focus in relation to prostitution as an expression of gender-based violence has directed a specific spotlight at men who purchase sex. The focus is directed less at commercial sex as a problematic phenomenon or a social problem, and more at the purchase of sex and the sex buyer as the cause of the problem (Svanström, 2004b). With the ambition to combat prostitution by eradicating the demand for commercial sex, the purchase of sex was criminalized in Sweden in 1999 (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017b). In the decades after 1999, the ‘Swedish model’ of targeting the purchase of sex has also been implemented elsewhere and has gained general legitimacy (FitzGerald & Skilbrei, 2022; Kuosmanen, 2011). Since this time, the political ambition in Sweden has been to strive to eradicate the purchase of sexual services via increasingly repressive measures, such as stricter legislation and more monitoring

(Erikson, 2011; Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017a; Scoular & O'Neill, 2007). In recent debates in Sweden, there have been calls for further repressive measures targeting men who purchase sex (e.g. Johansson & Lindhagen, 2020) and the debate in the media and in social media is often condemnatory towards men who purchase sex (e.g. Al-Sahhani et al., 2023; De Geer, 2020).

The responsabilization of clients, in the form of criminalization, and the victimization of sellers is based on an idea of prostitution as a uniform phenomenon. However, previous research has shown a complexity and variety of experiences of both selling and buying sexual services (e.g. Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017b; Sanders et al., 2020). The social contexts, the conditions, and the market associated with commercial sex have changed and become considerably more differentiated over recent decades. Internationalization and digitalization have made commercial sex more differentiated and professionalized (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017b; Länsstyrelsen Stockholm, 2014). Digitalization, in combination with factors such as globalization, migration, and free movement within the EU, have changed the conditions for the purchase and sale of sexual services (Agustín, 2007; Bernstein, 2007; Holmström & Skilbrei, 2008; Vuolajärvi, 2019). On the one hand, digitalization and internationalization have normalized, facilitated and made the purchase of sex available in new ways, by creating new opportunities linked to the accessibility and anonymity of the online environment (Brents & Sanders, 2010; Månsson & Sönderlind, 2004; Scaramuzzino, 2016). Markets have become more differentiated and specialized, and people's desires and opportunities to consume different forms of sexual services have increased (Bauman, 2003; Brents & Sanders, 2010; Hochschild, 2012a, 2012b). On the other hand, the Swedish Government has worked hard to attempt to combat this normalization of the purchase of sex via criminalization and normative change² (Kotsadam & Jakobsson, 2014).

The motives of men who purchase sex have been conceptualized as expressions of dominance or oppression (e.g. Farley et al., 2015). Power relations and aspects such as gender, race, and class are important for understanding the purchase of sex (Huysamen, 2022). All the sex buyers whom I met as a counsellor were men, and all participants in this study were men who bought sex from women. Thus, gender, sexuality, and masculinity are aspects that can affect the expressions,

² In recent years, the government has increased the focus on developing the social support for individuals who sell sex, in parallel with the repressive measures targeting sex buyers, and there is an ongoing inquiry whose aim is to develop an "exit-program for people exposed to prostitution" (Dir. 2022:115).

experiences, and perceptions of commercial sex (Huysamen, 2022). Keeping this in mind, previous research has shown that men's motivations and experiences of buying sex are both diverse and complex (e.g. Jones & Hannem, 2018; Kong, 2015; Sanders, 2008a). The complexity and heterogeneity found in men's motives and sex-purchasing trajectories, makes these difficult to conceptualize in terms of dichotomies (Bernstein, 2001; Sanders, 2008b). A conceptualization of prostitution thus requires an understanding of its multiplicity. This involves understanding potential discontinuities in the experience of prostitution found among those who participate in it, as well as between participants and the dominant narratives of the larger cultural context (Zatz, 1997). In emphasizing that context is essential to understanding a phenomenon like prostitution, it is crucial to recognize that 'context' is not itself unitary. Rather, context is always fraught with heterogeneity, paradoxes, and differences that may, for instance, mean that the same event transpires in different contexts for different individuals. Prostitution is both a practice in which gender and sexuality play important structuring roles and one that cannot be reduced to gender and sexuality alone (Zatz, 1997). Thus, it is important to recognize the complexities of lived experience without ignoring the different structural conditions that shape experiences of commercial sex (Weitzer, 2010).

During my years as a social worker, I worked with numerous people with different experiences of buying (and selling) sex. But there were also plenty of experiences and ways of purchasing sex that I did not come across. This awakened in me an interest in the myriad stories regarding commercial sex - both the individual diversity in the stories among people who purchase sex, and the discrepancy between on the one hand the political ambition and the public understanding of the purchase of sex, and on the other the lived experiences of men who purchase sex. More specifically, my focus of interest was, and remains, how sex buyers understand and conceptualize their own experiences in relation to the dominant political and public understanding of the purchase of sex and the 'sex buyer'. How can the diversity found in the clients' stories be understood in relation to the representations presented in the media and in political debate? How do other experiences of purchasing sex relate to the normative picture of men who purchase sex? And how do individuals who purchase sex relate to and navigate between the dominant public story and their own experiences? It is against this backdrop that this study takes its starting point in the complex intersection between lived experiences, social norms, and structural conditions, between the commercialization of intimacy, prostitution policy, contextual differences, and

power relations. This study directs its focus at the lived experiences of men who purchase sex in a Swedish context, an institutional context coloured by a specific perspective on commercial sex.

Aim and research questions

The aim of this thesis is to explore sex buyers' perceptions and experiences of buying sex. Further, the study explores how the purchase of sex is constructed as a social problem in Swedish social work practice.

The research questions that have guided the study are:

What are the perceived meanings of the purchase of sex for individuals who buy sex?

How do men who purchase sex make sense of their experiences in the Swedish context?

How do men who buy sex relate to the purchase of sex being a criminalized activity and a stigmatized phenomenon?

How does social work practice target the purchase of sex and how do social workers understand it as a social problem?

Disposition and terminology

This introductory framework (kappa) is organized into eight chapters. In the first of these I give a short introduction to the field, the focus of the study and its aim and research questions. In the following chapter, I present and discuss how the purchase of sex has been conceptualized in the Swedish context. In chapter three, I discuss previous research on the purchase of sex and different perspectives on commercial sex. Chapter four presents the theoretical perspectives that I have used as analytical tools to understand my empirical material. In chapter five, I present the study's research method and methodology. Chapter six presents a summary and discussion of the main research findings from the four published papers. In the final chapter, chapter seven, I discuss my findings in relation to the aim and objectives of the research. I focus on themes in my research results that I have found to be important and discuss additional perspectives that have not specifically been elaborated in the published papers. The thesis then presents the original published papers of which it is comprised.

The term commercial sex is used when I write about the phenomenon of people selling, buying, or exchanging in-person sexual services.³ When writing about policy and politics, I use the term prostitution, since this is the term commonly used in official documents in the Swedish context. The term that is usually used by practitioners and in social work practice is ‘sex mot ersättning’, best translated as ‘sex for compensation’ or ‘transactional sex’. Sex for compensation is not a commonly used term in English, and transactional sex is primarily used in a specific research field that targets a different topic than the focus of this study.⁴ I therefore use the term commercial sex instead. The activities that are included in the terms commercial sex and purchasing sex are primarily dependent on the participants’ conceptualizations, and they exclusively involve in-person sexual activities (activities such as pornography consumption, webcam sex, or other activities conducted via digital media are not included in the focus of this study). When writing about people who are engaged in commercial sex, I use the terms sex buyers, sex sellers or individuals who sell/buy sex. These terms are commonly used in the Swedish context, and were the most common terms used by the participants in both sub-studies. I also find them to be less associated with stigmatization or a specific political position than other terms (such as prostitute, sex worker, provider, client, punter or “torsk”) (e.g. Hansen & Johansson, 2023; Holmström et al., 2019).

Commercial sex involves more forms of activities, experiences, relationships, and identities than those presented in this study. In order to present the study in an accessible and intelligible way, however, I will continuously use the terms mentioned above and the definitions used by the participants. All participants with experience of purchasing sex defined themselves as ‘men’ who purchased sex from ‘women’ (with the exception of one, who also purchased sex from individuals he defined as ‘trans women’). The use of the terminology ‘men’ and ‘women’ (and the other terms used in this study) is not intended to be reductionist

³ Sex work is a term that is commonly used in international research but that has been politically stigmatized in the Swedish context. Some terms are common in the Swedish political debate but are either associated with political opinions and ambitions (such as ‘paid rape’ and ‘sexual exploitation’) while other are less common and ascribed to a liberal political position (such as ‘sex work’).

⁴ Transactional sex is a term that describes practices that may be similar to, but that differ from prostitution, sex work or commercial sex, and it is often used in research in a sub-Saharan contexts. Stoebenau et al., (2016) has defined transactional sex as “noncommercial, non-marital sexual relationships motivated by the implicit assumption that sex will be exchanged for material support or other benefits” (p 187).

or to make diversity invisible, but is rather a choice made for practical reasons, to facilitate the presentation of the study in an accessible and readable way.

THE PURCHASE OF SEX IN A SWEDISH CONTEXT

In this chapter, I describe and discuss how the purchase of sex has been understood and targeted in the Swedish context. The purchase of sex, but primarily the sale of sexual services, has been a focus for the Swedish legislature and social authorities in various ways since the 19th century and has long been understood as a social problem. The social measures targeting commercial sex have historically been closely linked to political ambitions and government control (Skilbrei & Holmström, 2013). The way prostitution is described and interpreted has changed over the last century, as have the explanatory models that have been given interpretive priority (e.g. Hulusjö, 2013; Scaramuzzino, 2014). During the latter part of the 20th century the debate intensified, and from having been linked to a more liberal wave in the 1960s, with a focus on sexual liberation, over the following decades the purchase of sex became framed as an issue of feminism and gender equality (Svanström, 2004a). Women who sold sex were seen as vulnerable and subject to harm and as individuals in need of protection, which they should receive from the Swedish welfare state. There has also been a shift over time from viewing women who sell sexual services as a social problem to seeing the phenomenon of prostitution as a social problem. In parallel with this, there has been an increased focus on demand and the buying of sex as being problematic and as the cause of the problem (Månsson, 2018). This chapter provides an overview of the way prostitution has been understood and dealt with over time in Sweden.

From invisible to deviant

The way people who buy sex are understood has changed over time, except for the constant that they are almost exclusively described as men. The nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century were dominated by a functionalist perspective on the purchase of sex. Men who bought sex (from women) were not seen as being particularly deviant, and the purchase of sex was rather seen as an activity that fulfilled a function in the social order (Svanström,

2004b). This was based on an essentialist and medical understanding of male and female sexuality, which involved a perception that men needed an outlet for their sexual needs. It was assumed that criminalizing prostitution would lead to severe medical consequences for men. During this period, men who purchased sex were considered healthy and normal. Buying sex was associated with youth and was viewed as something that young men from the bourgeoisie did before they got married and became family fathers (Svanström, 2004b).

The understanding of female sexuality at this time was different, and working-class women in particular who were visible in the public urban environment were assumed to have an uncontrolled and risky sexuality (Svanström, 2000; Svanström & Jansdotter, 2007). As a result of concerns regarding an increase in the spread of venereal disease, Sweden implemented a regulatory system that registered and examined women who sold sex. While disease control was the initial reason for this regulatory system, it soon developed into the administration of prostitution with a focus on morality and public order (Svanström, 2000; Svanström & Jansdotter, 2007). The sex buyer was quite invisible and excluded from the focus of the concerns of the welfare society at this time, despite concerns that they risked being infected by women who sold sex, and would then in turn spread venereal disease to their wives and children (Svanström, 2004b). This dominant discourse was challenged, and some women's organizations⁵ strove for the abolition of prostitution. Their goal was to abolish the regulatory system, which was seen as legitimizing prostitution, and to work for increased sexual morality. This was done by pointing to men's part in prostitution and working for greater rights for women in society at large. They argued that prostitution was able to continue because of the demand from men, and that if the same moral demands were placed on female and male sexuality, society would change for the better (Svanström, 2004b, 2006). Social work with women involved in prostitution was at this time influenced by Christian and philanthropic values, and by individual-oriented approaches with a focus on individual change (Holgersson, 2004; Jansdotter, 2004).

The regulatory system was abolished in Sweden in 1918, and for the next forty years or so the sale of sex by women was considered a form of vagrancy (Svanström, 2006). Despite the focus on women who sold sex as problematic, the perception of prostitution as being beneficial to society (in relation to male

⁵ *Federationen* was a local Swedish ancillary of the British mother organization, funded and led by a liberal called Josephine Butler, who was married to a priest. It was a Christian organization and most members were middle class women (Svanström 2006a).

sexuality) continued to have bearing until the 1960s. During the 1960s, with its lively sexual debate, some politicians argued in favour of state brothels. At this time there was thus a shift in the discourse, from a view of prostitution as a social benefit for all men, to one that saw prostitution as a social benefit for certain men with special needs, such as the disabled or the lonely (Svanström, 2004b). The feminist critique was not absent during these years, and both women's organizations and feminist politicians criticized the vagrancy law and continued to argue that prostitution existed as a result of the demand for prostitution among men (Svanström, 2006). During the mid-to-late part of the 20th century, the sex buyer found himself in something of a spotlight, which directed its focus at social and psychological explanatory models, and the role of the sex buyer in prostitution was discussed in the Swedish Government Official Reports (SOU 1981:71). Several empirical studies on the purchase of sex were conducted during the decades prior to its criminalization, which primarily focused on the individual factors and motivations that might explain why men purchase sex (Månsson, 1988, 1998; Månsson & Linders, 1984; Sandell et al., 1996). Aspects such as men's sexual drive, loneliness, and other physical and social functional variables were highlighted as reasons that contributed to men purchasing sex (Erikson, 2011; Månsson & Linders, 1984; Sandell et al., 1996).

Although there was an increased focus on structural understandings of prostitution during the period prior to the implementation of the Sex Purchase Act, there was also a parallel process focused on an individualistic understanding of the phenomenon (Hulusjö, 2013). During this period, the focus in both the political debate and research was to try to find explanatory models for why the phenomenon existed. The focus was directed at why some people bought or sold sexual services, and how they could be helped to exit (Hulusjö, 2013; Månsson & Linders, 1984; Sandell et al., 1996; Scaramuzzino, 2014). Prostitution was primarily seen as a social problem, and social measures were considered to be the main strategy for targeting people involved in commercial sex. Consequently, social work units targeting people who sold sex developed in the three largest cities in Sweden. In 1977, the 'Prostitutionsprojekt' started in Malmö, with the ambition of conducting outreach work in the prostitution environment and research on the topic. Two social workers and two researchers worked in the project, and this way of working has been an inspiration for subsequent social work with individuals who sell sex in Sweden. The overall aim was to prevent new recruitment into prostitution (Åkerman & Svedin, 2012; Månsson, 2018). The 'Spiralprojekt', a collaboration between Stockholm County Council and

Stockholm City, was initiated in 1978, with the ambition of providing both social and medical support to women in prostitution. In Gothenburg, the 'Prostitutionsgrupp' started in 1981, in response to the 1977 Prostitution Inquiry, which recommended that municipalities with open street prostitution should start special groups to offer support and help to people in prostitution. At this time, Gothenburg had one of the largest street prostitution areas in the Nordic countries (Åkerman & Svedin, 2012). All three of the above-mentioned units working with individuals who sell sex are now permanent units within the municipal social services.⁶ At this time, there were no social initiatives targeting men who purchased sex (ibid). However, the *travaux préparatoires* for the sex purchase legislation highlighted the issue of the buyers' vulnerability and also the need for a discussion of how sex purchases can be understood on the basis of sexuality (Erikson, 2011; Prop. 1997/98:55). During the period in which the Sex Purchase Act was implemented, there was also a growing interest from the government in offering social services to people who bought sexual services (Erikson, 2011; Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017b; Scaramuzzino, 2014).

The sex buyer as being in need of support

As will be discussed in the next section, the Swedish government has over recent decades increasingly come to explain the purchase of sex as an expression of gender inequality⁷ that ought to be targeted using legal measures. Purchasing sex is primarily viewed as a crime that the individual ought to be punished and held accountable for (Prop. 1997/98:55). However, prior to the development of this repressive understanding of the purchase of sex in Sweden, it was also conceptualized as an individual problem, with men who purchased sex being viewed as being in need of support (Erikson, 2011; Prop. 1997/98:55). In parallel with the legislation regulating the purchase of sex, prostitution has also been responded to with social measures. The purchase of sex has also been seen as an individual social problem that should be dealt with via therapy and behavioural counselling (see e.g. Månsson, 2018). As was mentioned earlier, social work targeting people who sell sex existed long before the implementation of the Sex Purchase Act (Åkerman & Svedin, 2012). However, social work targeting individuals who purchase sex also existed prior to the Sex Purchase Act. The first

⁶ For a short period of time there was also a unit working with people who sold sex in Norrköping.

⁷ For example, prostitution is noted in the government's letter to Parliament *Makt, mål och myndighet – feministisk politik för en jämställd framtid* (Power, goals and authority – feminist politics for an equal future) and is understood as a form of men's violence against women (Skr. 2016/17:10).

KAST (KAST is a Swedish acronym for Buyers of Sexual Services) office opened in 1997 in Gothenburg, two years prior to the introduction of the Act and was implemented and funded using grants for HIV prevention. The initiative to start a KAST unit was inspired by a study by Sandell et al. (1996), which showed that many of the men who purchase sex want help to change their behaviour (Isaksson et al., 2021). Inspired by Gothenburg, a KAST office opened in Stockholm in 2000, and in Malmö in 2006. The overall aim of these KAST units was (and still is) to decrease the demand for commercial sex by means of therapy and counselling (Åkerman & Svedin, 2012). Local aims have also been to prevent the purchase of sex by spreading knowledge about the target group and by working to counteract various myths and attitudes, to produce knowledge about the target group, or to inform clients about health risks associated with the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (ibid).

The KAST units in Sweden's three largest cities have now been part of the regular social services in these cities for over seventeen years. They are organized as independent and specialized units that offer voluntary support to municipal residents and that primarily meet clients who purchase sex to provide counselling (Åkerman & Svedin, 2012). In Malmö, the unit is called *Evonhuset* and integrates help and support provision to both sex sellers and sex buyers by social workers (Malmö Stad, 2021). In the last five years, additional KAST offices have been established in four medium-sized cities in Sweden. These units work with sex buyers as part of a larger target group and are organized within the field of domestic violence services. They primarily work with domestic violence offenders but have recently expanded their target group to include sex buyers (Isaksson et al., 2020). The overall aim of all KAST units is linked to the government's goal of combating prostitution and human trafficking, and to decrease the demand for sexual services (Olsson, 2021). Social work targeting sex buyers has developed into a professionalized and specialized field in Sweden (Skilbrei, 2012). Apart from the overarching goal of decreasing the demand for commercial sex, the units are free to organize their work as they see fit. The social work at KAST units primarily involves individual or couples counselling, based on the clients' needs and wishes (Olsson, 2021). The Swedish KAST units differ from initiatives directed at individuals who purchase sex in other countries.⁸

⁸ Social initiatives targeting individuals who purchase sex exist in a number of countries. Norway has one KAST unit, which is organized as a project within a nonprofit foundation, and initiatives focused on sexual health have been developed in Germany. John Schools are education programs for clients who have been arrested for prostitution offences and exist in the USA, the United Kingdom, Canada, and South Korea (Isaksson et al., 2020; Langanke & Ross, 2009).

Sweden is the only country with units that provide voluntary counselling of this kind within the publicly funded social services sector.

This conceptualization of the purchase of sex with a focus on individual support and counselling is of interest in relation to the repressive political ambition in Sweden. These social initiatives are of importance for understanding the changes in political and public opinion on prostitution during the period leading up to the introduction of the Sex Purchase Act. There was an intention that social work (primarily for sex sellers) would continue to be a central tool in the fight against prostitution, even after the implementation of the Sex Purchase Act. And, as discussed above, the sex buyer has also been viewed as being in need of help and support to stop buying sex (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017b; Prop. 1997/98:55).

The sex buyer as a criminal

Sweden's prostitution policy can be understood as involving two parallel, and intertwined, perspectives on the purchase of sex as a social problem. On the one hand, the purchase of sex is seen as an individual problem that the sex buyer needs help and counselling to deal with. On the other hand, the purchase of sex is seen as a problem of gender inequality and male oppression, which ought to be dealt with through legal action (e.g. Månsson, 2018; Prop. 1997/98:55). In the Swedish context, the political debate concerning commercial sex intensified during the latter part of the 20th century. From being associated with a more liberal wave in the 1960s, with a focus on sexual liberation, it became more clearly linked to feminism and gender equality in the following decades (Dodillet, 2009; Erikson, 2011; Svanström, 2004b). From this perspective, commercial sex was understood as an expression of an unequal power structure based on gender, which had been made possible by the development of the market. The Swedish Government had (and still has) a neo-abolitionist⁹ approach, and was striving to counteract the purchase of sexual services as part of the work to increase gender equality and stop men's violence against women (Erikson, 2011; Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017b). The combination of welfare provision and punishment resulted from the view that one party, the seller, needed support and protection, while the other, the buyer, ought to be punished (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017b).

⁹ Neo-abolitionism is a term used to describe an approach to commercial sex that criminalizes sex buyers, third parties, and various ways of organizing commercial sex (e.g. brothels, sex clubs) (Ward & Wylie, 2017).

The debate shifted from being about men buying sex as a result of individual urges to being about men acting on the basis of patriarchy-based male privilege (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017a). Even though women who sold sex were still in focus, there was an increased focus on the purchasing party as a problem and on the demand for commercial sex as the cause of the problem (Erikson, 2011). Men who buy sex were considered a problem, but the focus was directed at men's responsibility as a group and at a problematization of men's sexuality (such as by questioning why some men see buying sex as a necessity or a right) (Kulick, 2005; Svanström, 2004b). In this frame of analysis, (female) sellers are viewed as being exploited and as victims of structural oppression, while the client is constructed as being individually responsible for his involvement in prostitution (Hulusjö, 2013; Kulick, 2005). From this perspective, men who purchase sex are not subject to an analysis that highlights their vulnerability either on an individual or structural level. Consequently, there was a limited focus in the political and media debate on social work, or on social initiatives targeting men who purchase sex. Instead, the focus was primarily directed at normative and legal measures.

Since 1999 Sweden has had a law that criminalizes the purchase of sexual services (SFS, 1998:408). The aim of the Sex Purchase Act was to combat prostitution because it was seen as harmful, both for those directly involved and for society at large. The ambition was to reduce prostitution: in the short term by actively policing it, and in the long run by changing attitudes towards the purchase of sex. It was also hoped that the law would help reduce human trafficking for sexual purposes (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017b). The legislation is formulated in gender-neutral terms, but the interventional model employed is explicitly gendered in that its aim is to target men's actions and attitudes. Earlier debates had emphasized the link between prostitution and social problems, social inequality, and a commercialization of human relations, while in the political debates leading up to the legislative reform, gender and power were central topics (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017b). Thus, the ambition behind the law was not solely to send normative signals about the wrongness of purchasing sex. Instead, the goal of making Swedish society more gender equal by getting men to stop purchasing sex was intertwined with the idea of curbing the purchase of sex as a strategy to combat human trafficking and organized crime (Prop. 1997/98:55). In Swedish politics, prostitution and human trafficking are understood as being closely linked. The Sex Purchase Act is viewed as a tool to eliminate what is assumed to be the root cause of prostitution, i.e., 'men's demand for and use of women and girls for sexual exploitation' (Ekberg, 2004, p. 1189). The

stigmatization of men who buy sex is accepted as an effort to prevent them from purchasing sex and decrease the demand for prostitution (Benoit et al., 2019; Florin, 2012; Svanström, 2004b). The Swedish Sex Purchase Act is based on an ideological understanding of prostitution, in which the abolition of the phenomenon is understood as being fundamental to achieving a democratic society based on gender equality (Prop. 1997/98:55).

As is clear from the above review, there has been a shift in the political debate and in policy on commercial sex, from a focus on social policy and the individual being in need of help and support, to a law-based policy with a focus on oppression and power relations. This has led to both criminalization and the sanctioned stigmatization of people who buy sex (Erikson, 2011; Kotsadam & Jakobsson, 2014), and buying sex in Sweden is indeed associated with stigmatization (Kotsadam & Jakobsson, 2014; Kulick, 2005; Scaramuzzino, 2014). Support for the criminalization of the purchase of sex has increased among the general public, indicating a normative change (Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017; Kotsadam & Jakobsson, 2014; Kuosmanen, 2008; Svedin et al., 2012). However, there has also been an increase in the level of support for criminalizing the sale of sex, which indicates that public attitudes have a stronger focus on repressive measures than was previously the case. This change in public attitudes is not in line with the ideological motives underlying the law (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017b; Kuosmanen, 2011; Svedin et al., 2012), but may be seen as an example of an unintended consequence of a development towards a more carceral feminism¹⁰ (Bernstein, 2010).

In practice, the implementation of the legislation has meant that men convicted of purchasing sex almost exclusively receive a criminal sanction in the form of a fine (Olsson, 2020). However, recent debate in Sweden has called for more repressive measures targeting men who purchase sex. In 2018, when the current study's interviews with sex buyers were conducted, there were discussions in parliament about a bill aimed at making it a criminal offence for Swedish citizens to purchase sex abroad (Bet. 2018/19:JuU11). In 2021, when the interviews with social workers were conducted, supplementary directives given to the most recent sex crime inquiry suggested investigating a sharpening of the penalty for purchasing sex by removing the possibility of only awarding a fine (Dir.

¹⁰ Carceral feminism can be defined as a reliance on the criminal legal system to achieve feminist goals. The feminist cause relies on policing, prosecution, and imprisonment of perpetrators to resolve gendered or sexual violence (Terwiel 2020). This is further discussed in the next chapter. For a discussion about the consequences of carceral feminism for people who sell sex, see for example Vuolajärvi (2019).

2020:75). This was implemented in 2022, when fines were removed from the sentencing scale for sex-purchase offences (SFS, 2022:1043).

Another example of the increase in repressive measures is that, at the regional level, fathers who purchase sex are now being reported to the social authorities, a routine that some politicians want to implement at the national level¹¹ (Umeå kommun, 2019). Additionally, the legislation on sexual offences was sharpened in several regards in 2018, and Sweden has since also introduced consent-based rape legislation, which makes it possible to prosecute someone for ‘negligent rape’ (SFS, 2018:618). This is relevant in relation to suspected procuring and human trafficking offences, and the provision has been tested in court in relation to the purchase of sex. For example, one man was convicted of negligent rape for purchasing sex from a woman he suspected was a victim of human trafficking (Svea hovrätt, 2019). The repressive approach targeting the demand for commercial sex has also gained more traction in practice, with the policing of sex purchases having intensified in recent years (Polismyndigheten, 2020). In light of this review of developments in the way the purchase of sex has been conceptualized in Sweden, the next chapter directs its attention at how the purchase of sex has been conceptualized, understood, and explored in international research.

¹¹ This procedure is motivated by the logic that since the purchase of sex is conceptualized as men’s violence against women, the sex buyers’ children are understood as exposed to, or as witnesses of, domestic violence (regardless of whether they were present when their father purchased sex). Since 2021, is a child welfare offence in Sweden to cause children to witness violence and this should be reported to the social services (SFS 2022:1043; Umeå kommun 2019).

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Commercial sex is a complex and diverse phenomenon that has been studied from different theoretical perspectives and with a focus on different aspects of the phenomenon. In this chapter I present previous research that is of importance for an understanding of the sex-purchase research field and for relating this study to previous research. This involves research focused on the individual motives, experiences, and attitudes associated with men who purchase sex, and research that has discussed individual, contextual, and structural understandings of the purchase of sex.

The purchase of sex as an expression of gender inequality

In research on the structural aspects of commercial sex, one focus of discussion and analysis has been the extent to which the market creates a need for commercial sex and the extent to which the market is driven by this demand. Analyses have also focused on how demand is an expression and a manifestation of unequal power relations (e.g. Jeffreys, 2008; O'Connell Davidson, 1998; Pateman, 1988). Critical and feminist theory has understood prostitution from a structural perspective, primarily focusing on structures related to gender, class, and race. Some scholars attribute major importance to these structures alone, with the context being ascribed only minor importance (e.g. Pateman, 1988), while others instead highlight the importance of context (e.g. O'Connell Davidson, 1998). Some have viewed prostitution as the key institution in the oppression of women, and it has been conceptualized as an institution that objectifies and victimizes women and exists for the benefit of men. Feminist scholars have argued that when women are constructed as objects for men's sexual use, it affects the status of all women (Jeffreys, 2008; Pateman, 1988; Plumridge et al., 1997). This perspective involves an understanding of commercial sex that is intrinsically linked to violence, both real and symbolic, and as an embodiment of patriarchal male privilege (Kesler, 2002; MacKinnon, 2011). Modern patriarchy is ascribed a major value as a structure that organizes society, which sustains and

grants the male sex buyer autonomy in sexual consumption¹² but leaves the female sex seller objectified (Benoit et al., 2019; Pateman, 1988). Based on this understanding, what is being sold in commercial sex is not the same as the labour power sold by the worker to the capitalist (Phillips, 2011). Commercial sex alone is considered to exploit the seller's sexual self¹³ (Pateman, 1988). Thus, the sex seller/buyer relationship is viewed as being essentially a relation of domination and subordination of the self, that only arises under conditions of gender inequality (Anderson, 2002; Benoit et al., 2019; Farley, 2018). Additionally, since all forms of prostitution are understood as being linked to violence and exploitation, it has been seen as being analogous to sex trafficking (Benoit et al., 2019; Farley et al., 2005; Raphael et al., 2010).

From a structural perspective based on gender as the primary organizing principle, all forms of commercial sex can be seen as an objectification of women, and as a reproduction of patriarchal gender norms. Consequently, pornography and prostitution are seen as connected, and in some cases as causally linked, with pornography playing a role in creating the demand for commercial sex¹⁴ (Dworkin, 1981; Waltman, 2011). This is associated with an understanding of 'demand' as the core reason for the continued existence of commercial sex (Ekberg, 2004). This is complex, however, and the presumed direct and unilateral relationship between consumer demand and any specific form of sexual activity has been problematized (O'Connell Davidson & Anderson, 2003). The reasons that have been highlighted for the rapid expansion of the sex industry also involve this market being poorly regulated, widely stigmatized, and partially criminalized. O'Connell Davidson and Anderson (2003) has discussed how these different aspects affect the markets and circumstances associated with commercial sex, showing that other factors than consumer demand contribute to driving and maintaining the market for commercial sex. However, from a critical and feminist perspective, some scholars have stressed that demand may not be

¹² Pateman (1988) has argued that '[p]rostitution is the use of a woman's body by a man for his own sexual satisfaction'.

¹³ This is based on an understanding that there is an integral connection between the body and the self, and that selves are inseparable from bodies. Pateman (1988) has argued that masculinity and femininity are seen as sexual identities, with identity being inseparable from the sexual construction of the self. According to this argument, in modern patriarchy, the sale of women's bodies in the capitalist market involves the sale of the self in a different (and more profound) manner than the sale of the body of a male (sportsman for example). According to Pateman, womanhood is confirmed in sexual activity, and when a woman sells sex, she is thus selling herself in a very real sense.

¹⁴ These claims have been accused of being fictional and not supported by research (Weitzer 2007).

the only cause of the expansion of the sex industry, but that it is nonetheless the most immediate and proximate cause (Raymond, 2004).

A structural perspective on prostitution based solely on gender, has been criticized for tending to rely on an essentialist view of gender and sex. Critics have argued that a naturalization of sexuality and of the relationship between sexual acts and identity ignores culturally and historically specific processes and differences (Kulick, 2005; Zatz, 1997). Structural factors other than gender have also been highlighted in research (e.g. Agustín, 2007; Phoenix, 1999). For example, some scholars have argued that prostitution in Euro-American countries has been conditioned by colonial histories that have produced racialized patterns of desire, migration, and economic inequality that affect both sex sellers and buyers (McClintock, 1992; Shrage, 1992; Zatz, 1997). Another criticism has been directed at the sometimes close links between research and ideology, and it has been argued that the scholarship on prostitution can be weakened by researchers' ideological biases. When one believes a priori that all forms of prostitution are grounded in the sexual exploitation of women, there is a risk of a refusal to recognize examples that run counter to universal claims. In other words, there is a risk that the diversity and complexity of contexts and experiences will be downplayed (Benoit et al., 2019; Jaggar, 1997).

Based on a structural perspective with gender as its organizing principle, the policy recommendations and suggested solutions to the commercial sex problem have focused on changing individual behaviour (Bernstein, 2012), and particularly male behaviour, through the use of criminal law, awareness/shaming campaigns, and other repressive measures. This becomes a viable policy solution if the commercial exploitation of women's sexuality is understood as the core issue in relation to prostitution (Benoit et al., 2019). This link between ideology and policy can be understood as what Bernstein (2010) has labelled 'carceral feminism', with the focus of the debate having drifted from the welfare state to the carceral state as the apparatus for achieving feminist goals. The reliance on what Bernstein (2010) refers to as carceral feminist discourses leads to a partial understanding of the commercial sex phenomenon, which presents sex sellers as women and girls in need of rescue and sex buyers as men who should be punished (Bruckert & Hannem, 2013). In carceral feminism, social justice is viewed as criminal justice, with punitive systems of control being seen as the best motivational deterrents for men's bad behaviour. This becomes a crucial factor in the links between state actors, Christians, feminists, and other claims-makers

who are striving to achieve the same goal¹⁵ (Bernstein, 2010). Two different shifts in feminist and conservative Christian politics have made this possible: ‘the feminist shift from a focus on bad men inside the home to bad men outside the home, and the shift of a new generation of evangelical Christians from a focus on sexually improper women (as prior concerns with abortion suggest) to a focus on sexually dangerous men’ (Bernstein, 2010, p. 66). The construction of claims within a carceral feminist discourse has led to sex buyers being depicted as villains, and to some sex buyers being targeted more than others¹⁶ (Bernstein, 2007; Bernstein, 2012; Olsson, 2021; Taylor, 2019).

This form of repressive prostitution policy, directed at individuals but based on a structural gender perspective on commercial sex, is visible in Sweden’s prostitution policy, with the clearest example being the Sex Purchase Act (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017b). John Schools are another example of the way carceral feminism has affected social policy and social work. John Schools are education programs for clients who have been arrested for prostitution offences, and exist in the USA, the UK, Canada, and South Korea (Isaksson et al., 2020). These programs aim to reduce prostitution by targeting the demand for sexual services and educating participants on the harms associated with purchasing sex. The programs identify the buyers and their demand for purchased sex as causing the exploitation and abuse found in commercial sex (Cook, 2015; Gurd & O’Brien, 2013). Some scholars have argued that John Schools perpetuate traditional social constructions of prostitution by framing the sex buyers’ behaviour as being based on their ignorance or unawareness of the true nature of prostitution, or as being due to sexual addiction (Gurd & O’Brien, 2013). These are constructions of prostitution that deviate from empirical findings showing a diversity in the conditions, experiences, attitudes, and behaviours found in the field of commercial sex (e.g. Sanders et al., 2020). Overall, evaluations of the programs have also suggested that their effectiveness is limited (Matthews,

¹⁵ One example of this in the Swedish context is found in the way the government and feminist and women rights organizations have made common cause with Christian NGOs with the goal of sharpening the penalties for the purchase of sex (and other sex crimes).

¹⁶ Previous research has shown how people are targeted differently depending on factors such as their socioeconomic situation and skin colour, which contributes to the growing incarceration of poor black people in the U.S. Most of the men who are arrested for purchasing sex as a result of the new sex trafficking laws in the U.S. are men of colour (Bernstein 2012; Taylor 2017). A study on the implementation of the Swedish Sex Purchase Act have shown that most arrests of men purchasing sex have been made in Sweden’s three largest cities. The men arrested have overall had lower average incomes than Swedish men in general, and a larger proportion had foreign citizenship than in the population at large. A relatively large proportion of the men had been arrested in ‘open arenas’, such as the street environment or at hotels (Olsson 2021).

2008). Organizationally, John Schools differ from the Swedish KAST units in several ways. John School programs take the form of a sentencing option, or a diversionary program, that are offered to eligible offenders, and they primarily target buyers in the street sex market. KAST units are instead part of the municipal social services and provide counselling for individuals who wish to change their behaviour, regardless of whether they have been arrested (Cook, 2015; Olsson, 2021).

Understanding individual experiences of purchasing sex

Overall, studies that have sought to characterize men who purchase sex suggest that they are a diverse group comprising all ages, ethnicities, social classes, marital statuses, educational levels, and professions, making them difficult to differentiate from men who do not pay for sex (Sanders et al., 2020; Shilo et al., 2021). However, some differences have been found between the two groups in terms of certain factors such as sexual behaviours and sexual aggression (Belza et al., 2008; Schei & Stigum, 2010; Shilo et al., 2021; Ward et al., 2005). Some studies have found a correlation between pornography consumption and paying for sex (Deogan et al., 2021; Farley et al., 2011; Shilo et al., 2021; Tewksbury & Golder, 2005; Wright, 2013; Wright & Randall, 2012). Another study, based on a sample from the US and the UK, found a correlation between purchasing sex and social attitudes. The respondents in the study (and particularly those from the US) had more politically liberal views, especially with regard to sexuality and sexual behaviour, and were less religious (Sanders et al., 2020).

The research focusing on the individual motivations and experiences of men who purchase sex is relatively extensive and shows a complexity and heterogeneity in men's experiences of purchasing sex (e.g. Atchison et al., 1998; McKeganey & Barnard, 1996; Monto, 2010; Sanders et al., 2020). Researchers have identified motivations such as being able to purchase specific sexual acts and the opportunity that purchasing sex provides to meet a variety of women or to contact women with specific characteristics. Other motivations have been associated with being able to have limited, temporary relationships, and the thrill of the activity itself (McKeganey & Barnard, 1996; Monto, 2010). Additionally, men's motivations to buy sex have been understood in terms of: an attraction to a particular type of idealized women; a lack of satisfaction with a current partner; an inability to find a non-commercial sex partner; the thrill of breaking

boundaries; a wish to avoid commitment; or, for some men, the quest for romantic love, or for a so called girlfriend experience¹⁷ (Monto, 2010; Perkins, 1999; Sanders, 2008b; Weitzer, 2009). Previous research has conceptualized men's motivations for buying sex based on psychological, sociological, and psychiatric perspectives (Atchison et al., 1998; Månsson & Linders, 1984; McKeganey & Barnard, 1996). Some research has also conceptualized motivations for purchasing sex in relation to physical and social deviance, referring to factors such as physical unattractiveness, social unattractiveness/psychological maladjustment, and psychopathology (Atchison et al., 1998).

Men's motivations for purchasing sex have further been understood as a manifestation of cultural gender role expectations. Ideals of masculinity and the avoidance of gender role responsibilities have been understood as affecting men's involvement in commercial sex. Previous research has also analysed men's experiences of purchasing sex as a means by which disempowered men are able to exercise power (Atchison et al., 1998; Joseph & Black, 2012; Tal-Hadar et al., 2022). A number of studies have also discussed assumptions about masculinity and sexuality in relation to commercial sex (Huysamen & Boonzaier, 2015; Joseph & Black, 2012; Prior & Peled, 2021; Tal-Hadar et al., 2022), with some research suggesting that heteronormative ideas about both masculinity and femininity tend to filter into and shape the meanings that men construct in relation to paying for sex (Huysamen, 2022). Kong (2015) has argued that men who buy sex are torn between two different sexual scripts. One script involves their wanting or being expected to be intimate and to live in romantic and monogamous relationships. The other script is an adventure script that focuses on the sex drive as explosive and uncontrollable, and on the importance of sexual adventures and enjoyment without commitment (Kong, 2015). Kong (2016) has also suggested that buying sex can be seen as a form of leisure edgework, in the context of which people who buy sex are constantly balancing between enjoyment and risk. Kong understands the purchase of sex as a negotiation between sexual scripts and as a way for these men to relate to heterosexual ideals of masculinity.

Some previous research has discussed how men who purchase sex tend to conceptualize their experiences within an addiction discourse (Lahav-Raz, 2021). Here the conceptualization of men's experiences of purchasing sex can be understood in relation to an increased individualization of social problems. The individualization of social problems, in combination with a focus on diagnoses

¹⁷ 'Girlfriend experience' is a purchasable sexual service that includes sexual activities but also activities that resemble non-paid intimate relationships (Bernstein 2008).

and on people's psychological and neuropsychiatric status, has led to a tendency to medicalize and biologize social problems (Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009; Loseke, 2010; Olsson, 1999). Lahav-Raz (2021) has discussed how sex buyers' comprehension of their engagement in commercial sex can be understood using the concept of an 'addict sexual script'. Lahav-Raz shows how men frame their sex purchases in terms of an addiction, which she understands as a coping strategy that releases them from responsibility and the ability to be autonomous. Lahav-Raz (2021) views these men's negotiations between personal responsibility and self-governance through the lens of 'victimized masculinity', where the use of an addiction-related terminology can be understood as a strategy of renegotiating one's masculinity as a 'victimized masculinity'. When the men express themselves in the language of victimization, this can also be understood as a strategy to deal with their engagement in a stigmatized activity. 'Victimizing' oneself in this way can be understood as a strategy that these men use to 'deal with the disconnect between the lived experiences of their masculinity and society's expectations of them' (Hollander, 2014, p. 431).

Other studies have shown that some men who purchase sex seem to have internalized the social stigma linked to a view of paying for sex as a negative social phenomenon in general, and for men in particular (Neal, 2018). The stigma associated with paying for sex in certain cultural contexts, and its internalization, plays a key role in the men's identity construction processes, and this occurs even within cultural contexts where paying for sex is not explicitly condemned or criminal (Neal, 2018; Prior & Peled, 2021). In a study in a Malaysian setting, repeated visits to sex sellers neutralized the 'deviance' and shame surrounding commercial sex while reinforcing the camaraderie and masculine empowerment felt amongst the members. New clients utilize techniques of neutralization to justify their participation in commercial sex while simultaneously minimizing the negative consequences of sex work (Lim & Cheah, 2020).

The understanding of the purchase of sex as a form of deviance, and the sex purchaser as a deviant (e.g. Atchison et al., 1998), has been questioned from a variety of perspectives. Among other things, it has been criticized for being based on an essentialist view of sexuality and personality (Kulick, 2005). Furthermore, the application of the sociology of deviance to prostitution has been questioned by feminist scholars for not exploring the role of power in the designation of deviance (Jeffreys, 2008). Nonetheless, several studies have shown that men who purchase sex relate to and navigate in relation to perceptions of deviance and normality, for example by distinguishing between various types of paid sex and

various contexts where such sex may occur based on their perceived morality and normativity. Furthermore, men who purchase sex seem to make a distinction between deviant aspects and forms of commercial sex, and their own experience and practice (Lahav-Raz et al., 2023; Prior & Peled, 2021; Wepener et al., 2013). Previous studies have shown differences in experiences and attitudes among men who purchase sex based on whether they had purchased sex frequently or only once (Shilo et al., 2021). Additionally, some studies have indicated that there are also differences in the way men who purchase sex define what they do, and that the boundaries between prostitution, compensated dating and romantic relationships can become blurred (Chu & Laidler, 2016; Prior & Peled, 2021).

In recent years, a growing body of international research has interpreted the purchase of sex as an expression of the commercialization of intimacy and sexuality, with the forces of the market and (late) capitalism becoming important for the understanding of the phenomenon (Bernstein, 2007; Hammond & van Hooff, 2019; Sanders, 2008b). Sanders (2008b) has argued that we need to look beyond the perspectives previously described in this chapter, which tend to either individualize the desire to buy sex, or to focus only on structures, and to capture the motivations for engaging in commercial sex in terms of ‘push’ factors – elements that are lacking in men’s lives, and ‘pull’ factors – aspects of the sex industry that are attractive and that are promoted as ‘entertainment’ (Sanders, 2008b). Bernstein (2001) argues further that the market for commercial sex is experienced as facilitating and enhancing desired forms of non-domestic sexual activity, an argument that differs from previous research, which instead proposed compensatory arguments stating that commercial sex caters for a need that would be better satisfied within an intimate relationship in the private sphere (Bernstein, 2001; Giddens, 1992; O’Connell Davidson, 1998). In commercial sex, emotional intimacy instead becomes a critical component of the commercial exchange. Intimacy is not excluded from the commercial sexual experience but rather integrated within it. The blurring of boundaries between commercial transactions and social relationships has an important role to play in understanding the complexities and meanings associated with the buying of sexual services in the form of both specific physical acts and emotional intimacy (Lahav-Raz, 2019).

Previous studies have conceptualized men’s understandings of paying for sex as part of a consumerist discourse. By describing interactions with sex sellers as free-market commercial transactions, men are viewed as simply buying what is offered to them (Prior & Peled, 2021). In some cases, paying for sex is seen as a cost-effective behaviour of rational men, compared to (unpaid) courtship rituals

and romantic interactions with women (Kong, 2015, 2016). Some scholars have argued that men's consumerist arguments for purchasing sex ignore sex-trafficking, and that treating women who sell sex as a service or product dehumanizes them and entrenches men's powerful position (Cornforth-Camden, 2018; Prior & Peled, 2021; Senent Julián, 2019; Vaughn, 2019). Others have suggested that a neoliberal consumerist discourse is inherent in commercial sex as a social phenomenon, and may thus shape the self-perceptions of men who pay for sex into seeing themselves as legitimate service consumers in ways that are unrelated to any need to dismiss moral accusations (Pettinger, 2011). Still others have argued that resorting to a consumerist discourse is a way for men who purchase sex to ascribe alternative discursive meanings to their actions, which help them distance themselves from the social labelling of sex-for-pay as 'deviant' and to maintain a de-stigmatized image (Lim & Cheah, 2020; Prior & Peled, 2021).

Despite differences among scholars who focus on the purchase of sex as an example of the commercialization of sexuality and intimacy, this perspective has been criticized for lacking a structural analysis that includes aspects such as gender, power, class, and ethnicity (e.g. Farley, 2005). The consumerist understanding of commercial sex has been criticized by the critical feminist perspective, for example, which has argued that commercial sex is a patriarchal phenomenon and not a capitalist one: 'it did not occur when people began to buy and sell but is instead rooted in the relationship between men and women' (Senent Julián, 2019, p. 114). Discussions of demand as articulated in terms of the market and economic push/pull factors have also been criticized for framing a form of demand that supposedly has no gender, and that consequently makes men invisible (Raymond, 2004). In addition, the separation of sex work from forced prostitution or of prostitution from sex trafficking has been criticized for being 'futile and tak[ing] attention away from the "cruelty" endemic to all forms of prostitution' (Benoit et al., 2019, p. 1914; Farley, 2018).

Contextualizing the purchase of sex

Scholarship on commercial sex has long emphasized the power differentials between buyers and sellers (O'Connell Davidson, 1998; Pateman, 1988; Raymond, 2004). The ways in which commercial sex can be related to gender inequality have also been emphasized (Huysamen & Boonzaier, 2015; Jeffreys, 2008; MacKinnon, 2011). Different structural aspects create unequal social and

economic conditions, and commercial sex can be understood as a gendered phenomenon (Senent Julián, 2019). The powers and abilities that different social groups have in a social system can vary, and it is important to recognize that commercial sex can be oppressive (Monto & Milrod, 2020; Weber, 1978). However, power relations and intersectional inequalities are not static, but complex, dynamic, and multifaceted (Huysamen, 2022; Taylor, 2019). Monto and Milrod (2020) have argued that to exclusively emphasize exploitation, oppression, and structural differences in the positions of buyers and sellers implies a static power relationship in which buyers uniformly have greater power (Monto & Milrod, 2020). Even if commercial sex may be seen as a phenomenon that is permeated by hierarchical power relations, the conclusion that sex buyers as a category have greater social power than sellers is a simplification of the diversity of the dynamics involved in commercial sexual relationships (Monto & Milrod, 2020). Previous research has shown how different social categories, such as gender, race, sexuality, and ability intersect in the relational dynamics of commercial sex (Huysamen, 2022). A number of studies have presented examples of how sex sellers exercise power in sexual exchanges, which differ depending on the practices of sex sellers in different structural and cultural conditions, the ways in which they interact with different clienteles, and on their differing levels of individual resources (Hoang, 2015; O'Connell Davidson, 1998; Phoenix, 1999; Yuk-Ha Tsang, 2019). Conversely, other studies have presented examples of differences in the extent to which buyers experience themselves as having power in sexual exchanges with sellers, depending on different physical attributes, varying financial resources, different legal and cultural contexts, and variable access to conventional non-remunerative sexual experiences (Holt et al., 2014; Monto & Milrod, 2020; Plumridge et al., 1997). Scholars have argued that the diversification and hierarchical categorization of risks and respectability in commercial sex (Sanders, 2008b) needs to be located in the interwoven development of commercial sexuality and post-industrial society. Commercial sexuality has changed as cities have become re-enriched, as new communication technologies have developed and as the service sector has become more specialized. The politics of buying and selling sexual services lie at the intersection between the public and the private spheres (Bernstein, 2007).

Post-industrial societies may have affected the shape and expressions of commercial sex, but different countries' laws and policies also have an impact on people's attitudes and behaviours regarding commercial sex (Scoular, 2010; Weitzer, 2015). Previous research on the purchase of sex indicates that in national

contexts where it is illegal to purchase sex, sex buyers experience a fear of law enforcement (Holt et al., 2014; Horswill & Weitzer, 2018). Studies in national contexts other than Sweden have shown that criminalization has not decreased demand. However, it has changed the profile of clients to some extent, with those who purchase sex in contexts where it is criminalized tending to be bigger risk takers who also engage in a range of other risky behaviours (Della Giusta et al., 2021). Sterling and van der Meulen (2018) has studied men who purchase sex in Canada, which has a law similar to that in Sweden, focusing on their attitudes to the law and perceptions of risk. By studying conversations in online forums, the study showed that the participants tried to manage the feeling of increased risk resulting from the implementation of the law by dissociating themselves from being defined as criminals. Other ways of managing risk involved increased anonymity and changes in their communication practices. They also avoided certain types of sex sellers whom they suspected were victims of trafficking and being monitored by the police. Sterling and van der Meulen (2018) interpreted the participants' risk management as a form of hybrid risk knowledge production. The men based their knowledge on experiences and information gathered from different (more or less reliable) sources, a process that affected their behaviour in relation to sex sellers. Conversely, a study conducted in a UK setting indicates that internet technologies and the local infrastructure have made the visits to sex sellers easier and sex buyers feel safer (Pettinger, 2015). Several studies have shown how sex buyers use different strategies to reduce the risk of getting caught in national contexts where the purchase of sex is criminalized, such as quick negotiations in visible arenas or only using 'out-calls'¹⁸. These strategies to avoid detection can make those who sell sex more vulnerable, since such strategies make it harder for them to control whom they are meeting (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017b).

There is an extensive research focused on commercial sex as a risky and dangerous phenomenon for sellers (Deering et al., 2014). Aspects such as the way commercial sex is linked to the underground economy (Sanders et al., 2020) and organized crime (Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2013), the violence and crimes committed against sellers (Platt et al., 2018), and the harm and negative effects on the sellers' physical and psychological wellbeing (Farley, 2018; Farley et al., 2004) have all been thoroughly examined. Previous research has identified differences in the vulnerability of those who sell sex depending on how and where

¹⁸ 'Out-call' is a term for when the sex purchase takes place in locations other than sex sellers' residence.

they sell sex. Different forms of commercial sex are classified and valued hierarchically differently, both by sellers (Bernstein, 2007) and buyers (Sanders, 2008b; Scaramuzzino, 2014). Which sexual services are offered and performed, how long they are performed for, and in what type of environment, differs depending on whether the sale takes place in a street environment, via escort services, or in other arenas (Bernstein, 2007; Durant & Couch, 2019; Lever & Dolnick, 2010). Men who purchase sex have primarily been seen as causing danger in the field of commercial sex, either by being those who commit the crimes or expose the sellers to violence (Deering et al., 2014), or by fuelling the sex trade and allowing the violence against sellers to continue (Harrington, 2018). However, some research has contributed to a broader picture of the risks associated with commercial sex by also focusing on men who purchase sex. Different forms of commercial sex are associated with both risk and respectability for the individuals who buy sex, which can be traced back to both moral values and perceptions about what is riskier and more dangerous (Johansson & Östergren, 2021; Sanders, 2008b).

Individuals' perceptions of risk in relation to different forms of criminal activity have been studied in the field of criminology, with varying results. The perceived risk of getting arrested by the police and the severity of the punishment can function as a deterrent, if they are linked to previous experiences (Lab, 2020). However, a study on adult marijuana use found that the severity of punishments and combined legal factors, have a minimal influence compared to social background characteristics and social support factors (Meier & Johnson, 1977). Further, perceptions of stigma and social disapproval have been found to be the greatest concern, with the possibility of going to prison and being sanctioned by the legal system being less of a deterrent than these social factors (Taylor, 2019; Williams & Hawkins, 1986). Sanders et al. (2020) has examined how men who purchase sex navigate in relation to different forms of risk, finding indications that fear of exposure to a partner or social network constitute a bigger concern than a fear of law enforcement.

The results from a quantitative study on commercial sex and digitalization indicated that a relatively large proportion of the sex-buying men that participated in the study had been victims of crime, such as scams, financial crimes, or physical violence. The men in the study were also concerned about their safety and used different precautions when purchasing sex (Sanders et al., 2020). This is also a recurrent theme in other studies, where men who purchase sex are described as expressing fears about being exposed to blackmail, robbery, and

assault by both sellers and third parties (Horswill & Weitzer, 2018; Sanders et al., 2020; Scaramuzzino, 2014; Sterling & van der Meulen, 2018). Fully researching sex sellers and only visiting well-reviewed sellers were used as safety strategies to avoid being exposed to crime (Horswill & Weitzer, 2018). Being familiar with the practices of a specific sex market context and knowing the sex sellers have also been described as contributing to a sense of security and safety when purchasing sex (Durant & Couch, 2019). Previous studies show that men who purchase sex are aware of and concerned about the exploitation that they see, and that they have experiences of situations in which they have suspected that the sex seller was being exploited in some way (Hammond, 2015; Johansson & Östergren, 2021; Sanders et al., 2020). By avoiding meeting sellers whom they thought were being exploited, they tried to act upon or distance themselves from the exploitation. Another study indicates that men who purchase sex negotiate stigma by distancing themselves from the cultural and political discourse that depicts them as deviants or perpetrators. The men acknowledged that abuse and exploitation occurred but identified themselves as ‘good’ clients by distancing themselves from such activities and supporting responsible practices (Hammond, 2015). Conversely, other studies have found that men who purchase sex use different techniques of neutralization that enable them to indulge in the socially stigmatized act of commercial sex, with denial of injury being the most commonly used neutralization technique (Lim & Cheah, 2020), and that they avoid exploited sellers primarily as a result of their own consumer experiences and a desire for the sexual encounter to be mutual (Cornforth-Camden, 2018). Sanders et al. (2020) have argued that ‘environments have a huge effect on how clients manage risk in an unregulated and stigmatized industry and one where privacy in a digital world is increasingly surveilled’ (p. 187). At the same time, some studies have shown that risk can be a tempting aspect for men who purchase sex, as long as it involves a controlled and relatively harmless form of risk (Kong, 2016).

Concluding remarks

Based on this review of previous research, the research presented in this thesis proceeds from an understanding of commercial sex as a form of exploited labour where multiple forms of social inequality (based on class, gender, and race) intersect in neo-liberal capitalist societies (Benoit et al., 2019; Constable, 2009; Nussbaum, 1998; Van Der Meulen, 2011; Weitzer, 2007). In global capitalism, neoliberal state policies can be seen as being structured on the basis of the gender,

class, and racial inequalities that intersect in commercial sex (Benoit et al., 2019; O'Connell Davidson, 2014; Pitcher, 2015). Bodies play an important role in the exchange between sex sellers and buyers, and sexuality in paid sexual relationships cannot be understood if it is conceptualized as being disembodied. Sex buyers rarely just want sex. They want sex (or intimacy or something else) *with* someone. The focus of their wants can differ, for example in terms of a specific personality or gender, or varying characteristics, services, or emotional content, but the involvement of bodies remains a necessary condition. Consequently, what is commodified in commercial sex is a complex blend of labour power, socially marked bodies, and individual attributes (O'Connell Davidson, 2014).

This study takes its point of departure in a recognition of the complex and multifaceted nature of social relations, in which different norms, social categories, and power relations intersect in complex ways (Foucault, 1978; Taylor, 2019). By exploring how norms and power relations operate at different levels, it is possible to recognize resistance, negotiation, and navigation at the individual and social levels. Thus, this study is based on an understanding of norms and power relations as relational and productive, not static (Foucault, 1978; Huysamen, 2022; Taylor, 2019). This can be understood in relation to what Weitzer (2010) has labelled a polymorphous paradigm, where the complexities of lived experience can be recognized without ignoring the different structural conditions that shape experiences of commercial sex. It is at the intersection between structures, context, and actors, between the commercialization of intimacy and power relations, and between policies and laws and individual experiences, that this study directs the focus of its analysis. The study focuses on both sex buyers' perceptions and experiences of buying sex, and how the purchase of sex is constructed as a social problem. Accordingly, the study occupies itself with the interface between structural, interactional, and individual constructions of the purchase of sex, which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

The overall aim of this thesis, and the research questions addressed, focuses on constructions of the purchase of sex and on how experiences of purchasing sex are perceived and ascribed meaning. In this chapter, I present the theoretical perspective and concepts that I use as tools to answer the research questions. The theoretical perspectives and concepts are applied to provide the basis for a general, interconnected analysis in relation to the study as a whole, and are also used as analytical tools in the four original papers. Based on the aggregated results from previous research and the aim of the thesis, the study applies a social constructionist perspective to the sex-purchase phenomenon. Such a perspective focuses on both the structural and social aspects of the phenomenon at issue. By using a social constructionist perspective in this study, individuals' understandings of their experiences are understood as being constructed in social settings, and everyday reality is viewed as being permeated by social norms, relations, and material objects (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hacking, 1999). To answer the study's research questions, the overall analysis employs the theoretical concepts of deviation, stigma, and governmentality. In addition, when analysing different relational aspects of the studied phenomenon in the original papers, I have also elaborated on the concepts of emotional labour and emodities. In the following, I discuss a social constructionist understanding of reality on the basis of the theoretical concepts used in the study, with a focus on structural and interactional levels of analysis.

Deviation and stigma

A socially constructed reality at a given time, or the way it changes over time, needs to be understood in all its complexity with regard to its categorizations, power relations, and performativity (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Foucault, 1978). This study is based on an understanding of power relations as relational and as permeating all aspects of society (Foucault, 1978). Social categories, such as gender, class, and race, can be understood as being socially constructed since they are performative and normatively hierarchical (Foucault, 1978; Hacking, 1999; Huysamen, 2022). It is we humans who give the world meaning, and reality

becomes real in its consequences because we act as if our conceptions of reality are real (Hacking, 1999; Loseke, 2010).

Social norms are created, reproduced, and challenged in social interaction. Social rules are not fixed and immutable but are continually constructed anew in different situations (Becker, 1966). People act with an eye to the responses of others involved in the same action. They take into account the way others will evaluate what they do, and how that evaluation will affect their social position (Becker, 1966). Social rules (or norms) define situations and the kinds of behaviour that are appropriate to them. Some actions are specified as 'right', and some are forbidden as 'wrong' (ibid). Thus, we can understand the purchase of sex as a behaviour that is defined as being 'wrong' as a result of social rules or norms (e.g. Becker, 1966; Foucault, 1978; Kulick, 2005; Sanders et al., 2020). When a person is supposed to have broken a social rule, he may be seen as a special kind of person, an outsider. Social rules may be formal (as in laws such as the Swedish Sex Purchase Act) or informal arrangements, enforced by informal sanctions (such as shame and stigma), and the outsider, the deviant, may or may not agree with the social rule at issue (Becker, 1966). What is deviant is not fixed but is rather changeable over time and space. It is a social construct in the sense that 'social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance' (Becker, 1966). Hence, deviance is not a specific act and deviants are not a homogenous category, but 'deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behaviour that people so label' (Becker, 1966). Thus, deviance is not a quality that lies in behaviour itself, but in the interaction between the person who engages in a given act and those who respond to it. Whether an act of purchasing sex is defined as deviant, then, depends on how other people react to it and what meaning it is attributed. So, deviation is produced in social interaction, and structures are both created and maintained in social interaction (Becker, 1966).

It is not the individual per se that is understood as socially constructed, but rather the specific *kind* of person. In other words, it is the *idea* of a category that is constructed (Hacking, 1999). Ideas and classifications are formed in social settings, which are complexes comprised of, for example, institutions, laws, and media. Ways of classifying people interact with the individuals who are classified. People can become aware of how they are classified and modify their behaviour accordingly, which can be seen as a conscious interaction between kind and person (Hacking, 1999). People act by making interpretations of the situations they find themselves in and might then adjust their behaviour in such a

way as to deal with these situations (Blumer, 1971). Individuals who are classified (or who risk being classified) as deviant can make different choices or adapt their ways of living to fit into or get away from the classification that may be applied to them. These choices or adaptations have consequences for the kind of people that are invoked. What is known about people of a given kind, and about the classification of deviance, may become false because people who are classified as deviant have changed in terms of what they believe about themselves. This is what Hacking has called *the looping effect of human kinds* (Hacking, 1999). The construction of deviants, and the classification of a specific *kind* can be filled with various values and thus associated with stigma. The deviant as a kind becomes ascribed attributes that make him different, and less desirable, than others. This discrepancy between the desirable social identity and stigmatized deviance is something that those classified as deviant have to handle and navigate (Goffman, 1963). Related to this is shame, which can be understood as a social emotion involving a feeling of threat to the social bond. In this sense, shame is pervasive in virtually all social interaction and '[o]ne becomes ashamed by seeing one's self in the eyes of others, whether real or imagined' (Scheff, 2000; 2003, p. 253).

A social constructionist understanding of deviance, as used in this study, does not focus on specific acts or traits, nor on specific sexualities or personalities. The focus of interest with regard to deviance is the structures, relations, and processes that construct an act, behaviour, or phenomenon as deviant, and the way individuals who are classified and constructed as deviant interact with this categorization. Thus, this approach to deviance differs from a non-constructionist understanding of the purchase of sex as deviance, and of the sex purchaser as a deviant, which instead builds on an essentialist view of sexuality and personality (Kulick, 2005). A social constructionist understanding of deviance makes it possible to explore the role of power relations in commercial sex, which feminist scholars have argued cannot be achieved by applying functionalist understandings of deviance applied to commercial sex (Jeffreys, 2008). Social relations within commercial sex are permeated by notions of gender and power relations. From a social constructionist perspective, this study relies on an understanding of power as relational and performative (Foucault, 1978). A relational understanding views power as a process that takes many different forms and that is exercised through a variety of different social practices and relationships (Weeks, 2017). Power is expressed through complex and overlapping (and often contradictory) mechanisms, which produce domination

and opposition, subordination and resistance, regulation and agency (Foucault, 1978; Weeks, 2017).

The regulation of deviance

The law is an important component in the construction of acts and behaviours as deviant. Prohibitions may produce, perpetuate, or accelerate desires for those behaviours or activities that are regulated by law, especially in the case of sexual taboos. From this perspective, rather than writing normative scripts with which we then comply, the law contributes to the production of the kinds of deviance it intends to curtail (Taylor, 2019). However, even if prohibitions may give rise to temptation in general, in many realms of life the desire for the forbidden is likely to be counterbalanced by the fear of sanctions and the internalization of social norms (Taylor, 2019). Power does not primarily function through laws, however. Law can be understood as an inseparable dimension of social relations. It operates alongside other discourses and practices to shape the subjects, spaces, and forms of power found in commercial sex (Scoular, 2015). Legislative activities are one aspect of how social norms and power works in a constitutive, disciplinary, and normalizing way. They also contribute to the construction of social problems, which individuals must relate to, and against which society should intervene (Loseke, 2010; Scoular, 2015; Taylor, 2019). Law may have an ability to punish crime in a direct sense, but can also normalize the ‘outside’ of what it regulates (Scoular, 2015). Hence, law is not irrelevant, but the legal complex has become embedded within governmental strategies that are increasingly centred on the routine administration of lives (Scoular, 2015; Veitch et al., 2007).

A disciplinary penalty has the function of reducing deviations from the existing order and is thus corrective. Prominent in the regulation of deviance are the modern forms of power and governance at a distance (Scoular, 2015). By means of normalization, discipline, responsabilization, and bio-political power, power operates through (not over) individuals by structuring their possible fields of action (Foucault, 1978; Scoular & O'Neill, 2007). The different strategies, discourses, and techniques that states and institutions use to govern and regulate societies through the regulation of individual and collective behaviour comprise what Foucault et al. (2008) has termed governmentality. The shaping of subjectivities and interactions among and between groups is constituted in the relation between normative value systems, legal processes, and everyday practices (Sterling & van der Meulen, 2018). Norm-breaking behaviours are modified with a focus on productive performance, and according to current

norms. But since deviance is constructed in interaction and in relation to others, the modification of behaviours becomes a collective and relational process. This gives individuals a space for negotiation in relation to social rules and norms (Becker, 1966; Hacking, 1999; Scoular, 2015). When people labelled as deviant identify themselves as outsiders, they may distance themselves from the rest of society. And they may act on the basis of alternative life worlds, norm systems, or social worlds (Becker, 1966). However, people are sensitive to conventional codes of conduct and must deal with these sensitivities in order to engage in a deviant act. People who engage in activities labelled as deviant may adjust in order to follow social rules and to avoid being an outsider (ibid).

Social problems and social problems work

From a social constructionist perspective, a social problem is not an objective condition that is unchangeable in relation to time and space. Social problems are socially constructed, and a condition is defined as a social problem when it is seen as wrong or harmful, as widespread, and as possible to change. Social problems are also a category of conditions that it is believed should be changed. Thus, the understanding of a social problem is not fixed but can change over time and space (Loseke, 2010). With a social constructionist understanding of social problems, there is not one objective depiction of a social problem, nor one specific effective means for remedying a social problem (Blumer, 1971). A social problem is socially constructed, and constitutes a focal point for the operation of divergent and conflicting interests, intentions, and objectives. It is the interplay among these interests and objectives that constitutes the way in which society deals with its social problems (Blumer, 1971). A condition or a phenomenon is not a social problem until it is named and given meaning, and a specific person is not a victim or a perpetrator until someone classifies the person in that way (Loseke, 2010). In other words, a condition does not exist *as* a social problem until it is defined as such. Some conditions and people are categorized as social problems, and this occurs via a claims-making process involving, among other things, the work of constructing images of typical conditions and typical people, i.e., the work of constructing simplicity out of complexity. Additionally, the construction of social problems involves claims that are directed at different explanations and solutions to these social problems (ibid). From a social constructionist perspective, social conditions become ‘problems’ as a result of claims-making by interested parties, claims that may or may not reflect actual social arrangements (Weitzer, 2007). Claims-makers construct images of ‘types of people with types of problems and

types of needs requiring *types* of laws, physical environments, or services. When social change happens, *real* people are affected' (Loseke, 2010, p. 123).

Social work has the aim of resolving social problems (Loseke, 2010). Social work has been defined as 'promot[ing] social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people' and 'social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing' (IFSW, 2023). In this sense, social work is about social needs and social justice. However, social work is also by definition normalizing, and it includes both disciplining and moralizing aspects (Herz, 2018). On the one hand, normalization can contribute to individuals' wellbeing and participation in society, but on the other hand it includes a notion of what normality is and a disciplining of individuals to become 'good members of society' (ibid). Commercial sex, and the purchase of sex, is constructed as a social problem, but as has been discussed in previous chapters, there is a constant negotiation about how the different aspects of the phenomenon and the individuals involved should be understood. Thus, the actual *meaning* of social justice, wellbeing, and needs are not objective facts. Neither is it an objective fact for whom these aspects are concerned, nor how they should be achieved (Loseke, 2010). The suggested solutions to defined social problems can be of various kinds, but they need to be understood in relation to the cultural setting of a given society and how social problems are constructed. If understandings of social problems in a society are characterized by individualism, and by constructing individual responsibility, this leads to a tendency to construct diagnostic frames that hold individuals responsible for causing social problems. It then follows that any resolution requires changing people (Loseke, 2010).

When social work organizations work to change human behaviour, they are engaging in moral work. On the one hand, they provide concrete services to clients, such as counselling. But on the other hand, their actions also confer a moral judgment about the clients' social worth, the causes of their predicament, and the desired outcome. Thus, social work that aims at changing behaviour cannot be value neutral, since the people involved in this work are themselves imbued with values (Hasenfeld, 2000). Social workers do moral work through their actions. By exercising considerable discretion, in combination with personal belief systems and moral rationalisations, they rationalize their actions by morally constructing their clients. Their work is contextualized at the local level, and discretion prevails at both the organisational and street level (ibid). Moral work can be seen as highly contextualized and as reflecting the particular cultural,

political, and economic exigencies of the local community in which the work takes place. So even if human service organizations are embedded in institutionalized moral systems, these systems may lack consensus or internal consistency. Organisations can have multiple and conflicting moral systems, and social work practice may involve multiple service technologies that are guided by different, if not conflicting, moral assumptions. Even if organisations may look the same on the surface, closer scrutiny reveals considerable diversity. Organisations engaged in moral work must contend with abstract, conflicting, and ambiguous moral rules (Hasenfeld, 2000).

This section has focused on how a social constructionist perspective can be understood in relation to deviation, social problems, and social work. In doing so, it has described the theoretical perspective and concepts that are used in this study as tools to analyse how the purchase of sex is constructed as a social problem and to explore sex buyers' perceptions and experiences of buying sex. However, to analyse sex buyers' perceptions and experiences of buying sex on a relational level, additional theoretical concepts are also applied that provide assistance in understanding the specific relations associated with commercial sex. The following sections discuss concepts such as commercialization, the social meaning of money, trust, and connective labour.

Connective labour and trust

The mechanics of the social relations associated with commercial sex can be understood in relation to a theoretical discussion of commercialization. In general, societal changes have led to a commercialized development whereby parts of people's intimate and private lives can now be packaged as expert knowledge and sold on a market (Hochschild, 2012b). In the context of these changes in society in which intimate and social relations have become goods on a global market, authenticity is becoming increasingly important and is thus acquiring greater value as a commodity (Constable, 2009; Illouz, 2007). Aspects such as intimacy and authenticity are no longer exclusive to non-commercial relationships but constitute part of the purchasable services in commercial sex (Bernstein, 2007; Sanders, 2008b). Thus, the boundaries between private and commercial are not always clear cut but can become fluid and subjective based on subjective experiences (Hochschild, 2012b). Research has analysed how different practices in commercial sex have changed the emotional work and investment conducted and made by sellers (Bernstein, 2007). An example is

found in research on buyers who wish to buy a ‘girlfriend experience’, a practice that Bernstein (2007) has analysed as a form of bounded authenticity, which she defines as a temporary, delimited experience that is experienced as both physically and emotionally genuine. For the buyer to perceive the purchased sexual encounter as a form of bounded authenticity, the seller is required both to do emotional labour and to make emotional investments. The analysis of emotional labour in commercial sex is closely linked to the expected roles in the provider/consumer relationship, but it is also linked to gender expectations and performances (Bernstein, 2007; Hochschild, 2012a; Sanders, 2008b).

Emotional labour in commercial sex is gendered, with sellers performing emotional labour because sex buyers demand intimacy, authenticity, and genuineness (Bernstein, 2007; Milrod & Weitzer, 2012; Sanders, 2005). Thus, the emotional display and attention that one person owes to another other reflects an inherent inequality (Carbonero & Gómez Garrido, 2018; Hochschild, 2012a). The emotional labour conducted by sellers is not isolated to the specific practices of commercial sex but can be seen as an example of the emotional labour that is done not only by women who sell sex but also done by women as wives, lovers, and partners (Sanders, 2008b). Emotional labour can be understood as an expression of an increased commodification of many areas of private life in a late modern society, a commodification of private life that is highly gendered, since it is primarily the care work and emotional labour done by women that is outsourced to professionals (Hochschild, 2012a, 2012b). Additionally, it is an issue of class and globalization, since it is primarily poor, working-class women who (travel and) sell their services to the more affluent classes (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003).

From a social constructionist perspective, with its understanding of meaning and categorization as being constructed in social settings, and of power as relational, complex, and productive, it is of interest to explore emotional labour in commercial sex as a relational process. Based on Pugh (2022), conceptualization of connective labour, it is possible to explore how emotional recognition, investments and exchange can be interactive and engaged in by both parties in a worker/client relationship. Pugh defines connective labour as involving interactive processes in which the client co-constructs the meaning of the encounter. This involves intentionally using one’s own emotions to sense and reflect the other’s perspective. Pugh draws parallels to Foucault’s concept of ‘pastoral power’, which involves the harnessing of an intimate understanding of another to the aim of mental and physical wellbeing (Pugh, 2022). Pugh’s (2022)

understanding of connective labour is of interest in relation to the complexities of power relations in provider/consumer relationships. Her conceptualization of connective labour is helpful when the focus is directed at the client in the relationship, and in understanding the relational work conducted by clients, in this case the trust work that sex buyers engage in. I understand *trust work*¹⁹ as the various practices that together construct trust in a relationship.

The commodification of emotions

Bernstein (2007) has argued that emotional labour in commercial sex, such as in the form of bounded authenticity, is something specific to the purchase of sexual services in the post-industrial era, and that its appearance is due to a shift from sexual intimacy as something relational to sexual intimacy as recreation. She understands this as being closely intertwined with a wider change in society, where expanding consumption and increased state intervention in commercial sex should be understood in the context of a broad array of economic and cultural transformations that have taken place over recent decades. This shift has included the development of a symbiotic relationship between the information economy and the consumption of commercial sexuality, with the many mergings and inversions of public and private life being characteristic of our era (Bernstein, 2007). In line with this, and with support from Boltanski and Chiapello (2018), Carbonero and Gómez Garrido (2018) have argued that these changes are part of a new stage in capitalism in which our personal human qualities have become part of the transaction (Carbonero & Gómez Garrido, 2018).

Remuneration is a defining aspect in commercial sex, and commercial sex involves a differentiated social context, with boundaries and a distinctive matching of relations, transactions, and media (Zelizer, 2005). But money is not merely an object but is filled with social meaning. Monies can mark the quality of social relations, but social relations can also mark the qualities and meaning of monies (Zelizer, 1997), giving monies a social meaning that is also relevant in commercial sex (Zelizer, 2005). When different forms of payment define the quality of social relations, people work hard to differentiate monies, since payment systems become a powerful way to distinguish different social ties (Zelizer, 1997, 2001). To make sense of the complex and often chaotic social ties

¹⁹ This concept has been used in previous research across different research fields and with different definitions, see Cuadra (2012).

linked to monies, people constantly innovate and differentiate currencies, bringing different meanings to their various exchanges (Zelizer, 1996).

Zelizer (2005) has shown that intimate relationships are closely linked to economic exchanges in many different ways and that people are constantly negotiating with regard to the coexistence of economic exchange and intimate social relations. This process of negotiation involves, among other things, the development of distinctions between different types of relationships, transactions, and payment media, something that Zelizer (2005) believes is closely linked to moral beliefs and legal codes. This, in turn, shapes both our social behaviour and our legal decisions. Different forms of intimacy, authenticity, and emotional bonds exist between people who buy and sell sexual services and these are handled differently (Milrod & Weitzer, 2012; Zelizer, 2005). Based on Newmahr's (2011)²⁰ understanding of intimacy as an interaction based more on the sense of exclusivity or privilege that is offered, than on the 'depth' of the interaction, intimacy is about access, which 'depends on the cultivation of a belief in the privacy of a particular experience' (p 171). Feeling special or privileged in relation to another person may be understood as being central to the experience of intimacy. With Newmahr's (2011) conceptualization of intimacy and eroticism, the cultural scripts for sexual intimacy can be understood as drawing on, and challenging, cultural ideals about heteronormative sexuality with regard to features such as access, gender, and power. Thus, intimacy is not free from power and patriarchal arrangements, but is intertwined with them at a relational level, where personal relationships remain strongly gendered and where intimacy and inequality coexist (Carbonero & Gómez Garrido, 2018; Jamieson, 1999).

Illouz (2007) has argued that both intimacy and emotions have been transformed into commodities and thus buyable products or services. Emotions are not merely components of the motivational structure of the consumer, but also and more significantly actual commodities in themselves. According to Illouz, this does not mean the private emotional meanings and attachments that commodities accumulate after being purchased, but rather that 'commodities are designed in order to create emotions and affects, be they deep or shallow, with a transient or long-term impact, and that they are consumed as such' (Illouz, 2018, p. 16). Emotions are not only marketed and commodified, they are also shaped and created in the context of specific acts of consumption, something Illouz calls

²⁰ Newmahr bases her discussion of intimacy in S/M play on Simmel's ideas on intimacy in relation to access and the elimination of limits.

emodities (Illouz, 2018). Thus, for an experience to have an emotional dimension, the key question is whether the experience is framed and labelled as emotional (Benger Alaluf, 2018).

Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have presented the theoretical perspective and concepts that are used as tools to analyse the empirical material and to answer the research questions posed in this thesis. Social constructionism is used as a theoretical perspective throughout thesis and is also specifically used as a tool to explore sex buyers' perceptions and experiences of buying sex, and also how the purchase of sex is constructed as a social problem in Swedish social work practice. The theoretical concept of deviation is used as a tool in the overall analysis when discussing three of the research questions: 1. How men who purchase sex make sense of their experiences in the Swedish context, 2. How men who buy sex relate to the purchase of sex being a criminalized activity and a stigmatized phenomenon, and 3. How social work practice targets the purchase of sex and how social workers understand it as a social problem. Social constructionism and the deviation concept are also used as tools in the overall discussion as a means of linking together the papers presented in this thesis. The theoretical concepts of connective labour and emodities are used as tools in discussing the research questions that address sex buyers' perceived meanings of the purchase of sex and how the study participants make sense of their experiences. They are also used as tools in analysing the relational aspects of commercial sex and how sex buyers understand their interactions with sex sellers. In the following chapter, I will present the methods and conduct of the two sub-studies.

METHODS

‘Since deviant activity is activity that is likely to be punished if it comes to light, it tends to be kept hidden and not exhibited or bragged about to outsiders. The student of deviance must convince those he studies that he will not be dangerous to them, that they will not suffer for what they reveal to him.’ (Becker, 1966, p. 168)

In this chapter I describe and discuss the methods employed in the study and how the research has been conducted. To achieve its overall aim, the thesis consists of two sub-studies. The first sub-study focuses on the first part of this aim, namely that of exploring sex buyers’ perceptions and experiences of buying sex. The second sub-study focuses on exploring how the purchase of sex is constructed as a social problem in Swedish social work practice. The first sub-study examines the first three research questions: 1. What are the perceived meanings of the purchase of sex for individuals who buy sex? 2. How do men who purchase sex make sense of their experiences in the Swedish context? 3. How do men who buy sex relate to the purchase of sex being a criminalized activity and a stigmatized phenomenon? The second sub-study has helped to answer the fourth research question: How does social work practice target the purchase of sex and how do social workers understand it as a social problem? In addition to presenting the methodological approach employed in the research, this chapter also discusses and problematizes ethical considerations, participation, and my role as a researcher in this specific field of research.

Interview study with sex buyers (sub-study one)

In this section I present the methodological procedures and considerations used in the first sub-study. The results from this sub-study are presented in Articles I-III.

Recruitment of participants

The empirical material in this sub-study consists of interviews with men who have experience of purchasing sex. My research topic has required me to be creative in different ways, especially when it comes to making contact with

participants for the study. The participants were recruited by means of adverts on two different websites that offer escort services, a notice posted in a forum on one of these websites, and also via Facebook, Twitter, and adverts in two local newspapers (see Appendix 1). I chose to advertise on the two specific escort sites in question because it was free of charge. The adverts in the newspapers and on Facebook were paid for. However, the advertisements placed on the escort sites and other sites with a sexual content resulted in a greater response than the adverts in newspapers or on Facebook. One participant had seen the ad placed in one of the newspapers and one had seen the ad placed on Facebook, the remainder had seen the adverts placed on the escort sites. I have myself conducted outreach work in Malmö, which at the time had a commercial street sex scene, and I also tried working with key informants and snowballing. Non-governmental organizations that work for sex workers' rights and health have distributed information about the study, and governmental organizations that provide support to people who buy sex (KAST) have also distributed information about the study. I also created a webpage specifically to recruit informants. None of these recruitment channels gave any results.

Contact was initiated by the participants replying to an advert, calling, or e-mailing to express their interest in the study. The participants were informed both verbally and in writing about the study's purpose and procedures, and about anonymity and confidentiality. Consent to participate was either given in writing or recorded orally. The study data are based on interviews with thirty Swedish men with experience of buying sexual services in Sweden and/or abroad. The final number of participants was determined both by saturation in the empirical material and stagnation in the number of interested participants who made contact (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018; Saunders et al., 2018).

The participants

The empirical sample consists of interviews with thirty men. The sample was purposive, and not representative, since I recruited participants who had experience of purchasing sex and reached them via a small number of specific channels. As noted above, all men were recruited either online or through newspapers. The participants had engaged in buying sex for between one and thirty years, and the frequency with which they did so ranged between one and three times a week and once a year. Most of the participants were relatively experienced sex buyers who had purchased sex for more than five years, and very few of them had ever been arrested by the police. The participants had all

purchased sex as one-time visitors to different women, and twenty-three of them had also had long-term paid relationships with a woman. The arenas used to contact women who sell sex differed, but since most of the participants were recruited via escort sites, these sites were a regular means of contact used by the participants to reach sex sellers. Other contact locations were brothels or sex clubs abroad, massage parlours, regular sex sites or dating sites, the street environment (abroad or, if in Sweden, several decades ago), and contacts had also been made through friends or business associates. Only a small number of participants had purchased sex in street environments or other open arenas in Sweden. There was a variety among those who had purchased sex abroad, which included shorter visits to neighbouring countries, long-distance tourism, and longer stays in another country for work or private reasons. All participants were men who had purchased in-person sex from women, and one had also bought sex from transgender women. Sixteen were single and fourteen were married or had a steady partner. Fourteen had children. All but one had been born in Sweden. Twenty-one were employed or self-employed, two were students, four were retired, one was unemployed and two lived on investment incomes. For an overview of the basic sociodemographic characteristics of the participants, see Table 1.

The participants' gender was not a selection criterion for participating in the study. Despite this, all participants were men. There may have been several reasons for this. First, since most of the participants were recruited from escorts sites, the sites that were chosen affected the sample of participants. I advertised on sites that, despite including both female, male, and trans escorts, had a clear heterosexual approach, and targeted male clients. I tried to advertise on smaller sites which had a somewhat different approach (e.g., MSM), but had to abandon this for financial reasons. To my knowledge, at the time of the recruitment process, there were no websites in Sweden focused on female sex buyers. Second, even though the advertisements were formulated in a gender-neutral way, commercial sex is often understood as a gendered phenomenon. Since the ads did not explicitly state that the study was seeking female participants, there is a risk that people reading the ad may have assumed that the intended participants would be men. This might be the reason that all participants were men despite having placed advertisements on Facebook, Twitter, and in local newspapers. Third, most scoping studies on people's experiences of purchasing sex indicate that more men than women have such experiences (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2019), which might make them easier to recruit simply because there are more of them.

Table 1 (Participants $n=30$)

Sociodemographic characteristics	Number of respondents
Age	
20-29	4
30-39	6
40-49	8
50-59	5
60-75	7
Marital status	
Married/steady partner	14
Single	16
Place of residence	
Large city	14
Small city	13
Rural community	3
Occupation	
Employed/self employed	21
Student	2
Retired	4
Unemployed	1
Other	2
Main arena for contact with sellers	
Internet	24
Brothels/sex clubs abroad	6
Years of purchasing sex	
0-9	11
10-19	10
20-40	9
National context for purchasing sex	
Sweden	10
Abroad	6
Both	14

The interviews

The interviews were conducted in 2018 and 2019. They were conducted either in person, via telephone or via Skype, based on the preference of the participants. One in-person interview was conducted at a café, and the rest were conducted in a group room at my office or in a group room at another university.²¹ The interviews were about one to two hours long. They were recorded, with the exception of three, at which the participants declined to be recorded. During these three interviews I took notes. I perceived the atmosphere during the interviews as generally neutral or pleasant, but this could vary. My perception was that this variation depended both on how difficult it was for the participant to talk about commercial sex, and how closely linked commercial sex was to feelings of shame and guilt.²²

The interviews were semi-structured in such a way that they dealt with five themes, but with no specific questions for each theme (see Appendix 2). The themes on which the interview focused included the meaning of buying sex, sexuality, partners, relationships and social networks, vulnerability/exposure²³, and welfare efforts. I briefly explained what I meant by a theme title and then asked the participant to tell me about their experiences around that theme. If necessary, I asked open-ended questions or follow-up questions to clarify or help the person to continue talking or directed the conversation to the themes that constituted the focus of the interview. In most cases I asked few questions and employed a relatively low-profile, mirroring approach. Instead of using questions to guide the conversation forward, I echoed, summarized and confirmed what the interviewee had said, which often led to the person elaborating on their reasoning and telling me more. This way of conducting the interviews reduced my influence on the conversation while confirming that I had heard and understood what the person had said. If I had instead remained silent while the interviewee's told their stories, this might have led to an imbalance between me and the interviewees and caused uncertainty among the participants (Grenz, 2005). By echoing, summing up and confirming, I was not silent when the interviewees told their story, but I did not add anything new to the participants' stories. My role was more of an active listener (Hydén, 2000) and in this way the interviews may have become

²¹ I provided some suggestions for locations for the interview, such as my office, a café, or a library. I described what my office looked like and the risks of someone seeing them with me there. Despite this risk, most of them preferred meeting me at my office at the university or at a university in another city in Sweden.

²² Some, but not all, of the participants expressed this.

²³ "Utsatthet" in Swedish.

more relaxed and felt safer, and less like an interrogation. This may also have helped to reduce the power imbalance between myself and the participants. This was a conscious strategy, since it is a way of conducting interviews about sensitive or stigmatized experiences that has been found to be respectful and useful (Huysamen, 2022; Hydén, 2000).

The order in which we talked about the themes during the interviews was well thought through in advance. When people tell their stories they often start in chronological order (Linde, 1993), and by starting with the theme ‘the meaning of purchasing sex’ it was quite easy for the participants to start talking about the first time they had bought sex and to then move forward to the present. It can also be somewhat easier to ask questions that may be perceived as difficult or provocative later in the interview, when it has hopefully been possible to establish a more trusting relationship (Hydén, 2000). This was the reason that I introduced the vulnerabilities theme later in the interview and that I chose to ask background questions at the end of the interview. In many cases, routine questions about factors such as civil status, whether they had children and where they lived might have felt more intimidating than questions about how they bought sex. My considerations in this regard were based on my experience from interviews conducted for my master’s thesis and from the counselling I did as a social worker. I also tried to be responsive and compliant in relation to the interviewees’ responses during the interviews. I asked about welfare initiatives towards the end of the interview, with the reason being that this might be a topic associated with political opinions. Discussions about welfare initiatives in the Swedish context often led the conversation onto legislation and the criminalization of the purchase of sex. I wanted to avoid starting the interviews with a political discussion that it might then have been difficult to move away from. By concluding with this topic, which many of the participants had a lot of opinions on, it did not disturb the participants’ discussions of their more personal and private experiences of being engaged in commercial sex.

Processing and analysis

All interviews (except for those with the participants who did not want to be recorded) were transcribed verbatim and the quotes presented in the articles have then been translated into written English. All the names of the participants are pseudonyms, and all personal information has been changed to prevent recognition. Both the interview process and the analytical work have been inspired by Alvesson and Sköldberg’s (2018) ideas on reflexive methodology.

This has meant using a parallel process in which the transcribing and processing of the interview material, the analysis of the same, and an in-depth reading of relevant literature have occurred in a fluid process. The analysis process started with a thematization of the transcriptions into many themes, which were then gradually categorized into five major themes. Some of the themes were similar to the themes that had been covered in the interviews, but they also differed. The transcribed interviews were organized and thematized based on recurrent and dominant stories, contrapositions, and slippages in the stories. The software package NVivo was used during this process. The coding and the thematic process had both an organizing and analytical function. This process led to the following main themes and sub-themes: 1. Meaning²⁴ (love-relationships, closeness-intimacy, sex, excitement, trust-confidence²⁵, friendship), 2. History of buying sex (arenas, contact with sellers, accessibility), 3. Exposure/vulnerability²⁶ (crime, sex buyers' vulnerability, sex sellers' vulnerability, morality, stigma), 4. Welfare initiatives (the Sex Purchase Act, sexual health, support and treatment/therapy), 5. Motives for participation. This form of analysis can be described as thematic and reflexive (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the study is based on a social constructionist understanding of reality (Loseke, 2010). The empirical material is understood as being comprised of stories, and the interpretation and analysis of this material has been based on a social constructionist understanding of storytelling (Plummer, 1995). The thematization and analysis of the participants' stories has been understood through the concept of subject positioning (Davies & Harre, 1990; Sterling & van der Meulen, 2018). Stories are located within different discourses, and subject positioning can be understood as a way of 'locating ourselves in conversations according to those narrative forms with which we are familiar and bringing to those narratives our own subjective lived histories' (Davies & Harre, 1990, p. 13). Thus, a 'subject position incorporates both a conceptual repertoire and a location for persons within the structure' (p. 5).

Ethical considerations in sub-study one

Ethical approval was granted by the Regional Ethics Review Board in Lund (Dnr 2017/983). Since purchasing sex is criminalized and stigmatized in Sweden, anonymity and confidentiality have been of major importance. Some of the topics

²⁴ "Funktion" in Swedish.

²⁵ "Tillit-förtroende" in Swedish.

²⁶ "Utsatthet" in Swedish.

that the interviews covered can be seen as sensitive and intimate, such as sexuality, exposure, and buying sex when you are in a monogamous relationship. For most of the interviewees, the interview was the first time they had told someone that they had bought sex. The participants' stories have been handled with care and respect. Telling someone something that has been a secret for a long time can create a kind of bond or trust in relation to the listener, which is something that I have constantly reflected on during the interview process. On the one hand this bond was unequal in the sense that the participants shared a lot with me that I have then had the power to use in my research, a power that calls for responsibility. On the other hand, since these aspects are important parts of my research question, the trust developed with the participants was crucial to making it possible for them to talk about the issues examined (Hoffmann, 2007; Plummer, 1995).

The meanings of the interview

As already noted, the interview was the first time most of the participants had told anyone that they had bought sex. Consequently, the interview could acquire the meaning of a confession for the interviewee, with the interviewer balancing between the dual roles of researcher and therapist. This has been handled with great caution in order to create a space in which it was possible for the participants to talk about their experiences without the researcher losing her research gaze (Hoffmann, 2007; Plummer, 1995). Relatively many of the participants expressed viewing the interview as an opportunity to talk about experiences they felt they could not talk about to anybody else. One participant who had read my master's thesis and had picked up the term bounded authenticity²⁷ (the Swedish term 'avgränsad äkthet' was used in the master's study), expressed that this was precisely what the interview involved for him. He saw the interview as a bounded form of authenticity, where he could talk about his experiences of buying sex in an authentic way.

Another aspect of the meaning that the interview held for the participants was that they were able to use it to develop new insights about themselves. Talking about something may change your view of it or give you new insights about the topic or your own behaviour. Some interviewees contacted me after the interview to tell me that they had decided to stop buying sex or to 'confess'²⁸ that they had bought sex again. It is important to note that this was not something I encouraged

²⁷ Bernstein (2007).

²⁸ The interviewees choice of word.

them to do, neither to change their behaviour nor to tell me about it. The interesting thing is that something had changed for them and that they wanted to tell their interviewer about it. The interviews were not intended to be interventional, which makes this an interesting ethical aspect of my role as a researcher. Another way of understanding this is to see it as a form of co-creation of the subject matter in the interviews. Seen from this perspective the interviewees did not have a prepared story that they simply delivered to me during the interviews, but rather the stories evolved and developed during the interviews, through questions, interaction, and the relationship that was built up during the interview situation. This works both ways, and just as I as the interviewer affected the stories that were created, the interviewees' stories and persona affected the way I conducted the interviews and how I looked at the material. In this way the interviews and the research were more a form of co-creation and a two-way relationship than a one-way interrogation (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; Gabriel, 2013).

Self-presentation and motives for participation

As has been mentioned, for some the interview was an opportunity to talk about their experiences as a means of obtaining new insights or to get a better understanding of their behaviour. Another motive for participating in the interviews was that the participants had moral or political opinions about commercial sex that they wanted to talk about. Some saw the interview as an opportunity to convey another picture of commercial sex than the one presented in the media and the political debate. One important aspect of doing interviews about a criminalized and stigmatized phenomenon, is the way participants may view the interview as a means of presenting themselves to the researcher as 'nice' sex buyers (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; Huysamen, 2016). This self-presentation may be performed both in relation to the sex seller when buying sex (see Research Findings and Discussion), and in relation to the researcher when talking about buying sex. I interpret this as one part of the self-presentation the participants engaged in during the interviews. This self-presentation works in different directions, both in relation to me as a researcher, but also in relation to themselves and their self-image, and to how they handled doing something illegal and stigmatizing (c.f. Presser, 2014). When we tell life stories or parts of our life story, some parts are chosen in the storytelling and other parts are left out, both as a means of presenting ourselves as moral individuals and in order to present a coherent story (Linde, 1993; Presser, 2014). The participants were aware of the public and media view on men buying sex, and this normative view on the

phenomenon was also present as an invisible audience in the interview room. This will be further discussed in the General ethical considerations section and in the General discussion.

Interview study with social workers (sub-study two)

In this section, I present the methodological procedure and considerations for sub-study two. The results from this study are presented in Article IV.

Recruitment of participants

The empirical material in this study consists of interviews with social workers who meet individuals who purchase sex for counselling or support. All existing KAST units in Sweden were asked to participate in the study. Additionally, an outreach unit working with people who sell or buy sex in Stockholm and a national helpline offering support to people with an unwanted sexuality were asked to participate. To my knowledge, these comprise all the units in Sweden that have sex buyers as their primary (or as a major part of their) target group. A question about participating in the study, along with an information sheet (see Appendix 3), was sent by e-mail to all units in Sweden that offer counselling and/or support to individuals who purchase sex, and a second e-mail was sent to those that did not respond to the first. All units agreed to participate with the exception of the helpline and one of the KAST units. The helpline did at first agree to participate but did not then respond to my subsequent contacts. The KAST unit that declined to participate had started only recently and had not yet met any clients. Participation in the study was initiated by the participants responding to the e-mail. They were then given written, and later oral, information about the study and its procedures, anonymity, and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained.

Three of the units had two employees, three had one employee, and one unit had four employees (one of whom was interviewed for this study). At some of the units the social workers worked full time with individuals who purchase sex. At other units the social workers worked both with individuals who purchase sex and with domestic violence offenders. Six of the participants had a bachelor's degree in social work, while the remaining four had a university degree in behavioural science or education studies, with educational specialisms in counselling or psychotherapy. The study participants had worked with sex buyers for between one and twenty-four years. All the KAST units conducted

counselling with individuals who purchase sex, and one participant was engaged in outreach work with the same target group. At three of the units, the target group included individuals who used pornography or had problematic sexual relations. Contacts with clients were either initiated by the clients, or via a collaboration with the police. KAST services are either free of charge or the units charge a symbolic fee, and the clients can retain their anonymity in their contacts with social workers.

The interviews

Ten interviews were conducted with professionals working at seven different units. The interviews were conducted in 2021 (during the pandemic) and all interviews were therefore conducted either by telephone or via Zoom. The interviews lasted for between one and two hours and they were all recorded. The interviews were semi-structured, and an interview guide was used as a basis for the interviews (see Appendix 4). The interview guide consisted of five themes with different suggestions for questions relating to each theme. The themes in focus for the interviews were: professional base/background, welfare measures, commercial sex, meaning and vulnerability/exposure²⁹, and laws, guidelines, policies, and politics. I briefly explained what I meant by a theme title and then I either proceeded relatively freely from any one of my suggested questions, or the interviewee started talking. If necessary, I asked open-ended questions or follow-up questions to clarify or help the person to continue speaking or directed the conversation to the themes in focus. I employed an approach similar to that used in sub-study one, and in most cases I asked few questions and maintained a low-profile, mirroring approach. Instead of directing the conversation forward through questions, I echoed, summed up and confirmed what the interviewee had said, which often made the person develop their reasoning and tell me more. I perceived the atmosphere in the interviews as pleasant and relaxing. Some of the interviews were characterized by a fairly familiar atmosphere due to myself and the interviewee being familiar with one other. This will be discussed in the section on ethical considerations.

Processing and analysis

Sub-study two employed the same approach to processing and analysis as sub-study one. Thus, both the interview process and the analytical work were inspired by Alvesson and Sköldberg's (2018) ideas on reflexive methodology.

²⁹ "Utsatthet" in Swedish.

Accordingly, this sub-study also involved a parallel process in which the transcribing and processing of the interview material, the analysis of the material, and an in-depth reading of relevant literature occurred in a fluid process. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The quotes presented in the article have then been translated into written English. All the names of the participants are pseudonyms, and all personal information has been changed to prevent recognition. The software package NVivo was used and the transcribed interviews were organized and thematized based on recurrent and dominant stories, ambiguities, and slippages in the stories. A thematic content analysis was applied and the process started with a thematization of the transcriptions into many themes. These were then gradually categorized into five main themes. The themes are in part the same as those used during the interviews, but there are also differences. The main themes and sub-themes that emerged in this process were the following: 1. Clients (their sex purchases, anxiety-compulsivity-bubble, crisis, shame and stigma, interpretation and correlation, vulnerability/exposure), 2. Contact with KAST (arrangements and content), 3. Legislation and policy (politically hot topic, governing/leadership and room for manoeuvre), 4. The workplace (collaboration, values), and 5. Professional background. This sub-study is also based on a social constructionist understanding of reality (Loseke, 2010) and the thematization and analysis have been understood in relation to subject positioning (Sterling & van der Meulen, 2018). The participants' subject positioning has been explored in relation to the way subjectivities are used to navigate in relation to the purchase of sex, the participants' professional role as social workers, values, and the political discourse.

Ethical considerations in sub-study two

This sub-study was incorporated in the ethical approval that was granted by the Regional Ethics Review Board in Lund (Dnr 2017/983). The field of professional social work targeting commercial sex in general, and the purchase of sex in particular, is small in Sweden. All participants in this study knew one another and were part of the same network. The small size of the field, in combination with commercial sex being something of a political minefield in Sweden, was one reason why individual interviews were chosen and not focus groups. The use of individual interviews produced better conditions for the interviewees to talk openly about the subject, without taking the opinions of close or more distant colleagues into account. Even though the interviews in this sub-study only focused on the interviewees' professional role, the topic may be seen as sensitive even in this respect. As a result of my professional background, this was

something that I was aware of and took into consideration during the interviews. On several occasions during the interviews, the interviewees talked about things that they subsequently asked me to omit from the study in order to avoid causing them problems.³⁰ I did as they wished in these cases and was also careful to be clear and remind them about the voluntariness of both their participation in the study and what they chose to talk about.

One ethical aspect of this sub-study involves my own professional background in the field. Before starting my doctoral studies, I worked at Evonhuset in Malmö for five years and some of my former colleagues are still working there. I know most of the participants in this study as former colleagues or collaborators. But my closeness to the participants differed, and while I had not met some of the interviewees before, I still have some irregular contact³¹ with some of them. This affected the interviews in different ways and can be seen as both an asset and an obstacle. The interviews with people unknown to me were pleasant but quite impersonal and formal. However, the interviews with my former colleagues were a mixture of a more formal interview and small talk about shared memories and experiences. My familiarity and knowledge about the field helped me gain trust and credibility with the participants, which may have affected both their willingness to participate and the quality of the interviews. Due to my knowledge about the topic and the field, I could follow the interviewees and be sensitive to what they perceived as being difficult or delicate to talk about. This is not only an asset, however, since this knowledge about the field might have made me less curious and inattentive to nuances if I were not careful. This is something I was aware of and concerned about, and I handled this by continually discussing it with my supervisors during this study. Needless to say, I also had discussions with my supervisors during the process of conducting sub-study one. But in this second study, it was even more important for me to be able to balance and navigate between closeness and distance to the topic and the participants' stories (this will be further discussed in the next section). Thus, me being somewhat of an insider in the field may on the one hand have made it easier for the participants to talk. But on the other, it may have made it more difficult for them to talk freely. This familiarity with one another, and the fact that both I and the interviewees were aware of the political sensitivity of sex-purchase topic, may have made it harder

³⁰ This was primarily about political aspects of commercial sex and not about their clinical work with clients.

³¹ I have had some lectures for them, they have been participating as lecturers on a course I was course administrator for, and I have been invited to some seminars they have had.

for the participants to talk openly without giving considerations to what they assume to be the 'correct' opinion, or their view of my own opinion on the matter.

General ethical considerations

Choosing to conduct research on men who buy sex may seem incomprehensible to many. It is an area that involves a great deal of morality and opinions about gender, intimacy, sexuality, and relationships. There are strong moral beliefs associated with the purchase of sex as a socially unacceptable behaviour that should be combated. The stigmatization associated with those who buy sex may also affect those who consider doing research on the topic. Researching men who buy sex often goes hand in hand with a preconception about the researcher thinking that commercial sex should be legalized. Researchers who engage in this type of research can thus be viewed as anti-feminists or accused of neglecting or deflecting the focus from the harms of prostitution (for women who sell sex) (Kulick, 2005; Sanders, 2008b). This is something I have experienced throughout my work with this study, and I have found myself in a number of situations where people have accused me of ignoring the power relations in prostitution. A social constructionist perspective on the subject does not help in this matter, since it is a theoretical approach that takes no clear stand in relation to the rights or wrongs of a specific case, but that remains curious (Loseke, 2010). However, this has been my own point of departure on the subject, and my position on this matter is that it is important to stay curious. As should be obvious for the reader by now, explaining the commercial sex phenomenon in terms of dualisms, or the right or wrong of it, does not constitute the focus of this study. I think it is important to avoid this in order to be able to conduct research on commercial sex in a responsible and ethic way. However, I have had to deal both with my study being interpreted by others in relation to dualisms and with being ascribed a political opinion, both when conducting the study and when discussing and presenting it to different groups.

As mentioned above, closeness and distance to the subject, being an insider or an outsider in relation to the topic, has been something I have reflected on throughout the process. My professional background in the field has had an influence on the thesis and my work process in various ways. My experience of having worked as a social worker who provided counselling to men who purchase sex is a central reason for my interest in the topic overall, and for my point of departure with regard to research discipline and perspective. It is of course

possible to study the purchase of sex in disciplines other than social work, and it is reasonable to think that my professional background has influenced my perspective on the subject. However, I would say that my background knowledge and experience have been of value in the process, since they have contributed to my ability to gain trust with participants and stakeholders. Additionally, since I was aware of the political sensitivity of commercial sex before I started the project, I was prepared for the questioning, positionings, and ideologies that categorize this field. My familiarity with the field has helped me to avoid being blinded by this and to stay focused on curiosity and exploration. My experience and familiarity with the topic and the field has also been helpful in exploring the lived experiences of the study participants, with all their complexity and nuance. One way of navigating both the field and the research process has been to discuss and have others read and review my work throughout the research process. Another thing that has been helpful in this is my use of a reflexive process and methodology. I have not been a random curious explorer in this process, nor a random fellow human being in the interaction with the individuals I interviewed. In my work with this study, my relevance system, which works as a scheme for selection and interpretations, has been determined by my scientific preference (Schütz, 1999).

One ethical aspect of my role as a researcher, which relates to the dynamic of the interview situation, is the question of age and gender. Other (young and/or female) researchers in the field of commercial sex have highlighted difficulties associated with the dynamics created in cross-gender interviews (e.g. Huysamen, 2016). As was discussed in the Theory chapter, my understanding of gender is that it is both performed and performative. Given that we are gendered subjects who are constantly 'doing gender', this is also the case in the interview situation (Butler, 2006; Huysamen, 2022). The interview situation can be seen as a context in which dominant discourses of gender are reproduced and where women can function as facilitators of men's narratives. Related to this is an understanding that women seldom interrupt men's speech and are constructed as emphatic listeners who are there to facilitate men's talk (Huysamen, 2016). Doing gender is not something that can be ignored, and the interview situation may be viewed as a situation in which both I and the participant were doing both gender and sexuality in different ways. Some of the participants expressed that it was easier for them to talk about these things with me, being a (relatively) young woman, compared to an interviewer who was an older man. This corresponds with my experience both from the interviews and from my earlier work as a counsellor.

By reducing the risk for competition, comparison, or pride in relation to masculinity, it may become easier to talk about topics that one might be ashamed of (e.g. Sanders, 2008b). At the same time, this issue is too complex to be explained by gender alone. Behaviours and attributes that are ascribed to gender are also ascribed to other categories and role performances. For example, the above-described role performance fits for a woman, but also for an interviewer, a therapist, or a social worker (not all of which can be clearly coded as female). The therapeutic elements of the interview and the similarity to emotional labour can be understood as being related to both the role of the interviewer and to gender (Sanders, 2008b; Schütz, 1999). Thus, the interview situation as a form of human interaction involves different subject positions and is permeated by complexity (Davies & Harre, 1990).

One aspect of gender in research on commercial sex that has been highlighted is the issue of being objectified or sexualized in the interview situation (e.g. Prior & Peled, 2022; Sanders, 2008b). Even if the dynamic in the interview situations can be understood in relation to myself and the participants doing gender, I did not experience being objectified or sexualized in any direct way during the interviews I conducted.³² My perception of the dynamic in the interview situations was quite different. I experienced that the dominant Swedish discourse regarding the purchase of sex filtered into the interview situation and the dynamic between myself and the participants. As has been mentioned, the participants were to some extent presenting themselves as nice men and sex buyers. Related to this was the way they perceived the listener and *for whom* they were presenting their stories. Rather than experiencing being objectified or sexualized, my perception was that the participating men pictured me as a part of the dominant political discourse and the condemnatory feminist approach to the purchase of sex.³³ Thus, I was instead desexualized and seen as someone they were worried would judge them. Some of the participants had researched me before they decided to participate in the study. By reading newspaper articles and interviews that I have been cited in, and by reading my master's thesis, they had conducted a risk calculation and decided it was safe to participate.

This study covers one part of the phenomenon of commercial sex, and it represents one piece of the puzzle. My choices throughout the process have

³² One aspect that did not have to do with the actual participants in the study, but whose handling was quite time consuming, was the rather large number of men who called the number used in the ads because they wanted to buy sex.

³³ Whether this was due to my appearance or because the political position is so dominant in Sweden, I cannot say.

affected the empirical material I have to work with, and what interpretations and conclusions I can arrive at. This applies to the object of study, the choice of methods, and the processing, analysis, theoretical frame, and concepts employed. The perspective I have used and the tools applied have influenced both the study process and the outcome. By being clear and transparent about the different choices I have made and the different stages of the research process, it becomes possible for the reader to follow this process and assess the reliability of the study and its analysis and conclusions.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the research findings presented in the articles included in the thesis. I also provide a short summary of the aim and background of each study. The four articles focus on different aspects of commercial sex, but they are also situated on different analytical levels. The analysis in Article I is primarily focused at the interpersonal level. In Article II, I explore a specific, prominent aspect of the material at the same analytical level. In Article III, the empirical and analytical focus is directed at both an interpersonal and a structural level. Article IV has its focus on professional work and social policy in the field. The published papers are presented in the chronological order in which they were written and published. The subsequent General discussion is organized thematically in relation to the aim and research questions examined, and will thus not follow the chronological order of the published papers.

Article I

Doing trust work – the purchase of sex in a Swedish context

The aim of this article was to explore how men who buy sex navigate a complex area of tension between commercialization and intimacy in the Swedish context. More specifically, the article focused on the meaning of intimacy in commercial relationships for men who buy sex, and on relational practices and strategies that occur when purchasing sex. The objects of interest in this article were the aspects of authenticity, intimacy, and trust among one-time visitors who purchase sex for the thrill of it in the Swedish context, with its dominant political understanding of commercial sex as gender-based violence. The relationship between commercial sex and intimacy has been a focus in several studies on the purchase of sex, with this research often distinguishing between one-time visitors and regulars. This sub-study was based on interviews with twenty-nine Swedish men who have purchased sex. A thematic analysis was applied, with the dominant themes being excitement and risk, trust and safety, and balancing between excitement and trust.

The findings show how the men included in the study struck a balance between excitement and trust when purchasing sex, and how trust work was crucial both for the purchase of sex not to be experienced as dangerous and for it to feel pleasurable. When the participants purchased sex as one-time visitors, they were on the one hand looking for excitement and thrills, and on the other attempting to create a sense of trust in relation to the sex seller. A certain amount of trust was crucial for the paid sexual encounter to be perceived as a manageable experience. The participants' stories about how they balanced between thrill-seeking and safety when engaging in one-time visits show that the work they do in relation to the sex seller prior to and during the paid sexual encounter is better conceptualized as trust work than as intimacy or authenticity. Doing trust work in relation to the sex seller made the purchase safe enough not to be dangerous, but not sufficiently intimate to make it boring. Trust work made it possible for the participants to navigate between excitement, risk, safety, and intimacy. Using Bauman's (1998) frame of understanding, trust work became a way of handling two inherently incompatible roles in the search for thrills: being able to feel intrinsic pleasure (to be the body) while at the same time keeping one's distance and maintaining sober judgments (being the owner of that body).

The purchase of sex may be seen as an individualistic form of recreation. But the participants' experiences were permeated by relational and structural aspects that were negotiated and weighed against each other in relation to the women they purchased sex from. Thus, the trust work undertaken by men who purchase sex can be understood in relation to both relational and structural aspects of commercial sex. Even if thrill constituted the main reason for purchasing sex, the way trust work was done in the relationship with the sex seller may be viewed as a way in which the participants were navigating different norm systems. Viscous norms regarding love, intimacy, and companionship (van Hooff, 2013) affected the participants in such a way that they did not want to purchase sex without aspects such as trust and chemistry being present. This was intertwined with Swedish political norms, which regard the purchase of sex as a form of oppression. Doing trust work in relation to the sex seller can be seen as a way of handling the normative Swedish views on commercial sex, oppression, and gender. By doing trust work when buying sex, the participants in the study could maintain a self-image in which they are good people. By creating trust in relation to the sex sellers, the participants could maintain a distance between themselves and the stigmatized image of the sex buyer.

This article was co-authored with Charlotta Holmström and Lars Plantin.

Article II

The construction of intimacy in long-term commercial relationships in Sweden

The aim of this article was to explore the construction of intimacy in long-term commercial relationships. More specifically, this article focused on the meaning of transactions in long-term paid sexual relationships in a Swedish context. Common understandings have viewed commercial sex and intimacy as incompatible, with intimacy being exclusively linked to non-commercial, often romantic, relationships. However, previous research on commercial sex has shown examples of a fluidity between different forms of relationships in relation to commerciality, whereby commercial sexual relationships can be both long-term and viewed as intimate from the sex buyer's perspective. The empirical sample comprised interviews with twenty-three Swedish men with experience of purchasing sex as regulars. A thematic analysis was applied with the dominant themes being familiarity, emotional involvement and longing for closeness, and conditional exclusivity.

The findings show a fluidity whereby the commercial relationship can change and develop over time from purchasing sex to friendship or love. For some men in this study, becoming a regular client was a strategy that enabled them to purchase sex in a context in which it is criminalized. However, ideas about intimacy and commercial sex were more prominent than the legal context. Intimacy and authenticity were of central importance to the participants' experiences of their paid sexual encounters. The importance that closeness and intimacy had for the participants may be seen as a form of bounded authenticity (Bernstein, 2007). This theme in the participants' stories is supported by previous research on purchasing sex in other national contexts, which indicates that relational practices are more complex than would be suggested by structural understandings of commercial sex alone (Bernstein, 2007; Carbonero & Gómez Garrido, 2018; Milrod & Monto, 2012; Sanders, 2008b). At the same time, the way the participants described purchasing sex to feel intimacy, or to avoid feelings of loneliness, may be interpreted such that buying sex serves as a means of obtaining certain emotions and avoiding others. In the participants' accounts, it was not sex that became the primary commodity; instead it was the emotional experience associated with being close to a woman sexually or physically. Drawing on Illouz's (2018) ideas, this form of commercial sex may therefore best be understood in terms of emodities, with the emotional experience itself being a focus for these men when they purchase sex. The difficulty of separating

emotional subjectivity from consumer subjectivity leads to them doing emotional labour as consumers (Illouz & Bengtson Alaluf, 2019) and rewriting the script for the paid sexual relationship (Jones & Hannem, 2018).

Furthermore, the study shows that even if the relationships were similar to non-paid forms of friendship or love, the commercial aspect of the relationship was an ever-present restriction which affected emotional aspects such as intimacy and companionship. The ambiguity between bounded and unbounded authenticity required both navigation and negotiation on the part of the participants. Even if the participants experienced the relationship as intimate, the relationship would not exist if the clients did not pay for it, indicating a clear frame for the relationship based on money (Bernstein, 2007; Hochschild, 2012a). Consequently, the participants used different tactics to change the meaning of money in their relationships with sex sellers. By using currencies other than cash to purchase sex, the participants tried to reduce the relationship's commercial aspects, creating intimacy through a negotiation between feeling special and the valuation of currencies in relation to intimacy (Zelizer, 1996). The blurring of payment in some cases made it difficult for the men to define the relationship's obligations and responsibilities, as different payment methods were associated with different forms of inequality in the relationship (Zelizer, 1997). Along with 'romantic' courtship rituals borrowed from non-paid heterosexual relationships, other patriarchal arrangements associated with heteronormativity were also followed, such as the desire to be in control of the woman's spending. For the men in this study, by purchasing sex as regulars the boundaries between delimited paid sexual encounters and non-commercial heterosexual relationships became blurred. Hidden currencies both reduced the commercial aspects of the paid relationship, and made the expectations, obligations, and boundaries of the relationship unclear. Perceptions of intimacy and trust, expectations of the relationship, and perceived obligations came to be experienced as permeating the private sphere of the participants' lives, constituting an ambiguously unbounded form of authenticity.

This article was co-authored with Charlotta Holmström and Lars Plantin.

Article III

Purchasing Sex in Sweden – A Risky Business

This article explored how men who purchase sex in Sweden experience and navigate risk. The aim of the article was to explore how men who purchase sex

in a context in which their activities are criminalized understand and perceive risk. The focus was directed at individual assessments of risk in relation to experiences of crime, exploitation, and stigma. This article is based on interviews with thirty Swedish men who have purchased sex. A thematic analysis was applied in which the dominant themes were risk and crime exposure, exploitation, and the stigma of being a sex buyer.

Risk was something that all participants in the study related to in different ways. The participants expressed that risk management was learnt and developed from experience (Horswill & Weitzer, 2018; Lever & Dolnick, 2010; Olsson, 2020). This was evident in relation to getting caught by the police, becoming victims of crimes, and detecting exploited sex sellers and organized crime (Sanders et al., 2020). What becomes visible in the participants' stories is how they based their risk management and navigation both on their own experiences and knowledge and on information gathered from elsewhere, primarily from reading the news and from various online forums. In addition to basing their knowledge of risk and their risk assessments on their own experiences and on input from the Swedish media discourse, the participants also framed their own experiences based on these different sources of information. This may be viewed in relation to previous research on risk when purchasing sex (Horswill & Weitzer, 2018; Sanders et al., 2020) and studies that have conceptualized the risk assessments made by sex buyers as being based on hybrid risk knowledge production (Sterling & van der Meulen, 2018).

The risk assessments conducted by the participants were based on the notion of commercial sex as a risky business, with different arenas or situations being assumed to decrease or increase this perceived risk (Horswill & Weitzer, 2018; Sanders et al., 2020). The participants had perceptions of the sex sellers as being vulnerable in different ways and they tried to avoid purchasing sex from sex sellers whom they thought were vulnerable or exploited. The participants based their assessment of the sex sellers' vulnerability on aspects such as nation of origin and on their performed authenticity or intimacy. The participants' perceptions of foreign women being forced to sell sex were similar to Swedish media descriptions of prostitution and depictions of trafficking. The reasons for avoiding sex sellers who were presumed to be vulnerable or exploited were several. One reason was linked to the men's own safety and risk assessment, while another was related to personal values and a fear of being part of exploiting someone (Sterling & van der Meulen, 2018). The third reason was associated

with the participants' sexual pleasure and a desire for the sexual encounter to feel authentic and include mutual pleasure (c.f. Cornforth-Camden, 2018).

The Swedish juridical context has had a varying impact on the participants' engagement in commercial sex. While some have adjusted their behaviour as a result of the criminalization, others described not feeling affected at all. Despite this, the Swedish context, in terms of the political and normative approach to the purchase of sex, affected them more – not in a directly punitive way, but by governing them in a normalizing and disciplinary manner (Foucault, 1978; Scoular, 2015). This is expressed in the way the participants organized their purchases, in their contacts with sex sellers, and in their anxiety and reluctance to be exploiters and perpetrators. The participants' navigation of normative discourses on commercial sex included both feminist and religious ideas, where the (radical) feminist debate in Sweden had made them cautious about speaking of their experiences (Weitzer, 2018). The debate in Sweden was perceived as being polarized, and in parallel to the way the political and media discourse in Sweden tends to rely on dichotomized expressions, the participants tried to conceptualize and understand their experiences within the same polarized frame (Pettinger, 2015).

In their encounters with sellers, and when talking to the interviewer about these, the men resisted and distanced themselves from the view of themselves as oppressors or exploiters, navigating between the normative discourse on commercial sex and their individual and relational experiences (Hammond, 2015; Weitzer, 2018). In being defined as 'sex buyers' and as such as representatives of structural violence, they had internalized a view of themselves as oppressors, and they were constantly negotiating and navigating in relation to this self-view. This is visible in the way they talked about the sex sellers' vulnerability, in how they described trying to avoid exploiting or hurting anyone, and in how they distanced themselves from the forms of commercial sex they perceived as dangerous and risky. This can be understood as the participants being governed and disciplined in the sense that they mirrored their experiences in relation to the normative view of the 'sex buyer'. But this involved a struggle or a constant negotiation, since they continued to purchase sex and were in this sense resisting (or negotiating) governance and discipline (Foucault, 1978; Scoular, 2015). For the men in this study, the political ambition to use governance and discipline to change their attitudes and behaviour did not make them stop purchasing sex. However, their stories and reflections show how this disciplinary power worked through their lives as it structured their fields of action (Foucault, 1978), and also that it worked

through specific embodied, spatial, and communicative practices (Hayes et al., 2020) as it affected their behaviours when purchasing sex.

Article IV

Social workers' navigation between repression and social support for men purchasing sex

This article explored how social workers understand the purchase of sex as a social problem. The article focused on social workers' approaches to the purchase of sex in relation to professional values, professional practices, and political goals. More specifically, it examined how social workers navigate governance and discretion in their encounters with individuals who purchase sex. The article is based on interviews with ten social workers who meet such individuals. A thematic analysis was employed, and the dominant analytical themes were individual-focused diplomats and ambivalent moral work.

The participating social workers used governance and discretion when navigating the role of social work in relation to social policy and political ambitions regarding the purchase of sex in Sweden. They operate in an intersection, since they are providing individual-level support for a problem that is interpreted as being caused by structural factors. The purchase of sex is constructed as a social problem that is located in the firing line between political forces that explain it as an expression of gender inequality and a therapeutic discourse based on psychological and medical explanations rather than social ones (Olsson, 2021; Scoular, 2015). The participants navigated between a focus on the individual and his situation, while simultaneously having moral opinions on the issue, with some trying to generate change through morality and punishment. Their professional work was situated in an intersection between the normative discourse in Sweden that depicts commercial sex as morally reprehensible, with a focus on repressive measures and harsher punishments, and a medicalization discourse, which depicts the purchase of sex as a form of addiction or psychological problem (Lahav-Raz, 2021). The participants were doing moral work but were also acting as diplomats and as specialists on both an individual and group level. This involved their own moral values, professional ideals, ideas about hierarchies and status in social work, and ideas about the role of social work in relation to the criminal justice system (Bengtsson, 2020; Hasenfeld, 2000). The participants' descriptions of how they perceive their work and their professional roles show that the purchase of sex is a focal point for the operation of divergent interests, intentions, and

objectives, where they as professionals navigate between several subject positions. By navigating between different subject positions, the social workers become part of and interact with these aspects and goals. They thereby play a role in constituting the way Swedish society deals with the purchase of sex as a social problem (c.f. Blumer, 1971; Loseke, 2010).

The actions of social workers in this study involved doing moral work. Thus, they did moral work in relation to the public, but more importantly they did moral work in relation to their clients. This role, wanted or unwanted, was something they needed to handle and relate to when they met their clients. By exercising considerable discretion in combination with personal belief systems and moral rationalizations, they rationalized their actions by morally constructing their clients. The participating social workers navigated the interplay between values, professional practices, and political goals in their encounters with individuals who purchase sex (Hasenfeld, 2000). The participants' substantial discretion means that their work was to some extent based on their own judgements and opinions. This has led to a diversity between the units and among colleagues working in this field in how they understand and interpret their clients' problems and how they design treatments. The participants' stories revealed an ambiguity in which they both strove for increased specialization and evidence-based practice, and for more refined and individualized treatment: on the one hand more central control and alignment, on the other hand more local solutions, autonomy, and room for manoeuvre. The more well-established and the more recently established units were striving in different directions, which may be an expression of differences in knowledge, experience, and professional self-confidence. Due to the established units' experience and specialization, they were in a different claims-making position from that of the newer units (Loseke, 2010). However, this is not about whether or not one is in a claims-making position, but rather about a struggle between different positions and a transformation of these positions. The variations were also due to the way the professionals used their discretion in relation to moral and political opinions regarding the purchase of sex. While some participants had a firm foundation in a therapeutic discourse, and some were grounded in social work, others took their main point of departure in structural understandings based on gender inequality (c.f. Lahav-Raz, 2021; Skilbrei & Holmström, 2013).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The overall aim of this study has been to explore sex buyers' perceptions and experiences of buying sex. The aim has also been to study how the purchase of sex is constructed as a social problem in Swedish social work practice. In this final chapter, I present a general discussion of the research findings and suggest an overall and concluding answer in relation to the study's aim and research questions. I focus on the themes from my research results that I view as the most important and on how the different published papers can be understood in relation to each other. I also present some further elaboration in relation to the aspects and perspectives discussed in the published papers.

The purchase of sex as deviance

The participants' perceptions and experiences of purchasing sex were affected by how they related to the purchase of sex being a criminalized and stigmatized activity. Hence, the starting point of this discussion is the research question focused on how men who buy sex relate to the purchase of sex being a criminalized activity and a stigmatized phenomenon. The purchase of sex as a phenomenon is permeated by both formal social norms (as in laws such as the Swedish Sex Purchase Act) and informal arrangements enforced by informal sanctions (such as shame and stigma) (Becker, 1966). The Sex Purchase Act is a law that can be understood as an inseparable dimension of social relations. It functions alongside other discourses and practices to shape the subjects, spaces, and forms of power in commercial sex. The Sex Purchase Act punishes crime in a direct sense, but it also normalizes the 'outside' of what it regulates (Scoular, 2015).

The study shows that the criminalization of the purchase of sex has had a varying impact on the participants' engagement in commercial sex. While some had adjusted their behaviour as a result of the criminalization, others described not having felt affected by it. Some participants only purchased sex abroad, some avoided specific arenas or sex sellers, and others engaged in extensive risk assessments before buying sex in order to avoid getting caught by the police.

Others had not adjusted their engagement in commercial sex as a result of the criminalization, and some thought that the criminalization made buying sex more exciting. These differences can be understood in relation to law as an important, but diverse, component in understandings of experiences of purchasing sex. On the one hand, criminalization and the fear of sanctions influence individual behaviour when engaging in a criminalized activity. On the other hand, prohibition may produce, perpetuate, or accelerate desires for what the law is intended to regulate, especially in the case of sexual taboos (Taylor, 2019). Thus, the criminalization affected the participants to some extent, but it was primarily other factors that affected their involvement and behaviours when purchasing sex. The purchase of sex as a stigmatized phenomenon was something they all related to.

The purchase of sex is conceptualized as a behaviour defined as ‘wrong’ by Swedish social norms, and it is both attributed meaning and targeted in ways that construct it as deviant behaviour (Kulick, 2005). In the construction of the purchase of sex as deviant, the ‘sex buyer’ is constructed and categorized as a specific *kind*. Men who purchase sex are conceptualized in the media and political debate within this frame in that the ‘sex buyer’ is categorized as a deviant kind (Becker, 1966; Hacking, 1999). In the Swedish context, the understanding of prostitution, as well as the idea of the ‘sex buyer,’ is based on a framing of relations within prostitution as being shaped by patriarchy and unequal gender relations (Erikson, 2011; Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017a; Kulick, 2005). The construction of the ‘sex buyer’ in the Swedish context is heavily influenced by notions of gender and masculinity. The conceptualization of commercial sex as an expression of gender-based inequality incorporates a certain type of masculinity that is presented in the Swedish discourse on buying sex – which can be framed as a ‘toxic’ or ‘destructive’ form of masculinity (Harrington, 2021). Social norms about gender and male oppression, as well as the Swedish political discourse on the purchase of sex, had affected the participants in different ways. Prominent in the participants’ stories was the way normative ideas about gender equality and male oppression affected their attitudes to commercial sex. In being defined as ‘sex buyers’, the participants became representatives of (but distanced themselves from) structural violence, male oppression, and a specific kind of destructive masculinity.

The normative discourse on commercial sex was something that had filtered into the participating men’s perceptions and experiences of purchasing sex. They were aware of the risks associated with being classified as ‘sex buyers’, and they made

different choices and adapted to fit into or get away from the classification that was applied to them (Hacking, 1999). For example, the participants tried to conceptualize their sex purchases in as nice a way as possible. In relation to their attempts to purchase sex in ‘good ways’, and the way they understood what they did as representing ‘good ways’ of purchasing sex, their idea of what ‘good’ was, can be understood as being associated with the dominant political discourse on the purchase of sex in Sweden.

Thus, ways of classifying people interact with the individuals who are classified, since ideas and classifications are formed in social settings. Consequently, people can become aware of how they are classified and modify their behaviour accordingly (Hacking, 1999). How the participating men tried to negotiate their behaviour in relation to (and distance themselves from) the normative (and stigmatized) views on ‘sex buyers’ can be seen as an example of how they acted by making interpretations of a situation in which they found themselves and then adjusting their behaviour to deal with this situation (Blumer, 1971). Thus, norm-breaking behaviours such as purchasing sex can be modified and focused on productive performance, and can be indulged in accordance with current norms. When the participants negotiated and distanced themselves from the ‘wrong’ kind of sex buyer, this can be understood as a modification of their behaviour and an interpretation of their experiences in relation to the stigmatized view of a ‘sex buyer’ (Hacking, 1999; Scoular, 2015).

Since the Swedish discourse on the purchase of sex is filled with notions about gender relations, the way the participants distanced themselves from the Swedish discourse on buying sex can also be understood as a means of navigating in relation to different ideas about gender and masculinity. Consequently, when some participants challenged being labelled as ‘sex buyers’, this can be understood as involving a challenge against a certain type of masculinity and gender performance (Harrington, 2021; Kulick, 2005). One example of this is the way some participants distanced themselves from other sex buyers, who wrote about women who sell sex in a degrading and misogynist way on different forums, which they emphasized that they would never do. Another example is the way some participants stressed that they were feminists and in favour of gender equality, unlike other men who purchase sex and who objectify women.

Since deviance is constructed in interaction, individuals are given a space for negotiation in relation to social norms (Becker, 1966; Hacking, 1999). The modification of behaviours can be seen as a relational process, and the

participants resisted and distanced themselves from the view of themselves as oppressors or exploiters. How the participating men tried to conceptualize their sex purchases in as nice a way as possible can be understood as moral work, with the men who purchased sex doing moral boundary work to obtain moral worth within a highly stigmatizing context (Lahav-Raz et al., 2023).

The strategies and practices used by the participants to distance themselves from stigma and deviance can also be understood in terms of governmentality (Scoular, 2015). Governmental strategies and disciplinary penalties function in ways that govern the participants via normalization and disciplinary power (Foucault, 1978; Scoular, 2015). The governmentalization of men who purchased sex affected both their behaviour and practices and their understanding of their actions and of themselves. As the findings show, the concerns and deterrents that operate in relation to the purchase of sex are primarily associated with social factors (Sanders et al., 2020; Williams & Hawkins, 1986), and stigmatization and shame are powerful tools (emotions) in relation to disciplinary power. Disciplinary power worked through the men's lives as it structured their fields of action (Foucault, 1978). It worked through specific embodied, spatial, and communicative practices (Hayes et al., 2020) as it affected their behaviours when purchasing sex. However, the participants' behaviours when purchasing sex and their self-presentations in the interviews also expressed a resistance to being disciplined in line with the 'Swedish model'. They continued to purchase sex and were in this sense resisting (or negotiating) the governance and discipline, but at the same time they felt shame and tried to make their sex purchases feel less objectionable. In being governed through responsabilization, they did not stop purchasing sex, but they purchased sex in ways that they perceived to be 'less bad' (Scoular & O'Neill, 2007).

In relation to the construction of the 'sex buyer' as deviant, men's perceptions and experiences of purchasing sex are affected by different power relations. This study is based on an understanding of power as relational, and power is understood as being exercised through a variety of different social practices and relationships (Foucault, 1978). Thus, power is expressed through complex and overlapping (and often contradictory) mechanisms, which produce domination and oppositions, subordination and resistances, regulation and agency (Foucault, 1978; Weeks, 2017). This is visible in the complexity found in the participants' stories, in which they appeared disciplined and normalized in relation to governmental strategies regarding the purchase of sex.

Being constructed and classified as a deviant *kind* and as outsiders by social norms and claims-makers produces an inherently unequal power relation involving disciplining, governance, and regulation. The individual who is constructed as deviant is positioned as subordinate in relation to the normative discourse. From this subject position, the interviewed sex buyers can be understood as being in a deviant (suppressed) position in which their stories included examples of compliance, resistance, and opposition. At the same time, the men were engaged in activities that are permeated by unequal relations based on gender, class, and race. Men who purchase sex in general, including the men who participated in this study, can be seen as a privileged group who occupy a normative position with regard to power relations involving gender, race, and class. As white and (mostly) middle-class men, they can be understood as representatives of a privileged norm in society, which affects the power dynamics in their lives both in general and in relation to women who sell sex. This places them in a dominant position, with more space for agency than the woman who sell sex. They are positioned as part of the norm in a heteronormative society, while at the same time being positioned as deviant in relation to this norm by being classified as sex buyers. These different subject positions are intertwined in a complex way, which affects how the participants perceive, understand, and relate to the purchase of sex. One example of this is found in their different perceptions of the risks associated with the relationship between the sex buyer and the sex seller. On the one hand, the participants expressed a fear of being exposed to robbery, blackmail, or exposure when purchasing sex, which made them careful, worried, and meticulous in their contacts with sex sellers. On the other hand, an extensive amount of previous research has shown that those who are at greatest risk of being exposed as a result of violence or abuse are sex sellers (Deering et al., 2014).

Shame is an important aspect of understanding the participants' moral and navigational work in relation to the 'sex buyer' as deviant. From a social constructionist perspective, it is not the act itself that creates shame; the shame is constructed when the meaning or understanding of the act of purchasing sex is reformulated and reflected against the condemnations of the outside world (Becker, 1966; Scheff, 2000). The participants organized their actions and behaviour in relation to shame and stigma. Moreover, the shame and stigma associated with the purchase of sex affected the meanings they attributed to their involvement in commercial sex. Shame and stigma are visible in this study in the way the participants were afraid of being stigmatized and labelled as sex buyers.

Most of the participants kept the fact that they purchased sex secret due to the fear of being exposed as sex buyers and as individuals who engaged in a stigmatized and illegal activity. The shame associated with purchasing sex silenced the participants and made them careful in the way they handled and talked about their experiences (Hammond, 2015). One example of this is the way the participants worked consciously on their self-presentation when presenting their stories to me during the interviews. During the interviews, they were preoccupied with not being classified and stigmatized as ‘sex buyers’, and some of them continually asked if I judged them, if I found them disgusting, or if I disliked them because they bought sex.

The way the participants navigated between their individual pleasure on the one hand, and the shame and reluctance of being seen as exploiters and perpetrators on the other, can be understood as an internalization of the Swedish social norms regarding the purchase of sex. The participants had to some extent internalized the normative approach to the purchase of sex found in Sweden, where commercial sex is understood as an expression of structural gender inequality but the buyer is held responsible for his actions at the individual level (Monto & Milrod, 2020; Scoular, 2015). Thus, the self-presentations performed by the participants were constructed in part in relation to their own self-image, but also in the form of an interactive process in which their self-image and understanding of themselves and their actions were constructed in social interaction with other people.

The participants’ understanding of their experiences involved a mixture of how they perceived their social environment would look at what they do and the law and its ideological significance (Becker, 1966). They were constantly negotiating and navigating in relation to this self-view, which can be understood as an internalization of the view of themselves as oppressors. The way the participants related to the purchase of sex being a criminalized and stigmatized phenomenon can be understood in relation to how they made sense of their experiences. And also, in relation to how they interacted with women who sell sex and what meanings they ascribed their experiences of purchasing sex. These aspects will be discussed in the next section.

Making sense of purchasing sex

Two of this study’s research questions focus on how men who purchase sex make sense of their experiences in the Swedish context, and what the perceived

meanings of the purchase of sex are for individuals who buy sex. These research questions were elaborated and discussed in two different articles in relation to factors such as sexuality, intimacy, and close relationships. When the participants tried to make sense of their experiences, they navigated between their individual experiences, the social interaction with sex sellers, and social norms regarding gender, sexuality, and commercial sex. The participants' understandings of their own actions were reflected against normative ideas about gender equality and male oppression. This affected their attitudes to commercial sex and their understanding of their own involvement in commercial sex.

The participants did not want to be seen as men who oppress women, and they developed different relational strategies to make the paid sexual encounter feel safer and more morally justified, both for themselves and for the sex seller. Stigmatizing views about men who purchase sex affected the participants' interactions with women who sell sex and their understanding of their involvement in commercial sex. They attempted to navigate between their own individualistic sexual desire and pleasure, perceived social norms regarding intimate relationships, and Swedish social norms regarding the purchase of sex. Thus, the participants' actions and the way they constructed their understanding and the meaning of their actions and relationships needs to be understood in relation to different social norms. Social norms regarding sexuality and gender are intertwined with ideas specific to the commercial aspects of paid sexual encounters. The combination of sex and money, or intimacy and money, has been stigmatized and viewed as deviant in many societies for a long time (Kulick, 2005; Rubin, 1998). Social norms and ideas and performances of gender and sexuality in general, as well as social norms regarding the combination of sex, intimacy, and money, all play a role in the social and sexual interactions of commercial sex (e.g. Lim & Cheah, 2020; Rubin, 1998). When the participants purchased sex, both as one-time visitors and as regulars, their perceptions of their experiences were reflected against social norms about desirable ways of doing intimacy and love, as well as expected ways of doing gender and sexuality.

However, individual experiences and relational practices also affected how the participants made sense of and ascribed meaning to their experiences. The way the participants made sense of their experiences of purchasing sex, and the way they perceived the meanings of purchasing sex differed depending on whether they purchased sex as one-time visitors or as regulars. When purchasing sex as one-time visitors, factors such as sexuality, excitement, and the thrill were important for the men's engagement in commercial sex. In the first article, I

analysed how the participants balanced between excitement and trust to make the purchase of sex exciting but not dangerous, trusting but not boring. The men who purchased sex as one-time visitors navigated between sexual pleasure, excitement, risk, intimacy, and safety. This balance was struck in relation to their own motives, desires, and pleasures, and in relation to the seller and how they perceived her response. But they also navigated in relation to social norms and ideals regarding sexuality and commercial sex.

Trust can be understood as an important aspect of the meaning of a social relation between two individuals when money is involved. The concept *trust work* is a theorization based on the theoretical concepts emotional labour and connective labour (Hochschild, 2012b; Pugh, 2022), and I have used the concept of trust work to understand the relational work that the study participants in the study did in relation to the women from whom they purchased sex. Trust work was used as a tool to analyse the practices and strategies the men used to handle the complex navigation between individual experiences, relational practices, and social norms.

The trust work done by the participants in this study was done in social interaction and presupposes their involvement with and alternating exchanges between themselves and the sex sellers. The men presented themselves to the sellers as trusting individuals and modified and developed this presentation depending on the sellers' response. This involved their actions before a meeting and how they built trust prior to meeting a specific sex seller, but also during the actual encounter. In the first article, I discussed how the men navigated between feeling authentic and genuine in the moment while at the same time being in control and deciding what was performed. This can be understood as both being the body and at the same time being in control of that body (Bauman, 1998). This aspect of trust work between sex sellers and sex buyers involves the participating men's desires to experience authenticity and pleasure, while simultaneously controlling the interaction. In this sense they were consumer subjects, even if they engaged in trust work to make the provider-consumer interaction more trusting (Prior & Peled, 2021; Sanders, 2008a). In this sense, the trust created in the relationship also made the sexual encounter more pleasurable and satisfying for the sex buyer, since it made it feel more authentic and genuine.

Trust work and emotional and connective labour are useful concepts in understanding commercial relationships in relation to the expectations of sex buyers (and sex sellers) with regard to gender, power, and masculinity. The conceptualization of the participants' actions in the social interaction with sex

sellers as trust work does not mean that this is understood as connective labour in the sense of an equal investment from sex sellers and sex buyers. Rather, the study showed that the participants did emotional investments and trust work as a way of making the relationship with sex sellers *more* trusting and reliable. This presupposes an understanding of the social relationship as not being trusting, and of themselves as the agents who had the responsibility to convey trust and reliability. So, trust work does not make the interaction between sex sellers and sex buyers equal or free of unequal power dynamics but can rather be understood as a strategy used by the participants to try to even out these power imbalances and uncertainties (Sanders, 2008a).

The roles and power dynamics found in the commercial relationship between sex seller and sex buyer differ from those found between doctor and patient or therapist and client. When analysing these interaction on the basis of the concepts of trust work and connective labour, the sex buyer's role in the interaction with sex sellers is on the one hand the role of a client. But on the other hand, aspects of gender, class, and race twist the power relations around, making the power relations in the interaction multifaceted, such that the sex buyers can be understood as both assuming the somewhat subservient role of a client, while simultaneously adopting the dominant role of a white, male sex buyer. This mechanism can be seen as being vital to the trust work done by the men who participated in the study and to the way they navigate different subject positions and power dynamics in their interactions with sex sellers. Thus, the trust work done by the participating men can be seen as a part of the way their subject positions become intertwined with, and thereby a part of, the transaction in commercial sex (Carbonero & Gómez Garrido, 2018).

Sexuality is of importance for understanding the meanings of purchasing sex, and sex was an important aspect of why the participating men purchased sex, especially when they purchased sex as one-time visitors. Sex was one of the main motives for the men's engagement in commercial sex when they purchased sex as one-time visitors. Sexuality is socially constructed in interaction and is affected by social norms, and sex has a place in a social framework that is full of restrictions and qualifications (Anderson, 2002; Sanders, 2008a). Thus, heteronormative ideas about both masculinity and femininity can filter into and shape the meanings that men construct around paying for sex (Huysamen, 2022). Norms about sexuality and gender can be seen as affecting both their individual motives and experiences, but also the interaction with sex sellers. Trust work can be understood as a practice that enabled the men to accommodate relational

interactions and norms about gender and sexuality when purchasing sex. By doing trust work, they balanced between their sexual desires and pleasures, the interaction with sex sellers, and traditional sexual norms regarding the relationship between sex, intimacy, and love. By doing trust work they were also able to navigate between sexual norms about masculinity and male virility and norms about sexual relationships that are supposed to be trusting, mutual, and genuine. The meanings they attributed to their own involvement in commercial sex were affected by norms about what the ideal sexual relationship is supposed to look like, both in long-term relationships and in the specific sexual encounter. For the men who primarily bought sex as one-time visitors because of a desire for sex and thrills, norms about male sexuality may be seen as being more prominent in their constructions of meaning. An example of this is found in the men's focus on the sexual acts performed and on sexual satisfaction, and on what a sexual encounter or sexual activity was supposed to look like.

The trust work done in paid sexual relationships involves several aspects, which have been discussed in this study. The understanding of trust work as being socially constructed in interaction with others can also be conceptualized by understanding individual actions (and interactions) in relation to social settings and social norms. Thus, the participants' trust work in relation to the sex sellers was affected by social norms about the purchase of sex, and can be understood as a means of handling and navigating social norms about the purchase of sex and about sex buyers. Social norms are created, reproduced, and challenged in social interaction and the participants acted with an eye to the responses of others involved in a given action. They took into account the way others would evaluate what they were doing, and how this evaluation would affect their social position (Becker, 1966). For example, the way the participants tried to present themselves and to act as trusting and kind sex buyers may be viewed as an example of the way that their practices when purchasing sex were affected by normative views about sex buyers as deviant. Thus, the participants can be seen as interacting with the categorization of themselves as deviant, and they conceptualized their experiences in relation to the construction of the purchase of sex as deviance, and the sex purchaser as a deviant *kind* (Hacking, 1999). However, by distancing themselves from deviance and conceptualizing their experiences as something other than deviant or oppressive, it was possible for them to conceptualize their experiences as pleasurable. Trust was also important in relation to exposure, shame, and stigma, which were present in different kinds of relationships among the participating men. Trust can be seen as vital to handling both the risk of

exposure and feelings of shame, guilt, and stigma in relation to sex sellers, social workers, and myself as the interviewer.

When the participants purchased sex as regulars, the focus was directed at other motives, experiences, and meanings. When purchasing sex as regulars, it was instead aspects such as intimacy, closeness, and authenticity that were prominent in relation to the men's engagement in commercial sex. The participants' stories about longing for love or trying to escape feelings of loneliness were about something other than purchasing sex for excitement or thrills. Instead these stories were about the emotional experience associated with being close to a woman sexually or physically, not the sex per se.

These reasons for purchasing sex cannot fully be understood via concepts such as bounded authenticity or trust work, since they extend beyond what is covered by these concepts. Another significant aspect of the meanings linked to purchasing sex with a focus on the emotional experience itself can be understood in terms of the *emodities* concept (Illouz, 2018). When the meanings of purchasing sex are emotional, the participants can be understood as emotional subjects more than consumer subjects. This shift in positional subjectivity affected the emotional labour done in the paid sexual relationship. Being consumers, but at the same time doing emotional labour (connective labour), changed the script of the paid sexual encounter. For the men who primarily bought sex as regulars and had long-term relationships with one woman, norms about love, intimacy, and heterosexual relationships can be seen as being more prominent in their constructions of meaning. The authenticity in the paid sexual relationship could become unbounded and could spread into private spheres of the participants' lives, making these relationships more similar to non-purchased friendships or love relationships. However, this involved an ambiguously unbounded authenticity since the remuneration was both a prerequisite and created a clear frame for the relationship. The involvement of payment challenged the men's feelings of intimacy and exclusivity, which the participants tried to handle by making the commercial aspect of the relationship invisible.

One example of how the participants tried to downplay the commercial aspects of the relationship to make it feel more authentic and intimate was by using hidden currencies. By paying with a monthly allowance or with gifts instead of direct money payment at an encounter, the practices associated with these relationships imitated traditional courtship rituals in heterosexual relationships more than the rituals used when paying for sex. This can be understood as a

strategy used to maintain feelings of intimacy, closeness, and exclusivity in the commercial sexual relationship. But it can also be understood in relation to norms that regard money and intimacy as incompatible, and that view activities and behaviour involving a combination of money, sex, and intimacy as deviant (Rubin, 1998).

Another example was how the men's perceptions of authenticity and intimacy were linked to feeling special and to feelings of exclusivity in relation to the sex seller. This can be understood in relation to norms both about the combination of intimacy and money, and about sex and intimacy as supposedly being linked to exclusivity and monogamy (Rubin, 1998). For example, noncash or 'gift exchange' payments may blur the boundaries between paid and nonpaid relationships, which might require additional emotional labour on the part of the sex seller (Bernstein, 2007; Jones & Hannem, 2018) and may also create anxiety and confusion for the sex buyer. One example of this was found in the participant who on the one hand provided for the woman he bought sex from by paying a monthly allowance, making her financially dependent on him, but on the other hand felt trapped in the relationship since he felt he could not end it as a result of this financial arrangement and the responsibility in entailed.

In addition, the blurring of payment in relation to feelings of exclusivity could make the boundaries for the paid sexual relationship unclear. As I discuss in the second article, it became an unbounded form of authenticity in which aspects, mechanisms, and power dynamics from the paid sexual encounter spread to other parts of the participants' lives (Bernstein, 2007; Sanders, 2008a). Heteronormative ideas about gender performances became intertwined with the role expectations of the paid sexual relationship. In other words, heteronormative ideals about masculinity and gender in general were intertwined with the specific heteronormative ideals of commercial sex. Thus, the different meanings associated with the purchase of sex are not clear cut, but interwoven on different levels, which makes them complex and involves different aspects at the interactional and structural levels.

The participants' social construction of meanings were related to the way they made sense of their experiences. The meanings that buying sex had for the participants can be understood in relation to their experiences and how they ascribed meaning to these experiences. The participants constructed an understanding of what they did in relation to their own experiences and needs, and also in relation to notions of who sellers are. The men's perceived meanings

were intertwined with the way they made sense of their experiences. The way the participants navigated between the normative discourse on commercial sex and their individual and relational experiences can be understood in relation to the perceived meanings that purchasing sex had for the participants and how they made sense of these experiences. The men tried to understand their actions based on their own experiences, via the interaction with sex sellers, and by viewing them from the perspective of their social surroundings and reflecting on them in relation to social norms (c.f. Becker, 1966; Hacking, 1999). In other words, meanings were constructed both individually by the participants, in interaction with the sex seller, and in relation to how the men made sense of their behaviour in relation to the Swedish context.

The purchase of sex as a social problem

The second part of the study's aim has been to explore how the purchase of sex is constructed as a social problem in Swedish social work practice. The fourth research question involved exploring how social work initiatives target the purchase of sex and how social workers understand the purchase of sex as a social problem. This research question relates to the second sub-study, in which I conducted interviews with social workers who meet individuals who buy sex for counselling. The results from this sub-study are presented in the fourth published paper, which discusses how social workers engaged in counselling work with individuals who purchase sex navigate between repression and social support. It also explores how social workers approach the purchase of sex in relation to values, professional practices, and political goals, and how they navigate these aspects in their encounters with individuals who purchase sex. Thus, this sub-study focuses on the same phenomenon as the study focused on men who purchase sex but from another subject position, and there are similarities in the way individual, relational, and normative aspects are intertwined in the perceptions and experiences of commercial sex.

From a social constructionist perspective, prostitution is conceptualized as a social problem when it is defined, named, and given meaning as such. Consequently, men who purchase sex are constructed as perpetrators first when they are classified as such. The construction of social problems consists of claims directed at different explanations and solutions for social problems and both the phenomenon and the people involved are categorized as social problems by claims-making processes (Loseke, 2010). Prostitution can be understood as being

conceptualized as a social problem in the Swedish context. But since it is explained as being caused by gender inequality, it is (and has long been) primarily the women who sell sex who are constructed as the individuals in need of social work support (de Cabo Y Moreda et al., 2021b; Hulusjö, 2013; SOU 2010:49). Men who purchase sex are primarily conceptualized as representatives of structural gender inequalities and ought to be held responsible for their actions by means of punishment or treatment.

The Swedish government has a clear focus on the use of repressive measures to target the purchase of sex. However, there is a field of social work practice that works with individuals who purchase sex within the publicly funded social services. This practice is individual-focused and consists of voluntary (and mostly cost-free) counselling and therapy. Thus, social work practice with sex buyers becomes an interesting focal point for the operation of divergent and conflicting interests, intentions, and objectives regarding how the Swedish welfare state handles the purchase of sex (Blumer, 1971). The way the social workers navigated in relation to discretion, governance, professional values, and the political landscape, can be understood in relation to different conceptualizations of the purchase of sex. The participating social workers tried to navigate the role of social work in relation to social policy and political ambitions regarding the purchase of sex in Sweden, but also in relation to how they understand their assignment, their own moral values, and their professional values as social workers. This was visible in the way they framed their clients as being in need of support and counselling and in the way they distanced themselves from political discussions about the purchase of sex. In this sense, they may be viewed as individual-focused diplomats. It was also visible in the way they became professional experts who specialize in this field. These aspects can be seen as (conscious or unconscious) strategies to construct the purchase of sex as a social problem that ought to be targeted using social measures.

However, when conceptualizing their clients as being in need of social work support, they primarily conceptualized their problems and needs in individual, psychological, or addiction-related terms. In the fourth article, I discuss how this can be understood as a form of navigation among different discourses regarding the purchase of sex. Social work with sex buyers in Sweden can be understood as operating in the context of two competing discourses: a normative discourse that depicts the purchase of sex as morally reprehensible, with a focus on repressive measures and harsher punishments, and a medicalization discourse, which depicts the purchase of sex as a form of addiction or psychological problem (Lahav-Raz,

2021). This can be understood in relation to the discussion about deviance in the previous sections. Since the purchase of sex is conceptualized as a form of oppression in the Swedish context, men who purchase sex are thereby framed as perpetrators rather than as individuals in need of support. Thus, the construction of the purchase of sex as a social problem involves a claims-making process focused on constructing the clients as 'worthy' (Hasenfeld, 2000; Loseke, 2010). One example of this is found in the way social workers in the study conceptualized their clients in terms of an addiction discourse. By doing this they decrease their responsibility and attribute the men a subject position that involves vulnerability (Lahav-Raz, 2021). This can be understood as a form of moral work whereby the social workers morally construct their clients and thereby make them worthy clients for social work practice (Hasenfeld, 2000). It can also be understood as an example of the way constructions of the purchase of sex as deviance and 'sex buyers' as deviants are also present in social work practice. By morally constructing their clients as 'worthy' clients, the social workers differentiate them from the stigmatized view of 'sex buyers' in Sweden. This separation or distancing from the stigmatized view of the 'sex buyer' is not so different from the way the participating men tried to conceptualize themselves as 'good' sex buyers in relation to the stigmatized view of a 'sex buyer'.

Another aspect of constructing sex buyers as worthy clients involves the way that suggested solutions to a social problem need to be understood in relation to the cultural setting in a society and the way a social problem is constructed. If the understandings of social problems in a given society are characterized by individualism, and by constructions focused on individual responsibility, this leads to a tendency to construct diagnostic frames that hold individuals responsible for causing social problems. It follows that resolutions require changing people (Loseke, 2010). As was discussed in the findings presented in the fourth article, two quite different solutions to the sex-purchase problem have been presented in Sweden in recent decades: repressive measures and punishment or individual counselling and therapy for sex buyers, both of which have the aim of changing the individual's behaviour. From a social constructionist perspective, changing people through therapy can be seen as involving the application of a conceptual machinery to ensure that actual or potential deviants stay within the institutionalized definitions of reality. The specific institutional arrangements involved can be seen as a form of social control. Since therapy must concern itself with deviation from 'official' definitions of reality, it must develop a conceptual machinery to account for such deviations and to maintain the realities that are

being challenged. Such a conceptual machinery may be internalized by the individual afflicted with the deviant condition, and this internalization will in itself have a therapeutic effect (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

The work of the social workers examined in this study can be understood as a form of administration of life, since their therapeutic work revolves around getting the clients to know themselves and to thereby control and correct their unwanted behaviour (c.f. Becker, 1966; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This was evident in the way the social workers conducted individual therapy and counselling in a way that was both supportive and corrective in relation to normative views on the purchase of sex. In this way, they become a part of the governance of sex buyers. Changing behaviours through therapy or counselling can be understood as a means of disciplining and governing unwanted behaviours via normalization and responsabilization. The therapeutic work conducted with sex buyers can be understood as a form of pastoral power, by means of which the individual is normalized (to stop buying sex) via specific embodied, spatial, and communicative practices. Thus, the counselling conducted with sex buyers can be understood as one aspect of the disciplinary power used in relation to commercial sex (Foucault, 1978; Hayes et al., 2020; Olsson, 2021).

However, the professionals used their discretion in relation to moral and political opinions regarding the purchase of sex, which led to variations among them. Some of the social workers used their discretion to resist the repressive approach to sex buyers in Sweden. This variation emerged from the way they related their understanding of the purchase of sex as a social problem to what they encountered in their meetings with clients. One example involves the way they interpreted their role in relation to the law and its ideological significance, with some of the social workers expressing little confidence in either legislation or punishment as a means of stopping people from purchasing sex. The social workers' negative opinions on law and punishment can be seen as a way of resisting the administration of life, and instead focusing on relational aspects. The social workers tried to create a therapeutic alliance in order to build a trusting context and relationship with their clients. This represents a challenge to the repressive approach in Sweden, since social workers are public officials in governmental organizations. Consequently, even if they do focus on social work, individual therapy, and the relationship with the client, they are at the same time representatives of the 'Swedish model', which condemns the purchase of sex. Due to their position as public officials in the publicly funded social services, they become moral bearers of the Swedish political discourse on commercial sex.

In other words, it is difficult for the social workers to completely distance themselves from the aspects of social control that are related to this role (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Foucault, 1978).

However, the social work practice described in relation to sex buyers was not homogenous but involved divergent and conflicting interpretations of the commercial sex phenomenon. There was a diversity among both the units and the social workers in the way they understood and interpreted the clients' problems and also in the design of the treatment provided. Because of their discretion and room for maneuver, their work was diverse and was partly based on their own judgments and opinions. As I discuss in the fourth article, there was a struggle between the KAST units regarding their claims-making positions and how the purchase of sex should be understood and targeted. They differed in terms of whether they conceptualized the purchase of sex as a structural problem that should be met using repressive measures or as an individual problem that should be met using therapeutic measures. The established units can be understood as having a greater claims-making role than the newly established units as a result of their experience and expertise in the field. The established units had a conceptualization of the phenomenon that differed more from the dominant political understanding of the purchase of sex in Sweden than the newer units. The newer units lacked the expertise and experience of the established units, which in a sense made them lesser claims-makers in the field. However, their conceptualizations of the purchase of sex were more in line with the repressive Swedish discourse, depicting it as gender-based violence, which positioned them closer to the normative view of men who purchase sex.

At the same time, none of the social work units were prominent claims-makers in the general debate on the purchase of sex. For example, no professional social work unit working with men who purchase sex (KAST or Evonhuset) was invited to participate as a consultative body in the legislative process focused on sharpening the penalties for purchasing sex. Instead, several non-governmental organizations that advocate harsher penalties for sex buyers were invited to participate (Ju2021/02201). Although KAST units have been operating for at least two decades, they are not claims-makers in the debate. Instead, the political discourse on the issue of how to combat the purchase of sex is driven by the police and NGOs with ideological views on this issue³⁴ (Florin, 2012). This can be understood in relation to the strong alignment between the state and feminist

³⁴ This development is similar to developments noted in other countries, see Weitzer (2007).

organizations in Sweden, which has led to a gradual inclusion of feminist principles into the state agenda. ‘Swedish feminism’ has turned to, had an impacted on, and been moulded by its relationship with the state, and can therefore be seen as a ‘state feminism’ (FitzGerald & Skilbrei, 2022). The social workers’ understanding of the purchase of sex as a social problem to be targeted within their profession as social workers constitutes an understanding and approach to the purchase of sex that is becoming increasingly further removed from political ambitions and other claims-makers in the field. The social workers’ claims stand in contrast to the normative discourse in Sweden, which claims that purchasing sex is a form of violence and oppression that ought to be punished with increasing severity.

Implications for social work practice

This study has contributed to increased knowledge and an improved understanding of men’s perceptions and experiences of purchasing sex, which have implications for social work practice. By understanding men’s perceptions, experiences, and comprehensions of purchasing sex, it becomes possible to develop and design societal interventions and social work practices that are understandable, appropriate, and helpful. This study has shown that social consequences, such as shame and stigma, are vital factors in relation to both men’s behaviour when they purchase sex and how they handle their experiences. In relation to this, the research interview became interventional for some participants; for some participants it led to reflection, and some decided to stop purchasing sex. Being able to talk about their experiences in an anonymous and non-judgemental context may thus be viewed as important. These are factors that the social workers at KAST units are aware of and incorporate into their practice.

KAST units have been found to be helpful to clients, and evaluations of their work are good overall (Isaksson et al., 2021; Kjellgren & Svedin, 2012). However, KAST units offer a specific type of social intervention: therapy or counselling. Consequently, the therapeutic work conducted at KAST units reaches a limited group of sex buyers, namely those who feel bad or are experiencing severe problems and who see therapy as a solution to these problems. It is important to reflect on how a wider group of sex buyers might be reached, and how they might be reached earlier. How can social work practice provide support to those who do not want or need therapy or counselling, and how can it operate with as low a threshold as possible? Additionally, how can

social work practice conduct preventive work? The KAST units in Stockholm and Malmö have previously conducted outreach work targeting sex buyers, and the development of social work practice targeting sex buyers might include extending social work measures to include more than counselling and therapy. This might involve preventative and outreach work in arenas frequented by presumptive sex buyers, and also providing increased accessibility to social support for sex buyers in all parts of Sweden.

In future discussions about social work practice with sex buyers it is important to reflect on conceptualizations of the phenomenon. What are the consequences when the purchase of sex is conceptualized as an aspect of gender-based violence, and what problems might be excluded as a result. How might social work practice reach a more diverse group of clients by means of a wider understanding of the phenomenon? It is also important to reflect on what type of consequences collaborations among different professions might produce. The outreach work conducted at present primarily targets sex sellers and/or is conducted in close collaboration with the police (by means such as social workers participating in police raids). Close collaboration between the police and social workers has been highlighted as a successful means of prosecuting sex buyers and of reaching sex sellers who are involved in commercial sex (Brottsförebyggande rådet, 2022). Sometimes this collaboration leads to sex buyers being put in contact with KAST units, but the effectiveness of this form of collaboration for social work practice needs to be evaluated. What are the risks of close collaboration with the police for social work practice with sex buyers, and what is the overall effectiveness of this approach for reaching sex buyers? How might factors such as shame and stigma affect or aggravate the possibilities of providing social work support for men who purchase sex?

The social workers' dual role in providing support and therapy while simultaneously being representatives of a repressive approach to the behaviour itself has implications for social work practice in general. The need for social workers to navigate between support and repression, in combination with their discretion and room for manoeuvre, places them in a delicate position in relation to clients and other actors and claims-makers in the field of commercial sex. This position necessitates a great deal of professional confidence, knowledge, and experience, and also a moral compass, which in turn necessitates specific training and support both from social work training programs and the organizations in which they work. This dual role and the navigation required are not unique to social workers who work with sex buyers, and there are implications that merit

further discussion in relation to other fields of social work practice targeting behaviours or activities that are criminalized or where a balance must be struck between social support and repression.

POPULÄRVETENSKAPLIG SAMMANFATTNING

Denna avhandling undersöker mäns erfarenheter och förståelser av att köpa sex och hur sexköp konstrueras som ett socialt problem. Sex mot ersättning och sexköp har förståtts som ett socialt problem i Sverige under lång tid. Det har dock skiftat vilka orsaker och förklaringsmodeller som har varit i fokus. I Sverige idag så är sexköp tydligt inramat i en förklaringsmodell som förstår det som ett uttryck för ett icke jämställt samhälle och som en del av mäns strukturella förtryck av kvinnor. Sexköp är ett politiskt laddat ämne där sociala normer, värderingar och moral kan vara starka, men som också kan skifta över tid och mellan kontexter. Denna studie syftar till att undersöka hur män som har erfarenhet av att köpa sex förstår och tolkar sina erfarenheter i en kontext som så tydligt ramar in det som en form av förtryck. Studien syftar också till att undersöka hur sexköp förstås som ett socialt problem i det sociala arbetets praktik.

Studien består av två delstudier. I den första delstudien utgörs empirin av intervjuer med trettio män som har erfarenheter av att köpa sex. Den andra delstudien innefattar empiri från tio intervjuer med socialarbetare som arbetar med samtal eller terapi med personer som köper sex. Intervjuerna från de båda studierna har kodats, tematiserats och analyserats. Resultaten från dessa två delstudier presenteras i fyra vetenskapliga artiklar som har publicerats i fyra olika internationella vetenskapliga tidskrifter. I analyserna används socialkonstruktionistisk teori och teoretiska begrepp så som avvikelse, stigma, emotionellt arbete och emodities för att analysera det empiriska materialet.

Den första artikeln fokuserar på hur män som köper sex vid enstaka tillfällen hos olika kvinnor navigerar mellan kommersialisering och intimitet i en svensk kontext. Fokus är specifikt på vilken mening intimitet har i kommersiella relationer och vilka relationella praktiker och strategier som män som köper sex för spänningens skull har. I artikeln utforskas betydelsen av autenticitet, intimitet och tillit för män som köper sex i en svensk kontext med en politisk förståelse av fenomenet som ett uttryck för mäns våld mot kvinnor. Sex och spänning var viktiga aspekter för varför männen köpte sex. Det fanns en spänning i att sexköp

anses vara tabu och förbjudet, men samtidigt så fanns det en rädsla för att åka fast, utnyttja någon eller hamna i farliga situationer. Även om sexköpen var drivna av sexuell lust och åtrå så hade männen en önskan om att ha kontroll över situationen och att drivas av rationellt och logiskt tänkande. Blev sexköpen för riskfyllda så ansågs de vara farliga, men blev de för intima och trygga så upplevdes de som tråkiga. Männen balanserade mellan spänning och trygghet i relation till sina egna upplevelser och moraliska värderingar, i relation till säljarna och i relation till normer kring sexköp i Sverige. För att hantera detta så gjorde männen tillitsarbete i relation till säljarna, vilket gjorde det möjligt för dem att navigera mellan spänning, risk, trygghet och intimitet i förhållande till olika normer om kön, intima relationer och sex mot ersättning.

Tjugotre av de intervjuade männen hade erfarenhet av ett köpa sex av en och samma kvinna regelbundet. Dessa erfarenheter var i fokus i den andra artikeln, i vilket det utforskas hur intimitet konstrueras och vilken mening ersättningen har i långvariga kommersiella relationer. Männen som köpte sex regelbundet av en och samma kvinna uttryckte att detta gjorde sexköpen mer trygga och att det gav en mer autentisk och intim upplevelse. Att köpa sex på detta sätt var ett sätt att hantera en längtan efter intimitet, närhet och kärlek, eller att undvika känslor av ensamhet. Därmed var det den emotionella upplevelsen som var i fokus när männen köpte sex, inte själva sexet. Samtidigt var ersättningen ett hinder som satte ramarna för hur autentisk och äkta relationen eller känslorna upplevdes. Detta hanterade männen genom att försöka känna sig speciella eller exklusiva för sex säljaren eller genom att använda sig av "dolda valutor" (som gåvor eller regelbundet underhåll) som minskade den kommersiella känslan i relationen. I den här typen av sexköp så blev gränserna mellan betalda sexuella träffar och ickekommersiella heterosexuella relationer otydliga. Dolda valutor både minskade de kommersiella aspekterna i relationen och gjorde förväntningarna, skyldigheterna och gränserna för relationen otydliga. Upplevelserna av intimitet och tillit, likväl som förväntningarna och skyldigheterna i den betalda relationen spred sig till andra delar av deltagarnas liv, och kan på så sätt ses som en tveetydigt gränslös form av äkthet.

Sexköp är både kriminaliserat och stigmatiserat i Sverige och riskerna associerat med detta var något alla deltagare som köpte sex förhöll sig till. Detta är i fokus i den tredje artikeln, som fokuserar på hur deltagarna förstod och tolkade risk i relation till erfarenheter av brott, exploatering och stigma. Denna artikel är baserad på trettio intervjuer med män med erfarenheter av att köpa sex (en intervju tillkom efter att den första artikeln blivit publicerad). Deltagarna förhöll

sig till risk på olika sätt, där en typ av riskkalkylering handlade om att undvika att bli utsatt för brott. Risk var också aktuellt i förhållande till föreställningar om säljarnas utsatthet och misstänkt exploatering och organiserad brottslighet. Deltagarna undvek att träffa utländska, unga eller påverkade säljare då de uppfattade dem som mer utsatta och att det var större risk för att de var tvingade att sälja sex. Deltagarna undvek säljare som de misstänkte var sårbara eller exploaterade av flera anledningar. Dels handlade det om att undvika brott, dels om att sexköpen upplevdes som mer njutningsfulla och genuina om de var frivilliga, och dels att de ville ta avstånd från en form av sexköp som var förknippad med exploatering och utnyttjande. Deltagarna var måna om att inte framställas som personer som utnyttjade någon annan och de distanserade sig från den stigmatiserande bilden av sexköp genom att framställa sig själva som bra och snälla sexköpare. Riskerna med sexköp kunde också vara förknippade med att det var kriminaliserat och stigmatiserat att köpa sex och deltagarna förhöll sig till detta genom att vara försiktiga och undvika att bli avslöjade som sexköpare.

Den fjärde artikeln är baserad på delstudie två, som innefattar tio intervjuer med socialarbetare som arbetar med samtalsstöd för personer som köper sex. Fokus i artikeln är hur socialarbetare förstår sexköp som ett socialt problem i förhållande till värderingar, professionella praktiker och politiska mål. Fokus är också hur de navigerar mellan dessa aspekter i möten med klienter. Socialarbetarna ramade in klienternas problem som individuella och psykologiska och hade också utformat arbetsmetoder som framförallt var inriktade på samtal eller terapi. Deltagarna kan ses som individfokuserade diplomater som använde sin diskretion till att hålla sig undan politiska debatter och istället fokusera på sina klienter och deras problem. De flesta av socialarbetarna ansåg att skam och stigma gjorde det svårare för sexköpare att söka hjälp och ökade lidandet hos målgruppen. Samtidigt så medförde deras stora handlingsutrymme att det skiftade mellan verksamheterna och deltagarna hur de tolkade sexköp. Medan vissa tog tydligt avstånd från repressiva åtgärder så var andra mer positivt inställda till det. Socialarbetarna i studien försökte navigera det sociala arbetets roll i förhållande till social policy och den politiska ambitionen gällande sexköp i Sverige. De erbjöd individuellt stöd för ett problem som är tolkat som orsakat av strukturella faktorer. Sexköp kan förstås som ett socialt problem som befinner sig i skärningspunkten mellan politiska krafter som förklarar det som ett uttryck för mäns våld mot kvinnor och en terapeutisk diskurs med psykologiska och medicinska förklaringar snarare än sociala.

Sammantaget visar studien hur både männen som köper sex och socialarbetarna navigerade mellan sociala normer, relationella praktiker och individuella erfarenheter i förhållande till sexköp. Deltagarna i båda delstudierna navigerade mellan sina egna erfarenheter och förståelser, moraliska värderingar och sociala normer gällande sexköp i Sverige. Både sexköparna och socialarbetarna begripliggjorde sina erfarenheter av sexköp baserat på sina egna erfarenheter, men de förhöll sig också till normativa idéer om sexköp som fenomen och om "sexköpare" som en avvikande kategori. Deltagarna speglade sina erfarenheter i relation till normativa föreställningar om "sexköparen" och både sexköparna och socialarbetarna relaterade till och navigerade i förhållande till den dominerande diskursen i Sverige som framställer sexköp som ett uttryck för mäns våld mot kvinnor och sexköpare som avvikare och som förövare. Studien visar hur maktrelationer kan vara komplexa och motstridiga. Sex mot ersättning är ett fenomen där kön spelar roll och det kan förstås som ett könat fenomen på strukturell nivå. Samtidigt visar deltagarnas berättelser hur de både reproducerar och utmanar normativa föreställningar om kön och sexualitet på relationell och individuell nivå.

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APPENDIX 1

Köper du sex?

Just nu genomför vi en studie om människors erfarenheter av att köpa sex.

Vill du delta?

Klicka här för att läsa mer.



APPENDIX 2

Intervjuguide delstudie 1

Intervjuerna kommer vara av semistrukturerad karaktär som struktureras genom olika teman där öppna frågor kommer ställas för att uppmuntra respondenten att prata så fritt som möjligt utifrån varje tema.

Information

Information om mig, studien, proceduren, inspelning och anonymitet.

Valfritt att svara på frågorna och vill du inte svara på någon fråga så gör inte det.

Funktion

Sexköpshistorik – detta tema kommer inbegripa samtal om när personen köpte sex för första gången, hur ofta de köper sex och hur de brukar gå tillväga.

Hur mycket pengar brukar de lägga på att köpa sex, köper de på en eller flera arenor och vilken betydelse har arenan.

Detta tema kommer också att fokusera på vad sexköp fyller för funktion för personerna, vilken betydelse det har för dem och hur de tänker att tillvaron sett ut om de inte köpt sex.

Detta tema kommer behandla sexköpets funktion och hur personerna tolkar och förstår sitt handlande på en interpsykisk, intrapsykisk och en social (samhälls) nivå.

Sammanhangets betydelse. Arena. Var man köper och vilka man köper av. Vilka arenor och personer man tar avstånd ifrån.

Prioriteringar – pengars betydelse

Sexualitet

Under detta tema kommer frågor kring sexualitet i allmänhet och sexuell hälsa och risk i synnerhet att behandlas. I relation till sexköp men också i förhållande till ickekommersiellt sex.

Intimitet, maskulinitet

Min sexualitet i relation till mig själv, i relation till någon annan och i relation till en samhällelig diskurs.

Partner, relationer och socialt nätverk

Under detta tema kommer personens tankar och känslor om att köpa sex i förhållande till eventuell partner, familj och andra signifikanta andra att diskuteras.

Barn

Utsatthet

Under detta tema kommer köparens egen utsatthet att behandlas. Om de har känt sig fysiskt, psykiskt, socialt eller sexuellt utsatta, vilka konsekvenser det har fått och om de har fått någon hjälp/stöd med anledning av det. Eventuella strategier för att minska sin egen och säljares utsatthet kommer också att avhandlas.

Under detta tema kommer även köparens syn och förhållningssätt till säljarens utsatthet att avhandlas.

Detta tema kommer också fokusera på köparnas förhållningssätt till sexköpslagen och rådande normer kring att köpa sex – samt hur de tänker att det har påverkat dem och de som de köper sex av.

Välfärdsinsatser

Under detta tema kommer frågor kring om personen har, vill eller upplever sig behöva komma i kontakt med välfärdsinsatser. Hur de har upplevt kontakten och vilken hjälp de önskar kommer också att diskuteras. Både stödjande, hälsofrämjande och repressiva insatser kommer avhandlas.

Hur uppfattar man själv samhällets diskurs gällande detta?

Bakgrundsfrågor

Ålder, civilstånd, barn, arbetssituation, boende.

Sexuell läggning

Migration, etnicitet

Övrigt

Något annat som du skulle vilja berätta om?

Har du kontakt med någon annan som köper sex och som du tror skulle vilja vara med i studien?

Kan du tänka dig att bli intervjuad igen om jag behöver ställa några kompletterande frågor?

APPENDIX 3

Informationsbrev till yrkesverksamma

Hej.

Mitt namn är Ylva Grönvall och jag genomför en studie som en del av en forskarutbildning i socialt arbete på Malmö universitet. Det övergripande syftet med studien fokuserar på sexköp i relation till funktion, utsatthet och välfärdsinsatser. I den första delstudien som är genomförd intervjuade jag personer med erfarenhet av att köpa sex. I delstudie två är fokus på hur yrkesverksamma som möter personer som köper sex arbetar med frågan, både i det praktiska arbetet och utifrån sex mot ersättning som fenomen i ett större sammanhang.

Jag undrar om du och/eller dina kollegor kan tänka er att medverka i en intervju för att berätta om ert arbete och om sexköp i relation till socialt arbete? Intervjun kommer ta ungefär en timme. Du kommer vara anonyma och information som kan kopplas till dig som person kommer aidentifieras. Du kan när som under processens gång ändra dig och avsluta din medverkan.

Hör av dig vid intresse och för mer information om studien.

Med vänliga hälsningar Ylva Grönvall

Telefonnummer

Mailadress

APPENDIX 4

Intervjuguide – delstudie 2

Bakgrundsinformation

Information om mig, studien, proceduren, inspelning och anonymitet.

Valfritt att svara på frågorna och vill du inte svara på någon fråga så gör inte det.

Yrkesprofession, arbetsuppgifter – vilka möter du i ditt jobb?

Vad består dina arbetsuppgifter av?

Jobbar du efter någon specifik samtalsmetod?

Vidareutbildning?

Samhällsinsatser

Under detta tema kommer diskussioner kring vad olika välfärdsinsatser gör, bör göra och inte bör göra när det gäller att bistå personer som köper sexuella tjänster.

Vad är er roll? Vad är inte er roll?

Har den alltid varit samma eller har er roll och ert handlingsutrymme förändrats över tid?

Vilka samverkar ni med och varför? – Finns det några ni har valt att inte samverka med?

Vad gör ni och vad tycker du att ni bör göra?

Vilka kommer till er och vilka tror ni inte söker hjälp hos er?

Sex mot ersättning

Under detta tema kommer frågor om vad som är (och inte är) sex mot ersättning att behandlas. Vidare kommer frågor som handlar om vad personen tror att sex mot ersättning fyller för funktion för den som säljer eller köper sex att avhandlas

Vad tänker du är sex mot ersättning och när är det inte sex mot ersättning? Hur avgörs det i mötet med klienten (om det spelar någon roll)?

Varför tror du att människor köper sex, vad fyller det för funktion för dem?

Vad berättar de som söker sig till er om funktionen? Vad är din tolkning?

Funktion och utsatthet

Under detta tema kommer frågor kring när sex mot ersättning blir ett problem att diskuteras. Frågor som handlar om olika former av utsatthet hos målgruppen kommer också att avhandlas.

Hur tänker du kring utsatthet – för de som säljer sex och de som köper sex?

Vad möter du i ditt jobb med klienter?

Lagar, riktlinjer, policys och politik

Under detta tema kommer frågor som handlar om hur personen i sin yrkesroll förhåller sig till olika lagar, riktlinjer, policys och politik att behandlas. Personernas tankar och resonemang inför dessa kommer också att diskuteras.

Vilken betydelse har lagstiftning och policys i relation till det sociala arbetet?

Vilka lagar påverkar dig i ditt arbete?

Hur förhåller ni er till olika policys och riktlinjer?

Hur stor frihet har ni i relation till styrning uppifrån?

Politisk styrning på nationell och kommunal nivå?

Styrning från chefer?

Hur kan eventuella lagändringar påverka er i er praktiska yrkesutövning?

Avslutningsvis

Får jag kontakta dig igen om jag behöver komplettera något?

Kan din kollega också tänka sig att ställa upp på en intervju?

I

Doing trust work – the purchase of sex in a Swedish context

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Abstract

The relationship between commercial sex and intimacy has been in focus in a number of studies on the purchase of sex, often distinguishing between one-time visitors and regular customers. This article is based on a study exploring how men who buy sex as one-time visitors navigate between commercialization and intimacy in a Swedish context. Based on interviews with 29 Swedish men purchasing sex, an inductive thematic analysis has been applied. The findings show how the men in this study balance between excitement and trust when purchasing sex, and how trust work is crucial for the purchase of sex not to be experienced as dangerous and instead pleasurable.

Keywords

Buying sex, commercial sex, emotional labor, prostitution, purchase of sex

Introduction

The social landscape, conditions and market regarding commercial sex have both changed considerably and become more differentiated over recent decades.

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Migration and free movement within the EU, as well as technological developments and the internet, have changed the conditions for the purchase and sale of sexual services (Agustín, 2007; Bernstein, 2007; Holmström and Skilbrei, 2008; Vuolajärvi, 2019). Over the past century, the understanding of commercial sex has shifted (Holmström and Skilbrei, 2017; Svanström, 2006a), which has had different policy implications in different national contexts (Bernstein, 2001; Dodillet, 2009; Kulick, 2005; Sanders, 2008). In a Swedish context, the dominant political understanding of recent decades has been characterized by an interpretation of commercial sex as men's violence against women, where the discourse has had a strong gender-based focus on the (female) seller as vulnerable and the (male) buyer as a perpetrator (Holmström and Skilbrei, 2017; Svanström, 2006b). In a Swedish context, the purchase of sex is primarily met with repressive measures and is associated with stigmatization (Holmström and Skilbrei, 2017; Kotsadam and Jakobsson, 2014). During the decades prior to the implementation of the Sex Purchase Act, research and policy were intertwined to a considerable extent, and a number of researchers were much involved in the process that resulted in a criminalization of the purchase of sex (Erikson, 2011; Månsson, 2018; Skilbrei and Holmström, 2013). Today, research and policy are largely separated in Sweden, and alternative interpretations of the sex buyer as a perpetrator have found it difficult to make the journey from research to policy (Kulick, 2005; Scaramuzzino, 2014; Vuolajärvi, 2019).

Men who buy sex have been the focus of research in a number of areas, such as sociology, social work, psychology and criminology (Khan, 2015; Kong, 2016; Kuosmanen, 2011; Munro and Della Giusta, 2016; Sandell et al., 1996; Sanders, 2008; Scaramuzzino, 2014). International research on the purchase of sex has interpreted the phenomenon as an expression of pathology and sexual defects (Ellis, 1959; Gibbens and Silberman, 1960), as an expression of masculinity or gender-based oppression (Farley, 2017; Joseph and Black, 2012; O'Connell Davidson, 1998), or as an expression of the commercialization of sexuality (Altman, 2001; Prasad, 1999). Although some research on the purchase of sex has been conducted in Sweden in recent years (Scaramuzzino, 2014), the main focus has been directed at the sellers of sexual services (de Cabo Y Moreda, 2018; Fredlund, 2019; Hulusjö, 2013; Kuosmanen and de Cabo, 2018).

The dominant understanding of commercial sex can be traced to either an oppression paradigm or an empowerment paradigm, although a growing number of scholars suggest a less one-dimensional or essentialist understanding of the phenomenon (Weitzer, 2010). Some members of the international research community have focused on the purchase of sex as an expression of the commercialization and commodification of sexuality and intimacy, both from the buyers' and the sellers' perspectives (Sanders, 2005; Milrod and Weitzer, 2012). In previous research on the commercialization of sexuality, men's motivations for buying sex have often been categorized into different groups, and two of the specified categories of motivations have related to buying sex as a form of intimacy and emotional relationship or buying sex merely as consumption (Joseph and Black, 2012;

Monto and Julka, 2009; Soo Jin and Shu Xu, 2016). However, other researchers have noted a complexity and heterogeneity among men's motives and trajectories for purchasing sexual services (Bernstein, 2001; Sanders, 2008). Sanders (2008) has argued that perceptions about the purchase of sex are based on a false dichotomy between commercial and non-commercial relationships. Bernstein's (2007) concept of purchasing sex as *bounded authenticity* provides one way of conceptualizing this fluidity. So does Sanders' (2008) concept of 'reciprocated' intimacy, wherein the commercial act turns into a more egalitarian experience based on 'private', individualized intimacy, similar to that expected from conventional relationships (Sanders, 2008). Still, embedded in this interpretation is a notion that emotional labor and intimacy are interconnected with girlfriend experiences or regulars, while one-time visitors and those who purchase sex merely for the sake of the thrill are consumers on a market in which intimacy, trust and emotional labor are absent (Monto and Julka, 2009; Sanders, 2008; Soo Jin and Shu Xu, 2016). From the standpoint of Weitzer's polymorphous paradigm (2010), the complexities of lived experience can be recognized without ignoring the different structural conditions that shape experiences of commercial sex.

The aim of this article is to explore how men who buy sex navigate in a complex area of tension between commercialization and intimacy in a national context criminalizing their actions. More specifically, this article will focus on (1) the construction of meaning and intimacy in commercial relationships for Swedish men who buy sex, and (2) how these men describe relational practices and strategies that are distinguished when purchasing sex.

Motives for the purchase of sex, and its meaning

A number of studies have explored the motives for men purchasing sex by categorizing and problematizing these motives (or the men). Several studies have tried to explain men's motivations for buying sex on the basis of psychological or psychiatric perspectives (Atchison et al., 1998; Månsson and Linders, 1984; McKeganey and Barnard, 1996). Researchers have identified motivations such as being able to purchase specific sexual acts, to access a wide variety of women or women with specific characteristics, as well as engaging in limited, temporary relationships, or the thrill of the activity itself (McKeganey and Barnard, 1996; Monto, 2010). Others have pointed to physical unattractiveness, social unattractiveness/psychological maladjustment, psychopathology, the manifestation of cultural gendered role expectations or ideals of masculinity and the avoidance of gender role responsibilities, or have viewed the purchase of sex as a means by which disempowered men are able to exercise power (Atchison et al., 1998; Joseph and Black, 2012).

Sanders (2008) has argued for the need to look beyond perspectives that tend to individualize the desire to buy sex, and to instead capture the motivations to engage in commercial sex in terms of 'push' factors – elements of men's lives that are lacking, and 'pull' factors – aspects of the sex industry that are attractive

and that are promoted as ‘entertainment’ (Sanders, 2008). In addition, previous research has proposed compensatory arguments stating that commercial sex caters to a need that would be better satisfied within an intimate relationship in the private sphere (Giddens, 1992; O’Connell Davidson, 1998; see also Bernstein 2001). Conversely, Bernstein (2001) has argued that the market for commercial sex is experienced as facilitating and enhancing desired forms of non-domestic sexual activity. This remains the case regardless of whether the purchaser is looking for bounded authenticity, or looking for a wide variety of brief sexual liaisons, or looking for a sexual encounter that is ‘more real and human’ (Bernstein, 2001). A number of studies have discussed assumptions about masculinity and sexuality in relation to commercial sex (Huysamen and Boonzaier, 2015; Joseph and Black, 2012). Kong (2015) has argued that men who buy sex are torn between two different sexual scripts, where the one involves their wanting or being expected to be intimate and to live in romantic and monogamous relationships, while the other is an adventure script that focuses on the sex drive as explosive and uncontrollable and on the importance of sexual adventures and enjoyment without commitment (Kong, 2015). Kong (2016) has also argued that buying sex can be seen as a form of leisure edgework, where people who buy sex are constantly balancing between enjoyment and risk. The purchase of sex is understood as a negotiation between sexual scripts and as a way for buyers to relate to heterosexual ideals of masculinity.

Commercial sex is a heterogeneous phenomenon. The types of sexual services offered and performed, how long they are performed for, and the environment differ depending on whether the sale takes place in a street environment, via escort services, or in other arenas (Bernstein, 2007; Durant and Couch, 2017; Lever and Dolnick, 2010). Previous research has identified differences in the vulnerability of those who sell sex depending on how and where they sell sex. Different forms of commercial sex are classified and valued hierarchically, both by the seller and the buyer (Bernstein, 2007; Sanders, 2008; Scaramuzzino, 2014). Different forms of commercial sex are associated with both risk and respectability for the individual buying sex, which can be traced back to both moral values and perceptions about what is more risky and dangerous, and for some the street environment is not seen as a legitimate place to buy sex and is thus associated with danger (Sanders, 2008). Newmahr (2011) has argued that trust is closely related to risk, and that edgework plays with a dialectic relationship between risk and trust. In addition, Sanders (2008) has argued that ‘trust’ as an emotion can produce some level of security in the relationship between seller and buyer, an emotion which also can result in bodily intimacy.

The diversification and hierarchical categorization in relation to risks and respectability (Sanders, 2008) needs to be located in relation to the intertwined development of commercial sexuality and post-industrial society. Commercial sexuality has changed as cities have become re-enriched, as new communication technologies have developed and as the service sector has become more specialized. The politics of buying and selling sexual services lie at the intersection between the

public and the private spheres (Bernstein, 2007). Some caution should thus be exercised when drawing generalized conclusions about the effects of post-industrial societies on commercial sex, since different countries' laws and policies also have an impact on people's attitudes and behaviors regarding commercial sex (Scoular, 2010; Weitzer, 2015).

In the Swedish context, the political and medial understanding of commercial sex is strongly influenced by a gender power perspective (Erikson, 2011; Holmström and Skilbrei, 2017). Commercial sex has been a focus for the legislature and the social welfare authorities in Sweden for the last century, and since 1999 Sweden has had a law that criminalizes the purchase of sexual services. The Swedish Government has a neo-abolitionist approach and is striving to counteract the purchase of sexual services as part of the work to increase gender equality and stop men's violence against women (Erikson, 2011; Holmström and Skilbrei, 2017). On the one hand, the purchase of sexual services is now being met with more repressive measures than were previously employed in the form of stricter legislation and more monitoring. On the other hand, the purchase of sex has become normalized as a result of technological developments and the opportunities provided by online accessibility and anonymity (Holmström and Skilbrei, 2017; Scaramuzzino, 2014; Vuolajärvi, 2019). A number of empirical studies on the purchase of sex were conducted during the decades prior to its criminalization, which primarily focused on individual factors and motivations why men purchase sex (Månsson, 1988, 1998; Månsson and Linders, 1984; Sandell et al., 1996). In the last decade, however, empirical studies that have focused on people buying sex have been scarce in Sweden (Scaramuzzino, 2014). Recent studies show that there is relatively substantial support for the legislation among the public (Jonsson and Jakobsson, 2017; Kuosmanen, 2011) and that buying sex in Sweden is associated with stigmatization (Kotsadam and Jakobsson, 2014; Kulick, 2005; Scaramuzzino, 2014). Risk and trust have emerged as important aspects in the relationship between sex buyers and sex sellers in a Swedish context. Previous research has showed that sex sellers perceive buyers as stressed and nervous, which affect both the interaction between sellers and buyers and the sellers' safety strategies (Scaramuzzino, 2014; Vuolajärvi, 2019).

Commercialization of sexuality and intimacy

Bauman (2003) has argued that love and intimate relationships do not differ significantly from other areas of consumer society. With individualistic ideals, people strive to have no bonds to others, or at least to have bonds that are so loosely tied that they are easy to let go when circumstances require this (Bauman, 2003). Bauman's (2003) views of changes in intimate relations, as well as Giddens' (1992) notions on intimacy and pure relations, have been criticized. Some researchers have noted the viscosity of social norms on gender, love and relationships, which means that the changes regarding intimate relationships are more ambiguous than has been described by Bauman and Giddens (Pedersen, 2005; van Hooff,

2013). However, Zelizer (2005) has shown that intimate relationships are closely linked to economic exchanges in many different ways and that people are constantly negotiating with regard to the coexistence of economic exchange and intimate social relations (Zelizer, 2005). Based on this approach, intimate and commercial relationships exist on a continuum; we have different types of bonds in different human relationships, and these are more or less interconnected with different forms of economic transactions. There are no social relations that exist without economic exchange, but relations can continuously be renegotiated and changed by means of our constantly ongoing relational work (Zelizer, 2005).

With the blurring of the boundaries between the private and the commercial, what has previously been experienced as private and intimate (such as love, family relationships and friendships), may now be packaged as expert knowledge and become commodified (Hochschild, 2012). In a global era that is governed by capitalism, intimate and social relations become goods in the global market, while authenticity is becoming increasingly important and is thus acquiring greater value as a commodity. These changes are taking us farther and farther away from binary divisions between private and public, emotional and materialistic, love and money (Constable, 2009; Illouz, 2007). Sexuality plays a role in this, and the field of commercial sexuality is as complex and multifaceted, viewed in terms of the relationship between intimacy and economic exchange, as are other types of intimate and social relations (Zelizer, 2005). Similarly, intimacy, authenticity and emotional bonds exist in different forms and are handled differently between people who buy and sell sexual services (Milrod and Weitzer, 2012). Milrod and Weitzer (2012) have shown that such relations between the seller and the buyer are characterized by constantly ongoing relational work, and reworking of these relations. Bonds are alternately released and tightened, and both seller and buyer are negotiating and relocating their positions within the relationship.

Contrary to common assumptions that men often buy sexual services to avoid emotional ties and intimacy, a majority of the participating men in a study experienced authenticity and deepened feelings toward the providers (Milrod and Weitzer, 2012). Bernstein (2007) has argued that the people who buy sexual services are consuming neither a sexual act nor part of the personality of the seller. What is bought is a form of bounded authenticity, a temporary, delimited experience that is experienced as both physically and emotionally genuine. For the buyer to perceive the purchased sexual encounter as a form of bounded authenticity, the seller both does emotional labor and makes an emotional investment. Bernstein has argued that this is specific to the purchase of sexual services in the post-industrial era, due to a shift from relational sexual intimacy, to sexual intimacy as recreation, a shift that has generated a symbiotic relationship between globalized markets and the consumption of commercial sexuality (Bernstein, 2007). Meanwhile, the commercialization of sexuality and intimacy takes on different expressions in different national contexts (Weitzer, 2015). In Sweden, the state has long strived to counteract the commercialization of sexuality and

counteract the purchase of sex through legalization and policy (Holmström and Skilbrei, 2017).

Method

The study data are based on interviews with 29 Swedish men who have purchased sexual services. The participants were recruited through advertising on two different websites that promote escort services, a post on a forum on one of those escort websites, via Facebook, Twitter and via ads in two local newspapers. The interviews were conducted from March to December in 2018. Contact was initiated by the participants replying to an advertisement by telephone or email. The participants were informed both verbally and in writing about the study's purpose and procedures. Consent to participate was given in writing or recorded. All interviews (with the exception of those with two participants who declined recording) were transcribed verbatim and then de-identified. All quotations have then been translated into English. All names of the participants are pseudonyms and all personal information has been altered to preserve anonymity. Study approval was granted by the Regional Ethics Review Board in Lund (Dnr 2017/983).

The interviews were semi-structured. The themes that constitute the focus of this article include the meaning of buying sex, sexuality and partners, relationships and social networks. Both the interview process and the analytical work are drawn from Alvesson and Sköldberg's (2018) ideas on reflexive methodology, in that there has been a parallel process in which the transcribing and processing of the interview material, the analysis of the same and an in-depth reading of relevant literature have occurred in a fluid process. The empirical material is interpreted as stories and the interpretation and analysis are based on a social constructionist understanding of storytelling (Plummer, 1995). The transcribed interviews have been organized and themed on the basis of recurrent and dominant stories, contradictions and slippages in the stories. The software package NVivo 12 (QSR International, Melbourne) has been used and an inductive thematic analysis has been applied.

Purchasing sex is criminalized in Sweden and thus anonymity and confidentiality have been of major importance. For a majority of the participants, the interview was the first time they told anyone that they had bought sex. In some cases, the interview acquired the aspects of a confession, with the interviewer balancing between the dual roles of researcher and therapist. This was handled with great care in order to create a space in which it was possible for the participants to talk about their experiences without the researcher losing the research gaze (Hoffmann, 2007; Plummer, 1995). Another important aspect in relation to a criminalized and stigmatized phenomenon is how the participants present themselves (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011) to the researcher as 'nice' sex buyers. This self-presentation may be performed both in relation to the sex seller (as will be shown in the Findings section), and in relation to the researcher when talking about buying sex.

Findings

The participants had engaged in buying sex for between 1 and 30 years, and the frequency with which they did so ranged between 2 and 3 times a week and once a year. Most of the participants in the study had bought sex in different ways and had both been regulars of the same sex seller and one-time-visitors. The arenas for contact with women selling sex differed, but since most of the participants were recruited via escort sites these sites were regular means of contact used by the participants to reach sellers. Other locations of contact were brothels or sex clubs abroad, massage parlors, regular sex sites or dating sites, the street environment (abroad or, if in Sweden, several decades ago), or through friends or business associates. They all bought sex from women and one had also bought sex from transgender women. All except one had been born in Sweden and 12 had children. For an overview of the basic sociodemographic characteristics of the participants, see Table 1. The material presented in this article relates to those sex purchases that were single purchases from different people and not long-term relationships with a single seller.

Excitement and risk

For many of the participants, it was obvious that sexuality was an important factor in what the purchase of sex meant for them. Sexual desire, achievement and

Table 1. Participants (n = 29)

Sociodemographic characteristics	Number of respondents
Age	
20–29	4
30–39	6
40–49	8
50–59	5
60–75	6
Marital status	
Married/steady partner	13
Single	16
Occupation	
Employed/self employed	21
Student	2
Retired	3
Unemployed	1
Other	2
Place of residence	
Large city	14
Small city	12
Rural village	3

pleasure and a longing for these things, were important motives for having initially purchased sex and continuing to do so. Sexuality was present as a factor regardless of how and from whom they bought sex, but it acquired a more prominent and activity-oriented role when the meeting with the sex seller only happened once. Aspects that were highlighted by the participants included experiencing confirmation as a sexual being (and a man), obtaining an outlet for their sexual desire and feeling sexual pleasure and satisfaction. However, they also included feeling another person's body and being close to a naked woman and seeing her enjoyment. For a few, specific sexual activities were highlighted as being important, but for most participants it was more about 'having ordinary sex'. Martin said:

... it's not anal sex or anything advanced, it's ordinary sex and, well, cuddling and soft sex and yes, a little socializing with these girls, so no, I don't think it's been significantly affected by the fact that I pay for it, no.

Buying sex from different individuals was significant for the sexual encounter. Having sex with different people was associated with excitement and exploration, which the participants said enhanced their sexual pleasure. Having a longer sexual relationship with the same individual led to closeness and intimacy, which some participants described as being boring in the long run.

Aspects such as absolute anonymity also made buying sex more exciting and sexually arousing. For some, the build-up and expectation before a meeting was just as important, if not more important, than the actual encounter. Fredrik said: 'It's like when you do anything in life that's exciting and fun. You build up to it a bit.' Looking forward to something and fantasizing about it reinforced the whole experience, but also meant that it left a sense of emptiness afterwards. One participant compared it to longing to go on holiday and then the boredom of coming home after a successful trip. For many of the participants, the social norms that depict commercial sex as a forbidden area and as taboo, added to the incentive. For some of the participants, the criminalization in Sweden added to the thrill of buying sex. When asked what the thrill in buying sex was about, Fredrik said: 'Well, to some extent it's that it's illegal, it's a bit exciting to do something like that.' Henrik put it as follows:

It turns me on a little to pay as well... but maybe because it's a bit... it's also quite taboo to go to a prostitute and that makes it a little more exciting.

For others, however, the social stigma and criminality of the act were more associated with shame and a fear of being exposed as a sex buyer. Daniel said:

... and then it's the fact that you are committing criminal acts and hurting others, that I think is terribly hard. And it doesn't feel... I'm not... there's an anxiety about that as well.

Crossing their own boundaries regarding what was morally and socially acceptable when buying sex affected the balance between excitement and risk. This was closely associated with crossing the boundaries set by society, by social norms and by Swedish law. Daniel said:

I don't want to buy sex from a young girl who might be controlled by someone. No, I don't think it's okay. I'd like for her to be a person who does this by choice. Nothing is free in this world, of course, but I don't want to feel that I'm using anyone. I want to pay, I can pay a lot too.

When crossing boundaries, buying sex was perceived as being too dangerous or an exploitation of the seller; in retrospect, emotions were more marked by shame and guilt than by pleasure and satisfaction. The participants talked about different arenas, circumstances or sex sellers that they tried to avoid. How the participants handled things if they ended up in situations that they preferred to avoid varied. Some called off the encounter and left (some gave the seller money anyway, others did not) which left them with good feelings afterwards, in the belief that they were doing the morally right thing and handled the situation in the best possible way. Henrik said:

I can't really remember what felt weird, but it was something that just felt completely wrong, so I left and she got a bit annoyed. So, well, I gave her some money anyway.

Others went through with the purchase, which left them with a feeling of shame and regret to a greater extent, since they had done something that was not morally acceptable for them. Carl said:

Well, I don't meet any women who aren't Swedish. After all, I only meet Swedish hobby escorts that kind of do it on the side. Because it's illegal, I'm afraid that it'll be someone who's, with trafficking and so on, because it's unregulated. The first time I went to Norway, I met someone who wasn't Norwegian, but German. And then I didn't think it felt good, I don't know, it felt a bit more like, I don't know how to describe it, it felt like quicker and more stressed.

Some of the participants had at some point bought sex from street workers instead of via escort services. On these occasions they had experiences of buying sex from a foreign woman or from someone who seemed to have been forced to sell sex. Others had bought sex from someone who was underage or in a situation in which they themselves or the person selling sex was affected by alcohol or drugs. Lennart spoke about the last time he had bought sex, and why it had made him stop buying sex. He was drinking a lot of alcohol at the time and while drunk one day had called a 16-year-old girl who sold sex. Besides being a minor, and based on the stories she told him, he felt that she was living a very risky life in relation to sex and drugs. He nonetheless bought sex from her, and was later

caught by the police. He returned to this episode several times during the interview, and was filled with both regret and shame.

You know, this far too young girl I was with the last time, it was, well, I don't know why I didn't call it off and send her home. Yes, I know what happened, step by step, and it was so fucking stupid.

Lennart had crossed several different boundaries when he bought sex from a 16-year-old girl. First, his own moral boundaries regarding what he thought was socially acceptable, and when he talked about the event afterwards, he was ashamed and could not understand how he could have acted as he did. The second boundary he broke was that laid down by Swedish law, and he was caught, charged and convicted for the purchase of a sexual act from a child.

Several of the participants spoke about episodes when they had been drunk and had bought sex in a way that they later regretted. Buying sex while being drunk meant that the participants had bought sex in arenas or from people whom they would otherwise not buy sex from. This made them feel that they had crossed the boundaries of what they thought was morally justified. This was associated with feelings of loss of control and lack of judgment. Ulf said:

It may be a prejudice of mine, but I think that the ones who usually walk the streets may have greater social problems. So, no, I have tried to avoid it, but in Norway it just happened by chance. I was far too drunk then as well, so that wasn't good.

Others told stories about having bought sex from a seller who appeared intoxicated by alcohol and/or drugs and how this had felt bad afterwards. The same applied if the seller was perceived as being stressed and hurrying through the meeting. The recollection was characterized more by shame and a sense of having exploited someone, which was something that they otherwise tried to avoid. Even though sex and buying sex were seen as something that was driven by sexual desire, there was a desire to be in control of the situation and to be guided by rational and logical thinking. Feelings of shame were further reinforced if you got caught. The thought of doing something illegal could be exciting, but actually getting caught was associated with shame, stigma and a number of negative consequences. Since there were differences among the participants regarding when commercial sex was perceived as crossing moral or social boundaries, things that felt morally justified for some were quite unthinkable for others. However, in all of the individuals' personal stories about how they tried to navigate when purchasing sex, all of these factors were linked to shifts in the balance between thrill and risk.

Trust and safety

Even if the participants had bought sex for the thrill, there was a fine line between excitement turning into unwanted danger and risk. Adding to this, the participants

were not seeking completely anonymous sex with just any random sex seller. A recurrent theme in the interviews was the importance of chemistry, of trusting one's intuition and being able to communicate fluently. Being able to communicate with each other was important for several different reasons. Firstly it was important in order to be able to agree on what activities would take place, and at what price, and to be sure that both parties were in agreement on this. Secondly, the small talk that occurred in addition to the sex was considered important in order to produce a relaxed atmosphere and for the sexual encounter not to feel instrumental. A third aspect was that communication was important in relation to being able to determine the seller's vulnerability. Xander said: 'but at least I have quite a good intuition, to kind of get a sense of the situation.' Chemistry and intuition were difficult to explain, and in the interviews the discussion often ended with the participant saying 'you just know' or 'it just feels right'.

The participants had several strategies for investigating the vulnerability of the seller. The participants did a lot of research before making an appointment with a sex seller in order to get a picture of who the seller was and to ensure that it was sufficiently safe for them to buy sex from that person. Ymer said:

So, I've never just looked at an ad and then gone straight to meet the person; I've always talked a little first. And it's always been . . . there were never any foreigners, it was always someone Swedish.

There were several reasons for acting in this way. The first was to avoid buying sex from someone who was being forced to sell sex, something which the participants explained as being a matter for their own morality and conscience. Secondly, the participants suspected that sex sellers who have a pimp or who are victims of human trafficking are at greater risk of being monitored, and that by avoiding these people they would minimize the risk of being caught by the police. Finally, it was important for the participants' own sexual pleasure, since even if they knew that the person was getting paid to have sex with them, they wanted it to feel genuine and to feel that the seller liked it or at least had a neutral attitude towards it. Klas said:

I guess it's about self-affirmation, if it feels like they want to see me, it feels better than if it's just the money they are after.

The participants wanted the person who sold sex to perceive them as being kind and safe. In addition to the research that the participants engaged in to check whether the seller appeared to be trustworthy and safe, they also tried to appear reliable and nice in relation to the seller. In practice, this was achieved by being clear that one kept one's promises, by never bargaining or trying to cross the boundaries of what had been agreed. Anders said: 'Yes, for her to be honest, I must be honest with her too.' The participants highlighted the importance of being well dressed and clean, of behaving correctly and of being sober and

using condoms. At the same time, this work of presenting oneself as trustworthy and safe was also done by trying to present oneself as social and friendly, by chatting and showing an interest in the other, both in the social environment, but also during the actual sexual activity.

Trust was an important factor for the participants when purchasing sex from someone they did not know. However, one of the reasons for meeting different people was to avoid the purchase of sex developing into a closer relationship. The participants described that having sex with the same person over longer periods of time made the sex boring and routine, but also more similar to a conventional romantic relationship. If the excitement and curiosity were lost, there was no longer any meaning in buying sex. Getting too close to the sex seller was also associated with a risk of developing romantic emotions and starting to care too much for each other in relation to the nature of the initial deal. In addition to the risk of emotional involvement and the fear of bonding with the sex seller, there was also the risk of disclosure. Some of the participants believed that there was an increased risk of a partner finding out or of getting caught by the police if they had a longer relationship with the same sex seller.

Balancing between excitement and trust

Present in many of the participants' stories was the balance between excitement and trust. A sense of trust and confidence led to buying sex being perceived as not being too dangerous, but too much trust and intimacy made it boring and dangerous in other ways. A long-term relationship with the same sex seller made it feel routine, and for some it also became more difficult to ask about or try new sexual activities. Some of the participants said that when they had met a sex seller whom they did not know, their communication was more straightforward and clear, which meant that they got what they wanted but also that the agreement was clearer. Being a one-time visitor and purchasing sex from different people was perceived as more exciting, as long as they were careful to navigate in relation to risk and safety. Some of the participants likened purchasing sex to being a film director, you decide what you want and how it should be performed, but at the same time you want it to feel real and mutual. Per, who used to visit brothels in Denmark, talked about the importance of feeling welcome, of there being a cozy atmosphere and of it feeling like a human meeting with a nice woman. At the same time, it was important for Per that the brothel was well organized and safe. Per used the term 'seeing someone in private' to refer to his long-term relationships with sex sellers.

I'm not the type who gets off on risky escapades, it's exciting enough as it is. And there's a big difference between seeing someone in private and having continuity in the relationship and these one-time-things. There's an element of thrill to these one-time visits that's quite tempting, I have to admit. You don't really know what to expect.

In order for the paid sexual encounter to be experienced as pleasurable, the contact with the sex seller had to feel good, and more importantly, the paid sexual encounter must not create discord with the individual's self-image, morality and Swedish social norms. Martin said:

It's not just the ejaculation you want, it's kind of, well, a little snuggling and cuddling and some small talk and a fairly clear conscience afterwards as well.

The participants in the study were well aware of the political debate in Sweden and of the public's view of commercial sex. When they talked about their own actions and about how they relate to those who sell sex, it became clear that they navigate in relation to both their own moral values but also the Swedish discourse on commercial sex. The taboo and the fact that purchasing sex had been criminalized enhanced the thrill to some extent, but the participants' emotions could rapidly shift into shame and remorse if they broke too many taboos. In some cases, the participants were more concerned about being perceived as a kind and good sex buyer by the person who sold sex, than they were about the actual sexual encounter. If the purchase of sex was too greatly associated with negative emotions such as shame, exploitation or disgust, then the experience itself was also characterized by these feelings. Although the sexual activity was the focus when buying sex, it was the feelings connected to the experience that dictated how the purchased sexual encounter was perceived.

Discussion

The aim of this study has been to explore how men who purchase sex navigate between commercialization and intimacy in a context where commercial sex is legally regulated and where the purchase of sex is criminalized. The participants' descriptions of buying sex revealed a view of sexuality as something recreational and individualistic. The longing for sexual pleasure without relational commitments and the focus on excitement, thrill and curiosity may be seen as ways in which sexuality and sexual pleasure have become commercialized and commodified (cf. Bauman, 1998; Hochschild, 2012). The way the participants talked about being the director of the sexual act and getting what they ordered, is clearly in line with a view of sexual acts and sexual pleasure as a buyable service. Further, the importance of the paid sexual encounter as something exciting and driven by curiosity can be associated with Kong's (2016) understanding of buying sex as a form of leisure edgework.

Although commercial sex may be seen as an individualistic form of recreation, the stories also show that the participants' experiences are interconnected with relational and structural aspects that are negotiated and weighed against each other in relation to the seller. Consequently, the ways in which the participants navigate buying sex are not so easily dismissed as solely being a manifestation of the commercialization of sexual relationships. The participants attempt to navigate between their own individualistic sexual desire and pleasure, expected social norms

regarding intimate relationships and Swedish social norms regarding the purchase of sex. Traditional norms regarding intimate relationships and stigmatizing views about men who purchase sex affect the participants' relationships with women who sell sex. The stories presented in this article show that the study participants are on the one hand looking for excitement and thrills, and on the other attempting to create a sense of trust in relation to the sex seller. Further, the stories show that a certain amount of trust is crucial for the paid sexual encounter to be perceived as a manageable experience. The relational practices and strategies used by the men in the study when they purchase sex affect the meanings that intimacy in commercial relationships has for them. The participants' stories about how they balance between thrill-seeking and safety are thus not so much about intimacy as they are about trust. This can in part be understood in relation to Bernstein's (2007) and Sanders' (2008) discussions of intimacy. The same is true of the desire expressed by the participants in this study that (one-off) paid sexual encounters should feel genuine and real, a form of bounded authenticity in Bernstein's sense of the term. This longing among men who buy sex for a genuine and authentic experience has previously been linked to an increased expectation that sex sellers will engage in emotional labor (Bernstein, 2007) in order to meet this demand.

One element that is present in the participants' stories and that extends beyond the concepts of emotional labor and bounded authenticity, is the work they do in relation to the seller prior to and during the paid sexual encounter. This work is not so much about intimacy or authenticity as it is about creating trust, or doing trust work. The trust work undertaken by men who purchase sex can be understood in relation to both relational and structural aspects of commercial sex. Some aspects are more associated with the relationship to the seller regardless of context, while others are more closely related to the Swedish context. As can be seen in the findings presented in this article, doing trust work in relation to the seller makes the purchase safe enough not to be dangerous, but not sufficiently intimate to make it boring. Trust work makes it possible for the participants to navigate between excitement, risk, safety and intimacy. Using Bauman's (1998) frame of understanding, trust work is a way of handling two inherently incompatible roles in the search for thrills: being able to feel intrinsic pleasure (to be the body) while at the same time keeping one's distance and maintaining sober judgments (being the owner of that body). Further, by doing trust work when buying sex, the participants in the study are able to maintain a self-image in which they are good people. Doing trust work in relation to the sex seller can be seen as a way to handle the normative views in Sweden of commercial sex, oppression and gender. By creating trust in relation to the seller, the participants are able to maintain distance between themselves and the stigmatized image of the sex buyer. Even if the main reason for purchasing sex is thrill, the way trust work is done in the relationship with the seller may be viewed as a way in which the participants are navigating different norm systems. Viscous norms regarding love, intimacy and companionship (van Hooff, 2013) affect the participants in such a way that they do not want to purchase sex without aspects such as trust and chemistry being present. This is intertwined with

Swedish political norms, which regard the purchase of sex as a form of oppression. The Sex Purchase Act per se was not of major significance for their engagement in commercial sex, but prominent in their stories was how normative ideas about gender equality and male oppression affected their attitudes to commercial sex. The participants are preoccupied with a concern about being men who oppress women, and they develop different relational strategies to make the paid sexual encounter feel safer and more morally justified, both for themselves and for the seller, engaging in a quest for a more ideal sex purchase.

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III

The construction of intimacy in long-term commercial relationships in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Previous research on commercial sex has described fluidity between different forms of relationships, whereby commercial sexual relationships can be both long-term and viewed as intimate from the buyer's perspective. This article explores the construction of intimacy in long-term commercial relationships. More specifically, it examines the meaning of transactions in long-term paid sexual relationships in Sweden. Interviews were conducted with 23 Swedish men with experience purchasing sex as 'regulars'. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted. Findings show that the emotional experience is a key focus for these men when they purchase sex. The emotions involved are not delimited in time and space but are experienced both within and outside of the actual sexual encounter. Such emotions can be understood as the very precondition for the experiences of intimacy, while at the same time they create difficulties for the men who purchase sex. Experiences of intimacy are experienced in the ambiguity between unbounded and bounded authenticity and by not drawing a clear line between emotional subjectivity and consumer subjectivity.

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Introduction

Commercial sex is a complex phenomenon with many forms of expression, from exploitation and violent and destructive relations, to distanced paid relations, to intimate and long-term relationships (Farley et al. 2004; Joseph and Black 2012; Milrod and Weitzer 2012). A commercial sexual relationship can change over time, take various forms of expression simultaneously, and may be permeated by power at individual, relational and structural levels. Power relations in commercial sexual relationships are given multifaceted expression in the encounters between buyers and sellers (e.g. Sanders, Brents, and Wakefield 2020). Practices such as the purchase of sex, are often associated with unequal power relations (see Hammond and van Hooff 2020), and combining sex and money is commonly considered problematic and morally objectionable (Rubin 1998; SOU 2010, 49). The political and legal approach to

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commercial sex has been handled differently in different national contexts (Sanders, Brents, and Wakefield 2020). Sweden has adopted a neo-abolitionist approach to commercial sex, criminalising the purchase of sex since 1999. This approach targets the demand for sexual services and is based on an understanding of commercial sex as an expression of men's violence against women, and as something unworthy of a society that strives for gender equality (Holmström and Skilbrei 2017; Kotsadam and Jakobsson 2014).

Both in political debate and among the general public in Sweden, intimacy is closely associated with non-commercial relationships (Kuosmanen 2011; SOU 2010, 49). However, previous empirical research show that commercial sex is a multifaceted phenomenon, and that non-paid romantic relationships and commercial relationships cannot easily be dichotomised (Bernstein 2007; Birch 2015; Sanders 2008b). In contrast to the dominant ideological and political view in Sweden, whereby intimacy and commercial sex are seen as incompatible, these studies suggest that commercial sex may display features that are often associated with non-commercial, romantic relationships, such as emotional connection, sexual familiarity and authenticity (e.g. Sanders 2008b).

Furthermore, non-paid romantic relationships are not free from commercial aspects, and economic transactions are present in many forms of relationships. Zelizer (1997, 2005) has argued that there is a close connection between the economy and social ties, and that money has a symbolic value in relation to social connections. This also applies to commercial sex in terms of how the role of payment for the relationship differs (Jones and Hannem 2018). In addition, emotions may become commodified, with both intimacy and authenticity becoming valuable commodities in the field of commercial sex (Bernstein 2007; Illouz 2007; Sanders 2008b). As intimacy becomes more intertwined with the commercial sphere, there is a greater fluidity between different forms of relationships (Illouz 2007). In commercial sex, boundaries can become blurred with regard to expectations and obligations, with sexual relationships becoming both long-term and intimate from the buyer's perspective (Bernstein 2007; Jones and Hannem 2018; Milrod and Weitzer 2012).

Against this backdrop, this study examines how men who have long-term paid sexual relationships perceive intimacy in a national context coloured by an understanding of commercial sex as exploitation and oppression. Drawing on data from a sample of 23 Swedish men with experience of having long-term paid relationships with female sex sellers, the article aims to explore the construction of intimacy among men engaged in long-term transactional relationships with women. More specifically, the article focuses on the meaning of transactions for intimacy in long-term paid sexual relationships in Sweden.

The Swedish context

The political approach to prostitution in Sweden is based on an understanding of commercial sex as detrimental both for individuals and for society as a whole. In 1999, the so-called Sex Purchase Act (Förbud mot köp av sexuell tjänst, SFS 1962:700) prohibited the purchase of sex. Sweden took a clear ideological stand, arguing that commercial sex is driven by a demand for sexual services from women, most often expressed by men. The aim of the law is to combat prostitution, in the short-run by targeting demand with legal measures, and in the long-run by achieving normative

change in the general public (Erikson 2011; Government of Sweden 1998; Holmström and Skilbrei 2017).

Since the implementation of the law, support for the criminalisation of the purchase of sex has grown among the general public, indicating normative change (Kotsadam and Jakobsson 2014; Kuosmanen 2008; Svedin et al. 2012). Prohibition of the purchase of sex has strong political support in Sweden and current policy is seen as adequate. In addition, the Swedish Government has recently called for stronger measures through supplementary directives to sexual crime investigations. The government has suggested more severe punishment by removing fines as a sanction for the purchase of sex (Government of Sweden 2020). In some parts of Sweden, the police report men who have children and who have been caught buying sex to the social authorities (Umeå Kommun 2019). Some politicians have suggested implementing this procedure at a national level (Fritzon, Gustafsson, and Ohlsson 2020).

The purchase of sex and intimacy

A growing body of research has examined men's motivations for engaging in commercial sex (e.g. Birch 2015; Huysamen 2019; Kong 2015, 2016; McKeganey and Barnard 1996; Monto 2010). The motivation to purchase (or sell) sex can be understood in terms of push and pull factors and paying for sex involves a complex range of motivations beyond sexual pleasure and relief (Hammond and van Hooff 2020; Sanders 2008b; Vanwesenbeeck 2013). In a study on men who purchase sex, differences were identified between one-time visitors and regulars in the motivations for purchasing sex and in the dynamics of the commercial relationship (Sanders 2008a). Features such as communication, courtship rituals, sexual familiarity, and the desire for mutual satisfaction, as well as friendship and emotional connections can be important for regular purchasers (Milrod and Monto 2012; Sanders 2008a). However, the difference between regulars and one-time visitors is not clear-cut, and qualities presumed to be associated with regulars are also found among one-time visitors (Grönvall, Holmström, and Plantin 2020; Jones and Hannem 2018). Trust and safety, for example, can be important both for men who purchase sex as regulars and as one-time visitors (Grönvall, Holmström, and Plantin 2020; Sanders 2008b).

Previous studies have thus incorporated intimacy into an analysis of commercial sex (Bernstein 2007; Carbonero and Gómez Garrido 2018; Lever and Dolnick 2010; Tavory and Poulin 2012). In this context, intimacy has been defined as having physical and sexual contact and sharing time and experiences, with key elements being self-disclosure and revealing important aspects of one's life (Carbonero and Gómez Garrido 2018). An alternative conceptualisation of intimacy can be found in a study of trust and intimacy in sadomasochistic play, as an interaction based more on the sense of exclusivity or privilege that is offered, than on the 'depth' of the interaction. Based on such an understanding, intimacy is about access, which 'depends on the cultivation of a belief in the privacy of a particular experience' (Newmahr 2011, 171). In addition, previous conceptualisations of paid sexual interactions as being incompatible with dominant scripts for sexual intimacy have been questioned (Jones and Hannem 2018). It has been argued that sex sellers and buyers construct interactions drawing on

dominant cultural scripts, rewriting them in a way that set the boundaries for their encounters. This allows buyers to experience intimacy within a bounded temporal and emotional frame (Jones and Hannem 2018). Based on Newmahr's (2011) conceptualisation of intimacy and eroticism, these cultural scripts for sexual intimacy can be understood as drawing on, and challenging, cultural ideals about heteronormative sexuality with regards to features such as access, gender and power. Thus, intimacy is not free from power and patriarchal arrangements, but is intertwined with them at a relational level, where personal relationships remain strongly gendered and where intimacy and inequality coexist (Carbonero and Gómez Garrido 2018; Jamieson 1999).

Bernstein (2007) has argued that many men who visit escorts and erotic masseuses are looking for an authentic and genuine experience that is delimited in time, offering a form of 'bounded authenticity'. For sellers to provide this experience, they are required to make both emotional and relational investments. In addition, friendship is understood as being closely related to intimacy for men who purchased sex as regulars (Sanders 2008b). One example of bounded authenticity in commercial sex is the purchase of the 'girlfriend experience', which includes elements similar to those in non-commercial romantic relationships which render the consumer's experience more authentic. These include kissing and cuddling and engaging in partner-like activities such as having dinner, going to the cinema or sleeping together. The 'girlfriend experience' also has communicative dimensions that help to establish a unique relationship between buyer and seller (Carbonero and Gómez Garrido 2018; Milrod and Monto 2012). Consequently, it has shifted the symbolic limits of bodily practice and changed the nature of emotional labour. Since activities that were previously denoted as being part of intimate, non-commodified, private life, may now be part of commercial sex, greater effort is needed on the part of sellers to maintain the integrity of their personal sphere (Carbonero and Gómez Garrido 2018). Previous studies have shown that men who purchase sex enjoy pleasuring the seller, whether or not this pleasure is illusory, and that some women do experience sexual pleasure in encounters with buyers. However, this is a form of managed intimacy, with both parties being conscious of the importance of remuneration for the existence of the relationship, which can dissolve if the buyer develops romantic feelings or initiates a romantic relationship (Bernstein 2007; Hammond and van Hooff 2020; Kontula 2008; Milrod and Weitzer 2012).

Zelizer (1996, 1997) has argued that different forms of payment define the quality of social relations between parties. In order to make sense of the often complex social ties associated with money, people innovate and differentiate between currencies, bringing different meanings to their various exchanges. Culture, social structures and social relations mark the qualities and meaning of money, but money also serves to denote the quality of social relationships. The complex connection between payments and social ties is also present in commercial sex. Non-cash or 'gift-exchange' payments may blur the boundaries between paid and non-paid relationships, requiring additional emotional labour from sellers (Bernstein 2007; Jones and Hannem 2018). The shape of the relationship and the remuneration may also blur the boundaries between transactional sex and commercial sex (Stoebenau et al. 2016).

Emotions are not merely components of the motivational structure of the consumer, but actual commodities in themselves (Illouz 2018). Emotions are not only marketed and commodified but are shaped and created in the context of specific acts of consumption, becoming something which Illouz (2018) calls *emodities*. Consumers are actively involved in the co-production of the emotional experience, thus blurring the distinctions between consumer and producer, and between objects and emotions (Illouz and Bengier Alaluf 2019). Consequently, emotional subjectivity becomes inseparable from consumer subjectivity and ‘consumers have become increasingly involved in “emotional labour”’, which requires an incorporation of the consumptive sphere into Hochschild’s concept of emotional labour (Hochschild 2012; Illouz and Bengier Alaluf 2019, 249).

The study

In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 men who had experienced purchasing sex regularly from one woman. Advertisements for the study were placed on two different escort sites, on Twitter and Facebook, and in two local newspapers (in one metropolitan area and one small town/rural area). Interview participation was initiated by the participants answering the advertisement by email or telephone.

All participants were informed both verbally and in writing about anonymity, confidentiality and the study procedure. Interviews were conducted face to face, by telephone or via Skype, depending on the participants’ preferences. All interviews (except with two participants who declined recording) were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All quotes have been translated from Swedish to English and all names are pseudonyms. Ethical approval was granted by the Regional Ethics Review Board in Lund (Dnr 2017/983). A reflexive methodology guided both the interview process, and the thematisation and analysis of the data (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2018). The interviews, the analysis, and reading about theoretical concepts did not occur in separate steps, but as parallel processes. A social constructionist approach to storytelling constituted the basis for the analysis, and the interviews should be understood as stories (Plummer 1995). The transcribed interviews have been thematised on the basis of recurrent and dominant themes, and contradictions and slippages within the stories. Thematic analysis was facilitated by the use of the Nvivo 12 software package (QSR International, Melbourne).

The interviews included questions about sexuality, relationships and the meaning of purchasing sex. All men in the study purchased sex from cisgender women and one had also bought sex from transgender women. The period of time during which they had bought sex varied from one to thirty years and the length of the relationship with a single woman varied between a couple of months and eight years. A majority of participants had also purchased sex as one-time buyers. Most of the participants were recruited via escort sites, and a majority came into contact with sellers through online advertisements. Other means of contact included massage parlours, regular sex or dating sites, street environments in Sweden or abroad, or through friends or through business associates. The youngest participant was 24 and the oldest 73, with

the majority being between 40 and 60 years of age. Seven men were married or had a steady partner, and 16 were single. All participants were born in Sweden.

Since it is illegal to purchase sex in Sweden, anonymity and confidentiality were of major importance in the study. For a majority of the participants, the interview offered them to talk about their experiences of purchasing sex for the first time. Intimacy, loneliness and longing for love were sensitive topics for some participants. The interviewer was responsive to the interviewees' reactions throughout the interview, and participants were informed about possible support or counselling when needed. One important methodological aspect of storytelling when talking about a criminalised and stigmatised activity is self-presentation. In interviews about the purchase of sex conducted in a national context where purchasing sex is a criminal offence, the participants have to relate to a specific image of a sex buyer. How contextual factors impact participants' self-understandings and self-presentation (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011; Huysamen 2016) has been taken into consideration throughout the interview process and analysis.

Findings

Familiarity

Study participants perceived purchasing sex as being better and safer in various ways when they met one woman regularly. Communication was an important aspect for some and becoming familiar with a seller made it easier to meet each other's expectations and sexual desires. Knowing one another was also perceived as making the sexual encounter safer both for themselves and the woman. For some men, this was associated with the purchase of sex being illegal in Sweden, or with perceptions about the seller's vulnerability. Martin, a single man in his thirties, said:

It can of course be kind of exciting to meet a new girl. But I find that it gets better when you have met a couple of times, both sexually and socially. Both for me and for her, because she knows what she can expect, when she shows up. She doesn't have to worry or anything, since she knows what will happen. You have got to know each other a bit, and you know what to talk about - [it's] a bit more relaxed.

Some participants said that meeting one woman regularly created feelings of closeness and intimacy. The longing for a physical sexual connection with a woman that included mutual pleasure was better met when having a long-term relationship with the same seller. Some participants experienced that meeting the same person and getting to know her before a sexual encounter made the sexual interaction and pleasure feel more authentic and genuine for both parties. For some informants, this was linked to a feeling of being affirmed as a man and a sexual being. One important part of this was seeing the woman's sexual pleasure, which both enhanced men's own pleasure and provided them with acknowledgement as sexual partners. Participants were aware that the display of pleasure might be an act, but so long as it was well performed, this was sufficient to make the sexual encounter feel real. Klas, a single man in his forties, described this as follows:

So even if I have paid for their time ..., the women that I've met, at least pretend that they appreciate and like me. Then if it's a game, if they pretend or not, at least they seem to like it, and that's enough [for me].

The perceived meaning of purchasing sex changed over time, especially for participants who had purchased sex for many years. Compared to earlier, when their focus had been on sexual activities and pleasure, they were now focussed on the relational aspects and social closeness. Nils, a single man in his sixties who had purchased sex for 30 years, said: '... the first time it was more about sex, but now it's more intimacy, affection and love, that you long for'. Ola, also single and in his sixties with a 30 year history of purchasing sex, put it in a similar way: 'Over the years it turns into ... from just a desire for banging, if you excuse my language, to being more oriented towards some kind of relationship, where sex is important, but not that crucial as it used to be'. Purchasing sex from one woman regularly or for a long period of time thereby became a strategy for the participants to buy sex in a way that created closeness, familiarity and intimacy. With continuity in the relationship, the participants experienced that they got to know the woman on a more personal level. Gustaf, in his forties and with a steady partner, said this:

If you meet the same woman, it will inevitably turn into something that seems like a relationship. You get to know that person, at least partially, or at least the person that she is with you. So, maybe it's a different form of intimacy, another way of seeing each other, and even another way of having sex than if you only meet once.

For some, the reasons they purchased sex from the same person regularly were linked to aspects of intimacy other than sexual and physical closeness. For these men, purchasing sex was described as filling a social need for socialising, and for small talk and cuddling. Carl, single and in his twenties, said: 'There have been times when I've paid for sex, but then we haven't had sex, because I just wanted to hang out, and sit on a couch together, cuddling like a girlfriend and boyfriend.' Knowing one another well could also change the character of the relationship from being a delimited transactional relationship to one involving care, responsibility and obligations. Per, single and in his forties, lived in southern Sweden and only purchased sex in Denmark. He described a difference between the paid sexual relationship he had had with a woman for several years, and when he bought sex as a one-time visitor at brothels or sex clubs:

This relationship has changed in the sense that it's a lot on her terms, and that's how it should be. I feel very comfortable taking care of her and so on. But then for me, it's a bit more relaxed to just see someone once, at a club or so.

Emotional involvement and longing for closeness

A recurring theme in the interviews was how commercial sex helped men escape from feelings of loneliness and longing to feel closeness and intimacy. Some participants expressed the wish to feel both physically and emotionally close to a woman and wanting this feeling to be mutual. This provided them with an illusion of not being alone. As Carl described it, '... Yes, sometimes sex has also been a part of it, but never anything like "porn star sex" or so. For me it's more about fantasising about

not being alone.' For others, it was more about feeling close to someone and receiving emotional affirmation, as Klas described it, '... I'm rather lonely, and I've difficulties meeting women. Paying for sex gives me intimacy, and not surprisingly sex, and I get recognition from someone.' Participants reported how various circumstances made it difficult to achieve closeness and intimacy without paying for it. For a few, there was difficulty meeting someone when living in a rural area. For others it was about perceived deficiencies in their own personalities, such as being shy, boring or not socially outgoing. Nils, a single man in his sixties, said:

The reason [for me buying sex], well, where should I start? I'm a boring person, a quiet person, with low self-esteem, and a bit shy. I've never had a girlfriend, and neither do I have friends so socialise with. And, I shouldn't say unfortunately, but I do long for intimacy and affection.

Nils longed for closeness and tenderness and when asked whether he felt he got this when he purchased sex, he answered:

No, not really, I don't get that, since they are more into, if you see that type of woman, they sell sex, they don't sell love, so to say. And that's what I long for. But sometimes the desire [for love] is so strong that you... you long for a hug or to be intimate with someone and things like that.

A recurrent theme in some accounts concerned the fluidity of the boundary between paid sexual relationships and other forms of relationship, such as friendship or love. For some, the relationship started out as a paid sexual encounter and later turned into a friendship. This was the case for Jesper, a single man in his forties: 'I've quite a lot of female friends actually, that I socialise with. And one of my best friends I happened to meet when buying sex from her'. Some participants talked about this change as a natural development of the relationship, due to both interest and the emerging closeness. Björn, a single man in his forties, described the change from how he bought sex when he was younger, when his principal focus had been on the sexual activity, to how he purchased sex at the time of the interview:

It could be a full evening, when I treat her dinner, we hang out, and the woman stays the night, and then leaves the next morning, and she simply gets a small amount of money for that. It's even so that I've visited one of the women's house, I've met her grown-up children.

For others, the relationship changed due to the growth of feelings for a specific woman. One participant had met the same woman for eight years and continued to meet her because he liked her as a person. He felt their relationship had developed into a friendship, and they also met without him paying and without having sex. For others, the paid relationship had developed into a romantic relationship, as was the case with Jesper (and a different woman from the one previously mentioned):

... and one of them I almost hooked up with. And well, we had damn good sex, nothing more than that, and she obviously liked it a lot, and she liked me a lot. I taught her how to ride a motorbike. We went for walks in the woods, and we even had sex without payment.

For some participants, what started out as friendship turned into paid sexual meetings. This is how Ulf, a single man in his thirties, described what happened when he bought sex from a friend, an experience that was later reframed by the woman, who later considered the money a loan that she would pay back:

I had a female friend, a good friend of mine, and she knew that I had bought sex abroad, and when I once contacted her for casual sex, she responded; 'and what do I get?' And I didn't know if she was joking or what to respond; 'Well, what do you want?' 'A thousand crowns,' she said. 'Ok, let's go for it,' I said.

The fluid boundaries surrounding long-term paid sexual relationships could create awkward feelings for some participants. Closeness could create feelings of exclusivity, which led to discomfort if the woman met someone else. Klas described a relationship he had with a woman from whom he regularly bought sex:

The woman I used to meet quite often, she hooked up with someone last fall, but kept on seeing me anyway. They're getting married this summer, and he doesn't know that she's still seeing someone else. He has some idea of what she has been doing, but she sees me secretly, and that feels a bit difficult for me. But it's kind of exciting as well, since she seems to like me so much that she keeps on seeing me, even if she now has a partner. But I'm still not totally comfortable with it.

Changes in the relationship and the emergence of intimate emotions were not always easy for participants. Several men reported feeling rejected and left out when the woman ended the relationship. Edvard, single and in his thirties, described an episode when he had fallen in love with the seller, and explained how the break-up had made him feel used and betrayed: 'I said I loved her, but she was making fun of me... it still hurts when I think about it'.

Conditional exclusivity

Another factor linked to the experience of intimacy and closeness when purchasing sex was the importance of feeling special to the seller. Several participants expressed that they wanted to feel that they were the only one, or at least the first one that day. For some, this was linked to the quality of the sexual encounter. Klas said:

It's probably a bit naïve to say, but I do want the woman I meet to have a good time as well, and as I said before, it turns me on to see her having a good time. But if I'm her fifth customer that day, then it can be quite fake and instrumental.

Feeling special to the seller was for some participants associated with the duration of the encounter. This could involve getting more time than they paid for, how the time together was spent, or time becoming less important. Lennart, a single man in his fifties, expressed it like this:

Since I met her several times, it felt like, you know two hours, but she stayed for four. We fell asleep and slept together for two hours. It was really like, it was somewhat like GFE, you know, girlfriend experience.

In terms of money, feeling special to the seller was about getting a special price or the price changing when they became a regular buyer. For one participant it was about not being considered a buyer of sex. As his relationship with a woman

developed, she started to call him a friend instead of a client. A recurrent theme in some participants' stories was the experience of getting different benefits compared to one-time visitors. This perhaps involved meeting at the woman's house or knowing her real name or occupation. It could also involve knowing personal things about her life and her background. For some participants, condom use changed as the relationship developed. While condom use was almost universally a rule on the first visits, it was less common in long-term relationships with the same seller. Some participants were careful to point out that it was the woman's decision to not use a condom, while this was associated with feelings of exclusivity.

Even if participants felt special to the seller, they were aware of the meaning of money in the relationship. Ola was clear in pointing out that he did not see his long-term paid relationships as purchasing sex, and he paid in the form of restaurant visits and gifts. He was still clear however that the relationship was conditional on money:

'But clearly, it's about money when it comes down to it. If I wouldn't pay it wouldn't happen. Then there would be no relationship.' He was also clear that this was something both he and the woman he was seeing were aware of: 'But on the other hand, I'm aware of the fact, and she's too, that if I stop paying, the relationship will end.'

Although purchasing sex linked closely to intimacy and closeness for some participants, there was a clear difference between having a long-term paid relationship and having a non-paid relationship with someone they were in love with. Dan said: 'I do think that I don't really like having sex with someone that I'm not in a relationship with. I long for, like a deeper relationship with someone, actually.' Robert, single and in his thirties, expressed a similar view of the differences, but with a focus on the meaning of the transaction:

Of course, it can reduce feelings of frustration, and give relief. But it's by far not to compare with what it's like to meet someone that you really like and are intimate with and have sex with. That's a totally different thing! When it comes down to it, it's a transaction anyhow.

As indicated, some participants did not pay with money but with gifts, restaurant visits, hotel nights and vacations. One gave a monthly allowance to a woman in exchange for sex and intimacy. At the same time as it was clear to most participants that money framed the relationship, this could also create some unexpected difficulties. For some participants, remuneration as regular or monthly allowance led to feelings of responsibility for the seller's financial situation and standard of living. Per, for example, said that regular payments made it difficult for him to end the (paid) relationship with a woman he was seeing regularly, and also excluded the possibility of (non-paid) relationships with other women:

I find this really hard. I somehow feel like I really want to keep on seeing her, and I've told her that I want to see her as long as she wants to. But on the other hand, I do feel that I don't really have a choice. Somehow, it would be like pulling the rug from under her.

Per, who lived on investment income, also talked about how the woman's difficult financial situation and his perception of her being dependent on his financial support, affected how he planned his finances:

I've made a budget for a year, and I've calculated on how much money I need to set aside. And somehow I feel like, sometimes I give up other planned activities, when I feel like seeing someone else or so, then I think, 'She will probably need a little extra here', or 'I think I'll wait with that,' just to see how things turn out.

For other men, providing financial support in a long-term paid relationship led to a wish to control how the money was spent in a wise and responsible way, such as on rent instead of luxury products.

Discussion

For some men in this study, becoming a regular client was a strategy that enabled them to purchase sex in a context in which it is criminalised, and yet the Sex Purchase Act was of minor significance with respect to how they purchased sex. Ideas about intimacy and commercial sex were more prominent than the legal context. Intimacy and authenticity were of central importance to participants' experience of their paid sexual encounters. The importance of closeness and intimacy in participants' stories may be seen as a form of bounded authenticity (Bernstein 2007). This theme in the participants' stories is supported by previous research on purchasing sex in other national contexts, indicating that relational practices are more complex than would be suggested by structural understandings of commercial sex alone (Bernstein 2007; Carbonero and Gómez Garrido 2018; Milrod and Monto 2012; Sanders 2008b).

However, how participants purchased sex to feel intimacy, or to avoid feelings of loneliness, may be interpreted as a means of obtaining certain emotions and avoiding others. In participants' accounts, it is not sex in itself that becomes the primary commodity, instead it is the emotional experience associated with being close to a woman sexually or physically. Drawing on Illouz's (2018) ideas, commercial sex may therefore best be understood in terms of emodities, with the emotional experience itself being a focus for these men when they purchase sex. The difficulty of separating emotional subjectivity from consumer subjectivity leads to them doing emotional labour as consumers (Illouz and Bengier Alaluf 2019) and rewriting the script for the paid sexual relationship (Jones and Hannem 2018). The relaxation in condom use can be understood as being associated both with perceptions of exclusivity and notions of trust and intimacy (c.f. Newmahr 2011; Stoebenau et al. 2016).

Thus, participants' stories about longing for love or trying to escape feelings of loneliness cannot be fully captured by the concept of bounded authenticity. Findings indicate that the relationship and its emotions and obligations spread beyond the commercial relationship into the private sphere of participants' lives, making the boundaries between commercial and non-commercial relationships blurred and the experienced authenticity unbounded, albeit ambiguously. Men's stories suggest that even if the relationships were similar to non-paid forms of friendship or love, the relationships' commercial aspects were an ever-present restriction which affected feelings of intimacy and companionship. Even if participants experienced the relationship as

intimate, they had reservations, noting that the seller might be acting and that the emotions involved in the commercial relationship were not real (cf. Bernstein 2007; Hochschild 2012). As one participant expressed it, the women 'sell sex, they don't sell love'. The relationship would not exist if clients did not pay for it, indicating a clear frame for the relationship based on money.

The ambiguity between bounded and unbounded authenticity required both navigation and negotiation by the participants. Consequently, participants used different tactics to change the meaning of money in their relationships with sellers. Different currencies were invented, and by paying for sex with restaurant visits, hotel nights or a monthly allowance allowing payment in some instances to be seen as gifts or allowances. When payment for sex was made in these alternative hidden currencies, power relations and experienced inequality could change (Zelizer 1997). Further, using such currencies in the commercial relationship drew on cultural scripts related to courtship rituals associated with non-commercial heterosexual relationships (cf. Jones and Hannem 2018). This was negotiated by the participants in relation to feeling unique or special to the seller. On the basis of Newmahr's (2011) conceptualisation, feeling special or privileged in relation to another person may be understood as central to the experience of intimacy. By using currencies other than cash to purchase sex, participants tried to reduce the relationship's commercial aspects, creating intimacy through a negotiation between feeling special and the valuation of currencies in relation to intimacy (cf. Zelizer 1996). The blurring of payment in participants' stories in some cases made it difficult for them to define the relationship's obligations and responsibilities, as different payment methods were associated with different forms of inequality in the relationship (Zelizer 1997). Along with 'romantic' courtship rituals borrowed from non-paid heterosexual relationships, other patriarchal arrangements associated with heteronormativity were also followed, such as the desire to be in control of the woman's spending. The rewriting of heterosexual scripts was not bound to sexual encounters but affected other aspects of participants' lives (c.f. Bernstein 2007; Sanders 2008a) and required navigating in relation both to commercial sex and heteronormative ideals, where intimacy and patriarchy coexist at a relational level.

Conclusion

For men in this study, in purchasing sex as regulars, the boundaries between delimited paid sexual encounters and non-commercial heterosexual relationships became blurred. Hidden currencies both reduced the commercial aspects of the paid relationship, and made the expectations, obligations and boundaries of the relationship unclear. Perceptions of intimacy and trust, expectations of the relationship and perceived obligations came to be experienced as permeating the private sphere of the participants' lives, constituting an ambiguously unbounded form of authenticity.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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III

Purchasing Sex in Sweden—A Risky Business

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This article is based on a study exploring how men who purchase sex in Sweden experience and navigate risk. The focus is on individual assessments of risk in relation to experiences of crime, exploitation and stigma. Based on interviews with 30 Swedish men who purchase sex, an inductive thematic analysis has been applied. The participating men had different strategies to avoid crime and exploitation and they navigated in relation to stigma when purchasing sex. Their risk assessments and conceptualizations of purchasing sex were based on own experiences and on the normative discourse on commercial sex in Sweden. Their fields of action were structured through discipline, governing and responsabilization, and they tried to distance themselves from being defined as ‘sex buyers’ and to purchase sex in ‘good’ ways.

Key Words: purchase of sex, buying sex, commercial sex, risk, stigma

INTRODUCTION

Commercial sex has long been considered dangerous and risky, mainly due to its association with different forms of criminality, such as organized crime, drugs and violence (Jakobsson and Kotsadam 2013; Deering *et al.* 2014; Sterling and van der Meulen 2018). The dangers of commercial sex have also been associated with its links to an underground economy (Sanders *et al.* 2020). Discussions of danger, crime and risk in commercial sex have mainly concerned people who sell sex and who are exposed to procurers, buyers or others (Deering *et al.* 2014; Platt *et al.* 2018). Men who purchase sex have primarily been understood as causing risks for sellers (Sterling and van der Meulen 2018), and to a large extent as individuals who contribute to commercial sex being a risky environment. Less attention has been paid to buyers’ perspectives on risk and their individual experiences of risk linked to the purchase of sex, especially in a national context in which the purchase of sex is a criminal offence (Hammond 2015; Grönvall *et al.* 2021b).

Commercial sex is a phenomenon that involves several actors, and where interactions and perceptions of risk are interwoven on different levels (Monto and Milrod 2020). Previous research has shown that sex buyers are aware of or relate to the exploitation to which sellers are exposed, which affects their behaviour in different ways (Grönvall *et al.* 2021a; Sanders *et al.* 2020). Men who purchase sex manage risk and make risk assessments when purchasing sex,

both in relation to sellers and third parties. Additionally, they risk becoming crime victims when purchasing sex (Sanders *et al.* 2020). There is also risk related to the fact that purchasing sex is a stigmatized and, in some national contexts, criminalized activity, with a potential risk of being exposed as a sex buyer (Kotsadam and Jakobsson 2014; Hammond 2015; Grönvall *et al.* 2021a).

Despite the way in which different structural conditions shape experiences of commercial sex, lived experiences of the phenomenon are characterized by complexities (Weitzer 2010). Individual, interactional and structural aspects influence how a phenomenon is interpreted and understood. Taking this into account – how do men who purchase sex in a context in which their activities are criminalized understand and perceive risk? The aim of this article is to explore this question among men who purchase sex in Sweden. More specifically, the article will focus on individual assessments of risk in relation to experiences of crime, exploitation and stigma.

THE PURCHASE OF SEX IN SWEDEN

Sweden has a long history of striving to control or combat prostitution (Erikson 2011). The Swedish Government has a neo-abolitionist approach to the phenomenon, and the Swedish context is coloured by an understanding of prostitution as an expression of structural gender inequality and gender-based violence (Erikson 2011; Holmström and Skilbrei 2017). Purchasing sex has been criminalized in Sweden since 1999, with sanctions ranging from a fine to one year of imprisonment (SFS 1998:408). The aim of the criminalization was to combat prostitution by targeting the demand side, in the short-term using repressive measures, and in the long-term by striving for normative change, such as changes in men's attitudes to purchasing sex (Holmström and Skilbrei 2017). Several countries have implemented similar laws regulating the purchase of sex, but Sweden's approach is still considered to stand out with regard to its firm base in a state-feminist ideology (Scoular 2015). In practice, the implementation of the legislation has meant that men convicted of purchasing sex are almost exclusively given a fine (Olsson 2020). Support for the criminalization of the purchase of sex has grown among the general public, indicating a normative change (Kuosmanen 2008; Svedin *et al.* 2012; Kotsadam and Jakobsson 2014). However, support for criminalizing the sale of sex has also increased, which indicates that attitudes among the general public have a stronger focus on repressive measures than previously (Kuosmanen 2011; Holmström and Skilbrei 2017).

Recent debate in Sweden has called for more repressive measures targeting men who purchase sex (for example, Johansson and Lindhagen 2020). In 2018, when the interviews for this study were conducted, plans were being discussed for a bill intending to make it a criminal offence for Swedish citizens to purchase sex abroad (Report of Committee on Justice 2018/19:JuU11). Since then, supplementary directives to Sweden's latest sexual crime inquiry have suggested investigating a stiffening of the sanction for purchasing sex by removing fines from the penalty scale (Government of Sweden 2020). Additionally, on a regional level, fathers who purchase sex are being reported to the social authorities, a routine that some politicians want to implement at the national level (Umeå kommun 2019). The legislation on sexual offences was sharpened in several respects in 2018, since which time Sweden's rape law has been based on consent. This makes it possible to prosecute someone for 'negligent rape', a criminal classification for performing a sexual act with someone when you should have realized that the person does not participate voluntarily (SFS 2018:618). This becomes relevant in relation to suspected procuring and human trafficking, and the provision has been tested in court in relation to the purchase of sex. One man has been convicted of negligent rape for purchasing sex from a woman he suspected was a victim of human trafficking (Svea Court of Appeal 2019).

The repressive approach targeting the demand for commercial sex has also become more prominent in practice, as the police's work in this regard has intensified in recent years (Polismyndigheten 2020). However, previous research on the implementation of the Swedish Sex Purchase Act indicates that the legislation has targeted a specific kind of sex purchases (and purchasers) more than others (Olsson 2020). Most arrests of men purchasing sex have been made in Sweden's three largest cities. The men arrested have overall had lower average incomes than men in Sweden in total, and a larger proportion had foreign citizenship than in the population at large. A relatively large proportion of the men had been arrested in 'open arenas', such as the street environment or at hotels (Olsson 2020). Previous research shows that men who purchase sex have different socioeconomic backgrounds, which indicates that the men being caught purchasing sex in Sweden are not representative of the group as a whole (for example, Sanders *et al.* 2020). Some studies have noted that those who are arrested tend to be inexperienced clients, which indicates that experienced buyers have learned to avoid the police (Monto and Milrod 2014; Sanders *et al.* 2020). Wealthy buyers tend to use more concealed arenas and experienced buyers use different strategies to avoid law enforcement (Lever and Dolnick 2010; Horswill and Weitzer 2018; Olsson 2020).

RISK AND CRIME IN COMMERCIAL SEX

As was mentioned above, the research on commercial sex as a risky and dangerous phenomenon for sellers is extensive (Deering *et al.* 2014). There is now a considerable literature illuminating the links between commercial sex and an underground economy (Sanders *et al.* 2020) and organized crime (Jakobsson and Kotsadam 2013), the violence and other crime committed against sellers (Platt *et al.* 2018), and the harm and negative effects on the sellers' physical and psychological wellbeing (Farley *et al.* 2004; Farley 2017). Men who purchase sex have primarily been viewed as producing danger in commercial sex – either by being the ones committing the crimes or exposing the sellers to violence (Deering *et al.* 2014), or by fuelling the sex trade and ensuring that the violence against sellers will continue (Harrington 2018).

However, some research has contributed to a broader picture of the risks of commercial sex by also focusing on men who purchase sex. The results from a quantitative study of commercial sex and digitalization indicated that a relatively large proportion of the men who participated in the study had been victims of crime, such as scams, financial crimes or physical violence. The men in the study were also concerned about their safety, and used different precautions when purchasing sex (Sanders *et al.* 2020). This has also been found in other studies, where men purchasing sex have expressed a fear of being exposed to blackmail, robbery and assault (Scaramuzzino 2014; Horswill and Weitzer 2018; Sterling and van der Meulen 2018). Fully researching sex providers and only having contact with those with good reviews were used as safety strategies to avoid being exposed to crime (Horswill and Weitzer 2018). Previous research on the purchase of sex also indicates that in national contexts where the purchase of sex is illegal, sex buyers experience a fear of law enforcement (Horswill and Weitzer 2018). Sterling and van der Meulen (2018) have studied men who purchase sex in Canada, which has a law similar to that in Sweden, and focused on the men's attitudes to the law and perceptions of risk. By studying conversations in online forums, the study showed how the men tried to manage the feeling of increased risk resulting from the implementation of the law by dissociating themselves from being defined as criminals. Other ways of managing risk involved increasing anonymity and changing communication practices. The men also avoided certain types of sex sellers whom they suspected were victims of trafficking and monitored by the police. Sterling and van der Meulen (2018) interpreted the risk management engaged in by the participants in relation to the law as hybrid risk knowledge production. The men based their knowledge on experience

and information gathered from different (more or less reliable) sources, a process that affected their behaviour in relation to sex sellers. Conversely, a study conducted in a UK setting indicated that internet technologies and the local infrastructure have made visits to sex sellers easier and led to sex buyers feeling safer (Pettinger 2015).

Previous studies show that men who purchase sex are aware and concerned about the exploitation they see, and that they have experienced situations in which they suspected that the seller was being exploited in some way (Hammond 2015; Sanders *et al.* 2020). By avoiding meeting sellers whom they thought were exploited, they tried to act upon or distance themselves from this exploitation. Sanders *et al.* (2020) have argued that ‘environments have a huge effect on how clients manage risk in an unregulated and stigmatized industry and one where privacy in a digital world is increasingly surveilled’ (p. 187). Additionally, some studies have shown how risk can be a tempting aspect for men purchasing sex, when it is a controlled and relatively harmless form of risk (Kong 2016; Grönvall *et al.* 2021a).

Individuals’ perceptions of risk in relation to different forms of criminal activity have been studied in the field of criminology, with varying results. Perceived risks of arrest by the police and the severity of the punishment may serve as a deterrent if they are linked to previous experience (Lab 2020). However, a study on adult marijuana use found that severity along with combined legal factors have a minimal influence by comparison with social background characteristics and social support factors (Meier and Johnson 1977). Further, perceptions of stigma and social disapproval have been found to be the greatest concern, with the possibility of going to prison and being sanctioned by the legal system being less of a deterrent than these social factors (Williams and Hawkins 1986; Taylor 2019). Sanders *et al.* (2020) have shown how men who purchase sex navigate in relation to different forms of risk, indicating that fear of exposure to a partner or social network constitutes a bigger concern than fear of law enforcement. Another study has shown that men who purchase sex negotiate stigma by distancing themselves from the cultural and political discourse that depicts them as deviants or perpetrators. The men acknowledged that abuse and exploitation occur, but identified themselves as ‘good’ clients by distancing themselves from such activities and supporting responsible practices (Hammond 2015).

Thus, risk when purchasing sex involves more than only law enforcement, and the law may be understood as an inseparable dimension of social relations. It operates alongside other discourses and practices to shape the subjects, spaces and forms of power in commercial sex. Law have an ability to punish crime in a direct sense, but may also serve to normalize what lies ‘outside’ its field of regulation (Scoular 2015). Hence, the law has not become irrelevant, but the legal complex has become embedded in governmental strategies that increasingly centre on the routine administration of lives (Veitch *et al.* 2007; Scoular 2015). Prominent in the regulation of commercial sex are the modern forms of power and governance at a distance (Scoular 2015). By means of normalizing, disciplinary, responsabilizing and bio-political power, power operates through (not over) individuals by structuring their possible fields of action (Foucault 1978; Scoular and O’Neill 2007). The shaping of subjectivities and interactions among and between groups is constituted in the relation between normative value systems and legal processes and everyday practices (Sterling and van der Meulen 2018). By combining macro and micro approaches, the interplay of agency and structure in situ is made visible, which makes it possible to make sense of the social world of actors and the way agency is constrained by structure (Hayes *et al.* 2020). Subjectivities may employ different rationalities and strategies when navigating in relation to risk, which can be illuminated by using the subject’s positioning as an analytical category (confer, Sterling and van der Meulen 2018). It is in this intersection between subjective experiences and normative value systems in relation to crime, exploitation and stigma in commercial sex that this study has its focus.

METHOD

This study is based on an empirical sample of 30 men with experiences of purchasing sex in Sweden and/or abroad. Advertisements for participation in the study were placed on two escort sites, on Facebook, on Twitter and in two local newspapers, where a majority of the participants were recruited through escort sites. Participation in the study was initiated by the participants responding to the ad by email or telephone, and they were given both written and oral information about the study procedure, participation and confidentiality. Their consent was either given in writing or was orally recorded. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, by telephone or via Skype, depending on the participants' preference. All interviews were conducted by the author. The author's previous working experience in the field and the participants' research of the author's background and publications before the interview, was perceived as helpful in creating a trustful space for the interview. The interviews were semi-structured and covered five themes: the meaning of buying sex, sexuality, partners and relationships, vulnerability and welfare efforts, which were used as a basic support for what the interviewees chose to talk about. The interviews were recorded (with the exception of three, where the participants declined recording) and then transcribed verbatim. The quotes included in this article have been translated from Swedish to English. Ethical approval was granted by the Regional Ethics Review Board in Lund (Dnr 2017/983).

A reflexive methodology has guided the thematization and analysis of the empirical material (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2018). Processing, reading and analysis has not occurred in separate steps but as a parallel process. The thematization of the transcriptions was guided by looking for dominant and recurrent themes, contradictions and slippages in the stories. The software package NVivo 12 has been employed (QSR International, Melbourne). The thematization and analysis have had a focus on subject positioning as an analytical category. This subject positioning has been explored in relation to the way in which these subjectivities employ different rationalities and strategies when navigating in relation to risk (Sterling and van der Meulen 2018).

All participants were men who purchased in-person sex from women. The participants had purchased sex as one-time visitors to different women and twenty-three of them had also had long-term paid relationships with a woman. There was a variety among those who purchased sex abroad, covering shorter visits to neighbouring countries, long-distance tourism and longer stays in a country due to work or private reasons. Sixteen were single and fourteen were married or had a steady partner. Fourteen had children. All but one had been born in Sweden. Twenty-one were employed or self-employed, two were students, four were retired, one unemployed and two lived on investment incomes. For an overview of the basic sociodemographic characteristics of the participants, see Table 1. Despite these variations among the participants, all of them were self recruited, which entails limitations for the study. Future research with other recruitment methods could give a wider sample, which might contribute to a broader understanding of risk in commercial sex.

RISK AND CRIME EXPOSURE

For all participants, purchasing sex was associated with various risks. One risk when purchasing sex was that of being exposed to violence or crime. For a majority of the participants, the purchase of sex was not something they did impulsively, but was instead well planned. They calculated risk and did research before meeting a sex seller to try to determine whether it was safe to purchase sex from that person. The research before meeting a seller was done by looking at ads and reviews, or by having prior contact with the seller. Yngve, a man in his thirties who purchased sex in Sweden, said: 'I spend quite a lot of time finding out who the person I'm going to meet is.' And Ulf, who primarily purchased sex at brothels abroad, expressed it in a similar way: 'You have to be careful,

Table 1 Participants ($n = 30$)

Sociodemographic characteristics	Number of respondents
Age	
20–29	4
30–39	6
40–49	8
50–59	5
60–75	7
Main arena for contact with sellers	
Internet	24
Brothels/sex clubs abroad	6
Outdoor sex markets	0
Years of purchasing sex	
0–9	11
10–19	10
20–40	9
National context for purchasing sex	
Sweden	10
Abroad	6
Both	14

where and how you buy sex as well'. The risk calculation was conducted before meeting a sex seller, for example, by avoiding specific sellers or arenas perceived as potentially dangerous for them. Yngve again: 'Well, some areas are a bit more, feel a bit more dangerous. I've read about people being robbed and so. And if it looks like a nicer neighbourhood, it feels significantly safer'. For many of the participants, this involved avoiding the street environment as an arena for coming into contact with sellers. The outdoor sex market was seen as potentially dangerous and as a difficult arena in relation to risk assessments (confer, Sanders 2008). The risk calculation also came to expression during the actual meeting with a sex seller. Björn, who purchased sex in Sweden, said:

I make sure that there is no one else in the apartment, or someone else who can enter the apartment. I don't let them in directly in the stairwell, for example. I always meet them at the street door. I don't want to be caught off guard by two guys standing outside. So yes, of course I've made a risk assessment.

The risk assessments conducted by the participants were based on the notion of commercial sex as a risky business, with different arenas or situations being assumed to decrease or increase the perceived risk (confer, Horswill and Weitzer 2018; Sanders *et al.* 2020). Consequently, how the men organized their sexual encounters with sex sellers was based on these risk assessments. Some of the participants had been victims of different crimes when purchasing sex. One recurrent experience in their stories involved being ripped off in different ways, with some of these experiences (such as robbery) being seen as a crime. This is how Klas, who had purchased sex in Sweden for two years, described an experience of blackmail from a presumed pimp:

Like blackmail. Not threatening with violence but with being reported [to the police], and exposure, so to speak. [Y Okay. How did you handle that?] Discussed [it] with him and then I actually paid a little extra to this girl.

On the question of whether he had reported the blackmail to the police, Klas answered: 'No, I didn't. I thought about it, but I can't call the police without turning myself in.' The participants who had had experiences like this reacted in similar ways to Klas, and they also became more cautious when buying sex following this type of event. Being ripped off moneywise was commonly not considered a crime but was rather almost expected when one was inexperienced or bought sex in a risky way. For some, this was viewed as something they had to learn to handle over time, as with Jesper, who had purchased sex in Sweden for 15 years:

From the start I was a bit of a beginner, I was robbed, I was ripped off. But gradually I learned to select, and in the end, I only met a handful of people that I felt I could trust completely. Who trusted me as well.

The participants who had been victims of crimes handled this without contacting the authorities and changed their behaviour in response to negative experiences (Sanders *et al.* 2020). As they became experienced buyers, they developed the skills to avoid crimes and to purchase sex in less risky ways (confer, Horswill and Weitzer 2018). Despite a majority of the participants not having been victims of any crime, this risk was nonetheless taken into consideration. Björn, with a five-year history of purchasing sex, expressed this as follows:

No, I haven't been the victim of a crime. But once I left the place because I felt that everything wasn't right. And then I read in the newspapers a month later that there had been knife robberies against sex buyers.

Even if most participants had not been victims of crimes, the perception of commercial sex as dangerous and of sex buyers as potential crime victims affected their interactions and engagement in commercial sex. Due to the legislation, some participants perceived reporting experiences of crime to the police as an impossibility (confer, Sanders *et al.* 2020). One aspect of their risk awareness was a self-understanding of themselves as not 'worthy' crime victims and that they had themselves to blame if they were exposed to crime (confer, Heber 2012).

EXPLOITATION

Sellers' vulnerability

A central theme in the participants' reasoning about purchasing sex, was a perception of the sellers as being vulnerable in different ways. Different factors, characteristics or situations were viewed as signs of the sellers being vulnerable or exploited. For some of them, this reasoning was based on their own experiences, but in most cases, they were influenced by the media discourse on commercial sex. For many of the participants, the perception of vulnerability was closely associated with the sellers' nations of origin. Women from Eastern Europe or African countries (such as Nigeria) were seen as being particularly vulnerable to exploitation by pimps or traffickers by comparison with Swedish women. Lennart, with a 15-year history of purchasing sex in Sweden, explained how he associated nationality with suspicions about organized crime:

... But when they post ads in English, then I skip them. Because then, it may well be quite true that it's a Spanish girl on a month's holiday in Sweden, who is taking the opportunity to earn some extra money. It might be, but well, no, it's so easy to say that you're Spanish when you're actually from Romania and you didn't even write the ad yourself. Well, you know, it doesn't feel, but it's just a feeling that I have, I haven't anything specific to go on.

For some of the participants, the sellers' nationality was associated with perceptions of intimacy and independence. Martin, who had purchased sex for 15 years in Sweden and Norway, expressed this in relation to his experiences of meeting Nigerian women selling sex:

It's partly the media image and partly it's the attitude they have, that they are very harsh and maintain a lot of distance, in how they treat you. You feel as if they are maintaining a distance even though they are in a very intimate act. And there is a difference between, well I shouldn't generalize, but the Swedish girls I have met, there is much more intimacy in those meetings. So of course, you feel that they might want to be somewhere else.

The participants based their assessment of the sellers' vulnerability on both nations of origin and on their performed authenticity or intimacy. Swedish women were associated with being both independent and intimate, while being foreign was associated with being coerced and alienated. The participants' perceptions of foreign women being forced to sell sex are close to media descriptions of prostitution and their depiction of trafficking in Sweden. These descriptions have been questioned by studies on migrant women selling sex, which indicate that media depictions uncritically conflate commercial sex with human trafficking (confer, [Vuolajärvi 2018](#); [Weitzer 2018](#)). Some participants expressed an ambiguity about differentiating Swedish sex sellers as independent and non-Swedish sex sellers as exploited. Björn said: 'Because of ignorance I guess, I don't believe that Swedish girls are exposed to trafficking. I may be wrong, but I don't think so'. The participants also talked about vulnerability in relation to socioeconomic factors in various ways. A recurrent theme related to poverty and needing money to whether the seller was selling sex out of free will. Björn, who bought sex in Sweden, said: 'A single mother with two children who sells sex doesn't do it voluntarily. She has to, to make everyday life go round'. Lennart, who also purchased sex in Sweden, reflected about free will in relation to the sellers' life situation in a similar way:

It doesn't feel like they are feeling really well. How voluntary is it to make the decision to sell sex? Yes, it's voluntary, but the circumstances that lead to that decision, well, that I'm more hesitant about.

The vulnerability and independence of the sex seller were for some presumed to be associated both with language skills and educational level. Östen, who had purchased sex in Sweden and abroad for 25 years, said: 'But if the person speaks Swedish well, or is fluent in Swedish and so on, then it's a person who is educated or in control, or at least more in control of her life'. Another aspect was the arena in which the seller offered her services. Isak, who had purchased sex in Sweden and abroad for two years, said:

I have avoided street prostitution, not so much because it's an open arena that is more easily monitored. For me that doesn't matter, since the risk of getting caught is almost non-existent. I avoid the street environment because, which has been known for a very long time, it's where it's most common with abuse and social problems. It's mostly for that reason that I avoid that arena because, maybe it's for my own peace of mind, it's a rather exposed environment, which I feel I don't really want to support.

The participants tried to assess the sellers' vulnerability based on different features or characteristics associated with powerlessness and exploitation. They based their ideas of sellers as being vulnerable both on their own experiences with sellers, and on the normative discourse in Sweden that depicts commercial sex as oppression and exploitation (see [Scoular 2015](#); [Monto](#)

and Milrod 2020). These ideas were interwoven with racialised and classed notions of autonomy when selling sex, which the participants' reflections about free will in relation to the nation of origin and socioeconomic situation both reproduced and questioned (Agustín 2007). Some of the participants did extensive research before contacting a sex seller, trying to obtain a picture of her situation. One way to go about this was by talking to the seller before a meeting. If the seller seemed bothered by having this contact before the meeting, this was taken as a sign of exploitation or pimping. Nils, who had purchased sex in Sweden and Denmark for more than 30 years, described his experiences:

You get the feeling that someone else is behind it ... So last time I called, and then they didn't want to answer, they just wanted to text. So, we texted for a while, but I wanted them to send a picture, and then she sent a picture, and then I wanted them to send a video call or something like that, that made sure that she was the one in the picture. But she didn't want to, since she said getting her picture would be enough. 'No, but I want it confirmed', I said. And then the person in question wrote, I suppose it was a man, 'don't you understand that I'm a middleman' or something like that. I don't remember exactly what he wrote, but that he was a pimp.

The content of the ad and how it was formulated could lead the participants to suspect that the woman had a pimp organizing her business. Anders, who had purchased sex in Sweden for five years, said: 'In some of the ads that I have seen, it says "it turns my partner on to see me having sex, so he will be watching", but that's nothing but a pimp'. It could also involve checking up numbers, trying to make sure that the woman worked independently and was not part of an organized network, as Jesper, who had purchased sex in Sweden for 15 years, described it:

I've googled the number and then I've seen that this and that number appeared on this and that ad. Then I've checked by using different tabs, and it becomes clear that it's different girls on every single fucking ad. Something isn't right.

Noticing other people in the apartment when coming for an appointment with a woman was seen as a sign of pimping or trafficking. Fredrik, who had purchased sex in Sweden for five years, said:

These girls are probably vulnerable in that way, and then you avoid it for two reasons primarily, I would say. Partly because it's probably trafficking, that there's some kind of trafficking involved or some pimp or whatever. And that it's presumably dangerous for me to be there, because there may be a risk of robbery or that they steal my stuff while I'm undressed or stuff like that.

Even if the participants said that they had not met sellers whom they thought were exploited, they were affected by stories about the exploitation of sex sellers presented in the media, which Klas expressed as follows:

I've read a bit about girls who have been exposed in different ways, either abused or that their customers have crossed boundaries, so it turned into a rape and so. And the response from the police hasn't been the best. These are just anecdotes, so I don't know how common it is, but I can imagine that in most cases it's not even reported.

The participants expressed that they wanted to avoid purchasing sex from someone in a vulnerable situation, or someone who had a pimp or was a victim of human trafficking. Robert,

who had purchased sex for 15 years in other Scandinavian countries, expressed it in the following way:

You want to know that nothing strange is going on. You want to know that it's not human trafficking, and you notice that in how money is handled and what kind of arrangement it is. If the person has any injuries. And you make this assessment for your own sake and for theirs.

No participants (except one) had contacted the police when suspecting exploitation. However, the indicators they used to detect suspected exploitation, such as the sellers ethnicity and the ad's appearance, as well as its limitations, were similar to those suggested by researchers and used by the police (for example, *L'Hoiry, Moretti, and Antonopoulos 2021*). One way to avoid sellers whom they suspected were being exploited was to meet one woman regularly. The participants expressed that this decreased the risks of exploitation and crime at the same time as it made the paid sexual encounter feel more intimate and real. But meeting one woman regularly entailed other risks, such as emotional engagement and the seller becoming financially dependent on them, which in some cases was more difficult to handle (confer, *Grönvall et al. 2021b*).

The role of the purchaser

There were several reasons for avoiding sellers who were presumed to be vulnerable or exploited. In part, it was a question of the participants' own safety and part of their risk assessment for avoiding crime and law enforcement (confer, *Sterling and van der Meulen 2018*). A central theme when talking about the sex sellers' vulnerability was a fear of exploiting or hurting the person from whom they purchased sex. Many of the participants were careful to clearly distance themselves from forms of commercial sex that might be associated with exploitation or organized crime. Dan, who had purchased sex in Sweden for 4 years, put it as follows:

I'm extremely negative to trafficking and the kind of prostitution that has to do with someone being exploited. And then you can argue, and I have my arguments, I'm sure they wouldn't hold up in a debate, but for you to understand how I reason, or at least how I try. I think that in the Thai massage world, it may not be trafficking in the same way. Or maybe it is so, but you don't see it that way. But I've never been interested in going to prostitutes whom I suspect are involved in trafficking.

Trying to avoid sellers who were exploited or forced to sell sex was also linked to the participants' pleasure when buying sex and a desire for the sexual encounter to include some kind of mutual pleasure. Anders said: 'I think that I would never get an erection if I knew I was using a girl like that.' One way to avoid vulnerable or exploited sellers was to buy sex from someone who was involved in a sex workers' organization. Henrik, who had purchased sex in Sweden and abroad for 30 years, said:

In fact, there are several who are members of sex workers' unions and things like that. Then I think, I don't know where I got this from, that they are probably not exposed to trafficking. It seems so when they describe different things, and then it feels a bit better. Because I don't want to be a part of someone getting hurt.

In understanding their own experiences, the participants mirrored these against the normative discourse on commercial sex as exploitation and tried to conceptualize them by distancing their experiences from the exploitation discourse (confer, *Hammond 2015*). Some said that assessing the sellers' vulnerability was something they had learned from experience. Xander, who

had purchased sex in Sweden for 30 years, put it like this: ‘No, but it must feel pretty right, and if it’s a younger girl, then I always ask, “are you really sure that you are okay with this”. Well, over the years you somehow learn to read people’. Becoming an experienced and skilled client was not only an advantage in relation to avoiding law enforcement but also in relation to becoming a responsible sex purchaser (confer, [Hammond 2015](#); Horswill and [Weitzer 2018](#)). For some, the fear of being an exploiter was associated with shame and a bad conscience, which Robert, who only purchased sex abroad, expressed as follows: ‘The first time, in Prague in 2004, I got a lot of anxiety at first, that I had bought sex. Because I had learned how wrong it was’. Xander, who only purchased sex in Sweden, said it in a similar way: ‘I want everything to be as decent as possible, as simple as that. If there were to be any coercion or so on, it wouldn’t be, my conscience as I said, I have two daughters’. The participants navigated in relation to the Swedish discourse on commercial sex, but also in relation to stories they had read in the media or had encountered themselves. In this negotiation that they conducted in relation to a discourse, and also in relation to (more or less ideologically coloured) observations and descriptions, they tried to distance themselves from the idea of commercial sex as exploitation and of sex buyers as perpetrators (confer, [Hammond 2015](#)). Some pointed to the difficulties in detecting whether or not the sellers were being exploited. Fredrik said:

I won’t say that it’s some kind of fair-trade business I am doing. But you try to make sure that this is someone who seems to be an ordinary Swedish girl, or ‘an ordinary girl’, but someone who isn’t any kind of trafficking victim. You never know of course, but you still try to keep a track of it.

Robert felt the same, and he expressed the ambiguity associated with trying to do good while at the same time being involved in a phenomenon that is perceived to be pervasively bad:

And then, the thing with their vulnerability, it’s very difficult to know no matter what you consume, if someone may have been hurt on the way. And I don’t know, I think we live in a world of easily bought credulity.

Participants also reflected upon the responsibility of the individual sex buyer in relation to the wider phenomenon, as Ulf did: ‘But still, the question is whether it’s me, if I get a good feeling and it still isn’t so. Is it me who is making the mistake or the one who has exposed her, or am I part of the problem?’ These reflections can be viewed in relation to the way in which the political ambition in Sweden has been formulated: commercial sex as a phenomenon is understood as an expression of structural gender inequality, but the buyer is held responsible for his actions at an individual level ([Scoular 2015](#); [Monto and Milrod 2020](#)). This could lead to an ambiguity between the structural understanding of the phenomenon and individual responsibility. Some went through with the purchase even if there was something that did not feel good about it. This is how Fredrik explained why he purchased sex from women, whom he suspected being victims of exploitation:

Well, I have usually done my business and then I’ve left. There is nothing I would, once you are there, the desire is usually so great that it’s not worth it. I won’t do anything about it then, it’s not my problem. It sounds so cynical but that’s how it felt.

This was expressed by others as well, that in the moment they were caught up in their own desire, and that it was only afterwards that they saw the situation from a more sober perspective. Gustaf said: ‘You are expectant, eager and then the sick pallor of reflection may come later. And

then you understand that this might not have been that good'. Even if most of the participants tried to avoid buying sex from someone whom they thought was being forced to sell, some had experiences of having unintended contacts with presumed pimps. Gustaf, who had purchased sex in Sweden for 20 years, described such an episode with a presumed pimp in the following way:

It was some kind of scheme, some kind of fraud where there was a man involved. And I know that at some point I met a man and there was a woman in the picture as well and it seemed that she was quite controlled by this man and, well, it was him that I met.

Others spoke of bad experiences with sellers whom they suspected of being vulnerable, even if there was no third party involved. Lennart put it like this when he talked about an underaged girl from whom he had bought sex: 'She was so broken. I shouldn't have done it. I still have a bad conscience that I didn't just send her home. I think she used sex as some kind of self-harm'. One aspect raised by the participants focused on being a nice and decent buyer, both when meeting the sellers and when talking about them. Erik, who had purchased sex in Sweden for five years, said:

Something I don't like about the ads, it's the comments sections, where you can write comments, and you quickly realize that there are many really sleazy types, as I said. Who comments on looks and so on. And that, no, I don't like that.

The negotiation, and distancing themselves from the 'wrong' kind of sex buyer, also involved mirroring their experiences against their perceptions of other sex purchasers. This created discomfort and unease when they crossed the line and acted in contrast to their own perceptions of the decent sex buyer (Sterling and van der Meulen 2018; Grönvall *et al.* 2021a).

THE STIGMA OF BEING A PUNTER

For some participants, the perceived risks associated with commercial sex were linked to its criminalization. Dan, who purchased sex in Sweden, expressed it like this: 'The fact that it's illegal makes it dangerous in itself, you live in a twilight zone where things can happen that cannot be controlled'. Björn, who also purchased sex in Sweden, described it in a similar way: 'I've made a risk assessment that if I bring a girl to my place, the risk is very small that the police will raid the apartment like a Hollywood movie'. For others, the risks associated with criminalization led to them not purchasing sex in Sweden, both due to the legislation and the perceived risk of being involved in illegal activities. It could be both about not wanting to commit a crime and a fear of the consequences of getting caught by the police. Per, who had purchased sex in Denmark for 10 years, expressed it in the following way:

You have to use your judgement, so you don't end up in ... And the choices I've made: if I don't buy sex in Sweden, I don't do anything illegal, as the situation is now, and I also minimize those risks. Of course, you can end up in a situation like that in Denmark as well. But there you have the opportunity to get confirmation via, for example Eroguide [a Danish escort guide with ads, a forum and reviews], that it's legitimate, and then it feels safe.

Being caught by the police was for some associated with both negative consequences and shame. Lennart said: 'If I'm looking for a job, and the question comes "well, do you have a criminal record?" Then it's not fun to say that "yes, I have a criminal record for buying sex", that's no fun'.

At the same time, some participants expressed that the Swedish sex purchase act did not affect them and that it was both a problematic, illogical and ineffective law. Isak had bought sex for two years in Sweden and abroad. He was legally trained, with a political and professional interest in the question, and expressed his view as follows:

When it comes to law and morality, I think, and I will use Latin because you sound smarter than you really are when you speak Latin. There is a concept pair called *malum in se* and *malum prohibitum*, that is, what's wrong because it's wrong and what's wrong because it's forbidden. And in my opinion, the sex purchase act is clearly in the latter category. Similar to the sauna club law and the drug policy in Sweden. It's wrong because it's forbidden, it's not wrong because it's wrong, like the core criminal law. ... But you can also have the discussion on another level: that the law is completely insubstantial and is creating negative side effects for the people it is actually meant to help.

Even if the criminalization of the purchase of sex affected some participants, for most participants, the potential punishments for committing a crime were of minor significance in relation to their purchase of sex. The concerns and deterrents regarding the purchase of sex were primarily associated with social factors (Williams and Hawkins 1986; Sanders *et al.* 2020). One recurrent element in the participants' stories was the fear of being stigmatized and labelled as a sex buyer, and few had told anyone that they purchased sex. Martin, who had bought sex for 15 years in Sweden and Norway, expressed it as follows: 'It's such a big stigma so no one talks about it'. For some, the perceived stigmatization was associated with the purchase of sex being illegal in Sweden, as Fredrik who only purchased sex in Sweden, experienced it:

That it's illegal for people to buy, it makes it so incredible, it becomes stigmatized, it becomes so secret in a way. It gets really problematic that way. There's so much in it, you know what I mean? If you are a sex buyer then you are a sex buyer with a capital S.

The fear of being exposed as a sex buyer and as someone engaged in something illegal led to some of the participants being cautious about talking of their experiences. Gustaf, who had bought sex for 20 years in Sweden, said:

Sometimes I think it would be better to not criminalize it, and instead encourage people to talk about it. Of course, I'm not talking to anyone about this, because it's way too big ... I don't tell anyone if I don't know that it's anonymous and that I won't be reported.

The stigma associated with purchasing sex silenced the participants and made them careful in the way they handled their experiences (confer, Hammond 2015). For some, this was associated with commercial sex being a stigmatized phenomenon, and the fact that the debate in Sweden was perceived as being polarized. Robert, who only bought sex abroad, expressed it as follows:

Of course, you are very anonymous and careful in Sweden, because people don't think there is any difference between me paying for a massage with an erotic touch, compared to someone who is willing to really force themselves on someone with violence. I think there is a difference, as I said. So that's a bit of the background to why I don't do it, and never think I will do either, in Sweden.

In a way similar to that in which the political and media discourse in Sweden tends to rely on dichotomized expressions, the participants tried to conceptualize and understand their experi-

ences within the same polarized frame (confer, [Pettinger 2015](#)). Even if the participants were affected by media perspectives in Sweden that depict commercial sex as exploitation, their experiences also involved other aspects. Allan, who had bought sex abroad for 40 years, said:

I don't think that the media image, for example, is completely accurate about who sells sex and how their situation is. It's quite obvious that the vast majority feel bad and have a hard time and do it more or less through some form of coercion. But that doesn't apply to everyone.

Several of the participants were engaged in the debate on commercial sex in Sweden and had reflected upon it. While some thought the stigma was associated with Christian values, as was the case with Carl: 'Well, it is very taboo. We have always been a deeply Christian society until recently, so it's not that strange', others perceived it as being more related to feminism, as with Erik: 'If you were to mention anything, you would directly be seen as an antifeminist and misogynist, if you were to say something in the wrong direction. So, it's best to keep quiet'. A few of the participants were active in discussion forums on the internet, but quite a few had stopped doing this. This was due both to inactivity in the forums and that the online communication climate had changed. Per described this in the following way:

It's quite the same, the legislation in Sweden leads to a prostitution of misery, which also leads to a debate about the misery associated with the whole thing. So, I don't write anything there anymore, I did it a bit before. But then again, when you try to have a sensible debate it's like casting pearls before swine.

When navigating in relation to normative discourses on commercial sex, the participants referred both to feminism and religion, where the (radical) feminist debate in Sweden had made them cautious about speaking of their experiences (confer, [Weitzer 2018](#)). Digitalization had to some extent helped them to talk about their experiences, but it also made it more difficult as a result of the atmosphere online (confer, [Scaramuzzino 2014](#); [Pettinger 2015](#)).

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Risk was something all participants in this study related to in different ways. The participants expressed that risk management was something that was learnt and developed from experience (confer, [Lever and Dolnick 2010](#); [Horswill and Weitzer 2018](#); [Olsson 2020](#)). This was evident in relation to getting caught by the police, becoming victims of crimes and detecting exploited sellers and organized crime (confer, [Sanders et al. 2020](#)). What becomes visible in the participants' stories is how they based their risk management and navigation both on their own experiences and knowledge and on information gathered from elsewhere, primarily from reading the news and from various online forums. In addition to basing their knowledge of risk and their risk assessments on their own experiences and on input from the Swedish media discourse, the participants also framed their own experiences on the basis of these different sources of information. This may be viewed in relation to previous research on risk when purchasing sex (for example, [Horswill and Weitzer 2018](#); [Sanders et al. 2020](#)) and studies conceptualizing the risk assessments made by sex purchasers as being based on hybrid risk knowledge production ([Sterling and van der Meulen 2018](#)).

The Swedish juridical context has had a varying impact on the participants' engagement in commercial sex. While some have adjusted their behaviour as a result of the criminalization, others described not feeling affected at all. Despite this, the Swedish context, in terms of the political and normative approach to the purchase of sex, affected them all the more – not in a dir-

ectly punitive way, but by governing them in a normalizing and disciplinary manner (Foucault 1978; Scoular 2015). This is expressed in the way the participants organized their purchases, in their contacts with sellers, and in their anxiety and reluctance to be exploiters and perpetrators. In their encounters with sellers, and when talking to the interviewer about these, they resisted and distanced themselves from the view of themselves as oppressors or exploiters, navigating between the normative discourse on commercial sex and their individual and relational experiences (confer, Hammond 2015; Weitzer 2018). In being defined as ‘sex buyers’ and as such as representatives of structural violence, they have internalized the view of themselves as oppressors, and they were constantly negotiating and navigating in relation to this self-view. This is visible in the way they talked about the sellers’ vulnerability, in how they described trying to avoid exploiting or hurting anyone and in how they distanced themselves from the forms of commercial sex they perceived as dangerous and risky. This can be understood as the participants being governed and disciplined in the sense that they mirrored their experiences in relation to the normative view of the ‘sex buyer’. But this involved a struggle or a constant negotiation, since they continued to purchase sex and were in this sense resisting (or negotiating) the governance and discipline (Foucault 1978; Scoular 2015). For the men in this study, the political ambition to govern and discipline to change their attitudes and behaviour did not make them stop purchasing sex. However, their stories and reflections show how this disciplinary power works through their lives as it structures their fields of action (confer, Foucault 1978), and also how it works through specific embodied, spatial and communicative practices (Hayes *et al.* 2020) as it affects their behaviours when purchasing sex.

The effort and time the participants spent talking about the different themes during the interviews shows what preoccupied their thoughts when they reflected on the purchase of sex. While their own exposure to crime and danger was dealt with quickly, most of the participants talked extensively about the sellers’ situation in a concerned and detailed way. In presenting their stories to the interviewer, the participants worked consciously on their self-presentation. The impression management that they engaged in to affect the way they were perceived by others was linked to impression control, which shows an ambiguity in (and a struggle against) the governance of sex buyers in Sweden. The participants were preoccupied with not being identified, defined and stigmatized as the ‘sex buyer with a capital S’ and also with expressing resistance against being disciplined in line with the ‘Swedish model’. In being governed through responsibilization, they did not stop purchasing sex, but they tried to purchase sex in ‘good’ ways (confer, Scoular and O’Neill 2007).

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IV

Social workers' navigation between repression and social support for men purchasing sex

Socialarbetares navigering mellan repression och socialt stöd för män som köper sex

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ABSTRACT

Considering an increasingly repressive focus on sex buyers in recent years, the focus of this study is to explore social work in Sweden targeting individuals who purchase sex. The aim of this study is to explore social workers' understanding of the purchase of sex as a social problem. More specifically, the study focuses on social workers' approaches to the purchase of sex in relation to values, professional practices, and political goals, and how they navigate these aspects in their encounters with individuals who purchase sex. Based on interviews with 10 social workers who meet such individuals, an inductive thematic analysis has been employed. The participants navigated between focusing on the individual sex purchaser and his situation, and having moral opinions on the issue, with some being positive to force change through repressive measures. The participants tried to navigate social work's role in relation to social policy and political ambitions regarding the purchase of sex in Sweden, and did this by navigating between doing moral work, being diplomats or specialists. They did moral work both as individuals and as working groups, which was influenced by moral values, professional ideals, and ideas about social work's role in relation to the judiciary system.

ABSTRAKT

Med tanke på ett alltmer repressivt fokus på sexköpare de senaste åren, är fokus för denna studie att utforska socialt arbete i Sverige riktat mot individer som köper sex. Syftet med studien är att utforska socialarbetares förståelse av sexköp som ett socialt problem. Mer specifikt är studiens fokus på socialarbetares förhållningssätt till sexköp i relation till värderingar, professionella praktiker och politiska mål, samt hur de navigerar mellan dessa aspekter i sina möten med individer som köper sex. Studien baseras på intervjuer med 10 socialarbetare som träffar sådana individer och en induktiv tematisk analys har använts. Deltagarna navigerade mellan att fokusera på den enskilde sexköparen och hans situation, samtidigt som de hade moraliska åsikter i frågan, där vissa var positiva till att tvinga fram förändringar genom repressiva åtgärder. Deltagarna försökte navigera det sociala arbetets roll i förhållande till socialpolitik och politiska ambitioner kring sexköp i Sverige. Det gjorde de genom att navigera mellan att göra moraliskt

KEYWORDS

Buying sex; purchase of sex; social work; commercial sex; prostitution

NYCKELORD

sexköp; köpa sex; socialt arbete; sex mot ersättning; prostitution

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arbete, att vara diplomater eller specialister. De gjorde moraliskt arbete både som individer och som arbetsgrupper, vilket påverkades av moraliska värderingar, professionella ideal, och idéer om det sociala arbetets roll i förhållande till rättsväsendet.

Introduction

Sweden has a long history of framing prostitution as a social problem, approaching it with both social and repressive measures, primarily targeting sex sellers (Svanström, 2006). A political shift over recent decades has led to an increased focus on sex buyers as the primary problem, a problem that ought to be solved using both legal and social measures (Erikson, 2011). The purchase of sex has been criminalised in Sweden since 1999, with sanctions ranging from a fine to one year of imprisonment. The aim of the criminalisation was to combat prostitution by targeting the demand side, in the short-term using repressive measures and in the long-term by striving for normative change (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017b). Sweden's approach to commercial sex is based on an understanding of prostitution as an expression of gender inequality. However, this has been intertwined with an interpretation of prostitution as a social problem, primarily with individualised understandings of its causes, expressions and measures (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017b). In the preparatory work conducted prior to the implementation of The Sex Purchase Act, social measures were highlighted as important elements within the government's ambition to combat prostitution. The Sex Purchase Act was intended to work as a complement to the already existing social support (e.g. Government of Sweden, 1998; SOU 1981:71, 1981). Units providing social support for sex sellers have existed in Sweden's three largest cities since the 1980s (Åkerman & Svedin, 2012). Seven cities in Sweden have a KAST unit (KAST is a Swedish acronym for Buyers of Sexual Services) that provide support, counselling or therapy for individuals who purchase sex (Olsson, 2021).

Although the purchase of sex has partly been understood as a social problem, the primary focus in recent years has been on the purchase of sex as an expression of men's violence against women and as intertwined with organised crime and human trafficking. Thus, repressive measures focusing on men who buy sex have increased and the Swedish police are now an influential actor in the field, together with abolitionist organisations combatting prostitution (Erikson, 2011; Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017a). A current bill is suggesting to increase the sentence for purchasing sex to one year's imprisonment and to remove fines from the penalty scale (SOU 2021:43, 2021). Thus, the rhetoric has hardened, and the context has shifted, with an intensified focus being directed at punishment in terms of resource allocation, political ambition, and public opinion (Skilbrei & Holmström, 2013). Against the backdrop of an increasingly repressive focus on buyers, it is of interest to explore the social work targeting individuals who purchase sex. The aim of this study is therefore to explore social workers' understanding of the purchase of sex as a social problem. More specifically, the study focuses on social workers' approaches to the purchase of sex in relation to values, professional practices, and political goals, and how they navigate these aspects in their encounters with individuals who purchase sex.

Background

The first KAST opened in 1997 in Gothenburg and was funded by grants for HIV prevention. The initiative was based on research results showing that many men who purchase sex wanted help to change (Isaksson et al., 2021; Sandell et al., 1996). KAST opened in Stockholm in 2000, and in Malmö in 2006. These three units have been organised as independent, specialised units within the regular social services for between one and two decades (Åkerman & Svedin, 2012). In the last five years, additional KAST units have been established in four medium-sized cities in Sweden. These municipal units primarily work with domestic violence offenders, but have recently expanded their target group to include

sex buyers (Isaksson et al., 2020). KAST is a part of the publicly funded social services, offering voluntary support for individuals purchasing sex in the form of counselling, therapy, or psychological treatment. One of the units provide social measures both to sex sellers and buyers. KAST's overall assignment is tied to the government's goal of combating prostitution and human trafficking (which are understood as linked in government policies), and their role is to decrease the demand for prostitution (Olsson, 2021). Contact with clients are either initiated by the clients, or via collaboration with the police. KAST services are either free of charge or the units charge a symbolic fee, and the clients can retain their anonymity in their contacts with social workers.

Social work with individuals selling or buying sex in Sweden, as social work in general, has been tied to political governance. Despite increased privatisation and marketisation in some areas of public welfare, the Swedish welfare system remains extensive, and the general welfare system still stands out in international comparisons. Most social work is publicly funded, decentralised, and municipally organised (Pettersson, 2001; Skilbrei & Holmström, 2013; Wennemo, 2014). Historically, social work has been based on structural explanations for social problems. However, social work in general, and with individuals selling or buying sex, has also been influenced by Christian and philanthropic values, as well as individualised approaches with a focus on individual change (Holgersson, 2004). During the mid-twentieth century, structural perspectives were ascribed greater importance in relation to the understanding of social problems. Today, the focus has shifted towards more individualised understandings of social problems (Björngren Cuadra et al., 2013; Pettersson, 2001). Social work tends to be a local issue with a focus on individuals rather than structures (Julkunen & Harder, 2004), as in offering counselling for migrants who sell sex while having a repressive Aliens Act (Vuolajärvi, 2018), or KAST's development in becoming increasingly refined counselling clinics (Isaksson et al., 2021). The individualisation of social problems, in combination with a focus on diagnoses, psychology and neuropsychiatry, has led to a tendency to medicalise social problems (Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009; Olsson, 1999). Understanding the purchase of sex within an addiction discourse, and to treat it with counselling or therapy, can be understood as an example of this individualisation and medicalisation of social problems (Lahav-Raz, 2021). Social work targeting sex buyers has developed into a professionalised and specialised field (Skilbrei, 2012), which reflects a general development in social work during the latter half of the twentieth century. In Sweden, social work became both a university educational program and a research discipline, and social work underwent a process of professionalisation, specialisation and academisation. There has also been an increased focus on evidence-based practice, and an expansion in the number of specialised professional social workers with varying educational specialisms, especially in psychotherapy (Dellgran & Höjer, 2000; Högskoleverket, 2003; Pettersson, 2001).

KAST differ from initiatives directed at individuals who purchase sex in other countries. Units providing voluntary counselling as part of publicly funded social services exist only in Sweden. Norway has one KAST-unit, organised as a project within a foundation, and initiatives focused on sexual health have been developed in Germany (Isaksson et al., 2020; Langanke & Ross, 2009). John Schools, i.e. education programs for clients who have been arrested for prostitution offences, exist in the USA, England, Canada and South Korea (Isaksson et al., 2020). These programs aim to reduce prostitution by targeting the sex buyers and educating them on the harms associated with purchasing sex. The programs identify the buyers and their demand for purchasing sex as causing the exploitation and abuse found in prostitution (Cook, 2015; Gurd & O'Brien, 2013). Some scholars have argued that John Schools perpetuate traditional social constructions of prostitution by framing the sex buyers' behaviour as being based on their ignorance or unawareness of the true nature of prostitution, or as being due to sexual addiction (Gurd & O'Brien, 2013). These understandings of prostitution differ from previous research showing a great variety in experiences, and overall evaluations of the programs have suggested limited effectiveness (e.g. Matthews, 2008; Sanders et al., 2020). Organisationally, John Schools differ from KAST in several ways. John School programs take the form of a sentencing option, or a diversionary program, offered to eligible offenders, and they primarily target street prostitution. KAST are instead part of the municipal

social services and provide counselling and therapy for individuals purchasing sex through diverse arenas, who wish to change their behaviour, regardless of arrest (Cook, 2015; Olsson, 2021).

The understanding of the purchase of sex as a social problem is not fixed but can change over time and space (Loseke, 2010), and it may be viewed as a focal point for divergent and conflicting interests, intentions, and objectives. Thus, how Sweden deals with the purchase of sex as a social problem is constituted in the interplay between these interests and objectives (Blumer, 1971). This can be understood in relation to organisations' multiple and conflicting moral systems, and social work practice can have multiple service technologies that are guided by different, if not conflicting, moral assumptions (Hasenfeld, 2000). At a microlevel, social workers do moral work through their actions. By exercising considerable discretion in combination with personal belief systems and moral rationalisations, they rationalise their actions by morally constructing their clients. Even if organisations may look the same on the surface, closer scrutiny reveals considerable diversity. Organisations engaged in moral work must contend with abstract, conflicting, and ambiguous moral rules. Their work is highly contextualised at the local level, and discretion prevails at both the organisational and street level (*ibid*). Professionalism is based on both knowledge and experience, as well as normative value systems and ideology (Evetts, 2013). Inspired by Hasenfeld's (2000) notions on moral work, this study focuses on how social workers navigate in the interplay between values, professional practices, and political goals in their encounters with individuals who purchase sex.

Method

All KAST employees in Sweden were asked to participate in the study (seven units with one to four employees) via the units' joint email. One unit conducting outreach work with both sex sellers and buyers and one running a helpline for people with 'undesirable sexuality,' were also included. All KAST offices except one (the newest, which had not yet met any clients) agreed to participate, as did the employee from the unit that conducts outreach work. Three of the units had two employees, three had one employee, and one unit had four employees (one of whom was interviewed for this study) who worked in part with individuals who purchase sex. Six of the participants were from the established units, three from the newly started, and one from the outreach unit. Participation in the study was initiated by the participants responding to the invitation to participate by email or telephone. They were then given both written and oral information about the study procedure, their participation and confidentiality, and informed consent was obtained. Ten individual interviews were conducted during the Spring of 2021 by telephone or via Zoom, because of the pandemic and depending on the participants' preferences. The interviews were semi-structured and covered five themes: professional base/background, social measures, commercial sex, meaning and vulnerability, and laws, guidelines, policies, and politics, which were used as a basic support for the interviews. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The quotes included in this article have been translated from Swedish to English and have been anonymised to prevent recognition of the participants. Ethical approval was granted by the Regional Ethics Review Board in Lund (Dnr 2017/983).

A reflexive methodology has guided the thematisation and analysis of the empirical material (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). Processing, reading and analysis has been a parallel process. The thematisation of the interview transcripts was guided by looking for dominant and recurrent themes, contradictions, and slippages in the stories. The software package NVivo 12 has been employed (QSR International, Melbourne). The study is based on a social constructionist understanding of knowledge (Loseke, 2010). The thematisation and analysis had a focus on subject positioning as an analytical category: how the participants navigate in relation to the purchase of sex, their professional role as social workers and the political landscape (Sterling & van der Meulen, 2018). This generated two central themes regarding the purchase of sex and social work: Individual-focused diplomats and Ambivalent moral work.

Findings

Six of the participants were graduates in social work, while the remaining four had a university degree in behavioural science or education studies, with educational specialisms in counselling or psychotherapy. The study participants had worked with sex buyers for between one and twenty-four years, four of them for less than three years and six of them for more than six years. Eight of them were women and two were men. All KAST units conducted counselling with individuals who purchase sex, and one participant was engaged in outreach work with the same target group. In the three established units, the target group included individuals who used pornography or had problematic sexual relations (e.g. sex addiction).

Individual-focused diplomats

Most of the participants described their units as counselling clinics and themselves as counsellors or psychotherapists. All participants described that they had a substantial amount of freedom in their work and that they had designed their clinical work as they wanted to. However, all units worked within the framework of the overall objective of decreasing the demand for commercial sex:

I would say that we have a great deal of freedom. Of course, there is a framework, but the framework we have to relate to is that we should be working to reduce prostitution, to reduce the purchase of sex.

This goal was taken for granted by the participants, but it differed how it trickled down into their clinical work. While some saw stopping people from purchasing sex as their main goal, others focused primarily on the individuals' psychological wellbeing. The participant doing outreach work and the two participants who worked with both sex sellers and buyers primarily described themselves as social workers. They sometimes helped with housing matters and assisted their clients in contact with other authorities. Except for these three, most participants had a psychotherapeutic focus and described their professional work as therapeutic rather than as social work. They primarily conducted counselling or therapy with individuals or couples, which was what they thought the target group needed due to their problems. They described the clients' problems as individual and heterogenous, although the participants identified certain common denominators. They described the clients' problems, needs and motivations to purchase sex as being associated with anxiety, depression, compulsiveness, addiction, childhood trauma, or psychological ill-health. A participant from an established unit said:

We treat the individual in the way we assess that they need to be treated. It can differ a bit, but it's a behavioural problem, it includes talking, mapping different behaviours and parts of behaviours that you may not have really understood ... We talk a lot about the behaviour and how they should avoid going into that, what they describe as 'the bubble'.

The description of purchasing sex as going into a 'bubble' was part of framing the activity as a behavioural problem related to addiction, compulsiveness, and loss of control. Most participants expressed satisfaction with their work, and that their unit's work was adequate in relation to the target group. Some of them had a wish to develop their work, either by working more with preventative measures or of becoming more focused on treatment and therapy. The ambition to work more preventatively was focused on reaching individuals who had not yet purchased sex, by reaching out to young people or to people who use pornography. Some participants considered pornography to be an explicit risk factor for purchasing sex, as one from a newly started unit:

It's porn and porn addiction and the incredible amount of time they spend consuming porn. And it seems that the time they spend consuming porn often turns into time spent looking for someone to buy sex from or buying sex.

The participants' opinion that their clients needed therapy due to their behavioural or addiction-related problems, can be understood in relation to an addiction discourse and the medicalisation

of social problems (Lahav-Raz, 2021). Some participants expressed that KAST's work had changed from supportive social work towards therapy and psychological treatment. One from an established unit said:

I think that our work with the target group has changed a lot. We've become more focused on treatment. It's not that we have any treatment for this target group yet. But there are discussions about whether it would be possible to offer ... Our work has become more treatment oriented. It's not just advice and support as I see it, as the guidelines were when I started. I guess all people want to help and make a change, but there has been a shift.

The participants' wish to focus on more refined treatment was based on the idea that it would make their work structured and focused rather than arbitrary and subjective. While some participants described an ambition towards more refined treatment, some of the newly started units expressed a wish to be as specialised as possible in the topic of prostitution. This involved having the best available knowledge about the target group and staying updated in relation to research. It also involved a desire for their units to become more uniform and for their professional work to be evidence-based:

The first thing that needs to be done is research, or to develop an evidence-based treatment method. And I know that KAST in Gothenburg are evaluating their methods now ... And if it's possible to show evidence of this, and that the outcomes are good, then you can really think about whether more people might follow suit ... I think the best thing is to be highly specialized, as they are in the larger cities, that you have a unit where you only meet sex buyers and maybe those with sex- or porn addiction.

The participants' focus on treatment and therapy more than social work may be understood as a means of meeting the clients' needs, since they framed the clients' problems as individual and psychological. The focus on specialisation that characterised the newer units can be understood in relation to lack of experience and as a part of gaining more knowledge. The older units were already specialised, and instead strived for even more psychological and individual-oriented solutions, as in more refined and individualised therapy. Despite having a framework that governs their work towards decreasing the demand for commercial sex, they were able to organise their practical work with clients however they wanted. The perceived lack of evidence-based practice in combination with professional discretion led to the units interpreting their clients' behaviour and needs differently. Thus, their professional discretion was linked to their own judgements, values and moral. For example, the perceived link between purchasing sex and violence differed between an established and a newly started unit:

They [another KAST unit] had seen in some study, and we've never been able to find out which study it is, that people who have bought sex are supposed to be more violent than other people. That's not a connection we've made based on those we meet.

The participants perceived purchasing sex as being linked to shame and stigma, and they focused on being neutral, respectful and having a low threshold for clients. The negative view on the purchase of sex affected the life situation of the participants' clients. Most of them expressed that the stigma and social punishment associated with purchasing sex was both too severe and caused more harm than good. Some participants had clients who became suicidal due to exposure and shame, which in some cases had led to fatal consequences. They expressed that it was not their role to judge people and that they did not want to have an opinion on the purchase of sex. A participant from one of the established units said:

We don't take a position and that's our policy towards the outside world entirely, given that it's something of a minefield, and above all for us, who meet both buyers and sellers. And that has been called into question throughout the years I've worked here.

Some participants expressed the importance of being diplomatic and to focus on their role as social workers. This was not always easy, since the purchase of sex attracts both general and media interest in Sweden, and they were sometimes contacted by the media to express an opinion on the issue. A participant from an established unit expressed difficulties to navigate a politicised issue as publicly

funded social workers: ‘Sometimes when you do interviews, you have to think both as a lawyer and a prosecutor, to be somewhere in between.’ This could pose difficulties in relation to professionals outside their own unit, who had clear political opinions and goals regarding commercial sex: ‘There are so many man-haters in [a collaborative governmental organization] sometimes; it really shocks you.’ Some expressed that the debate was dichotomised and harmful, as a participant from an established unit: ‘There’s a polarization in the public debate, that these people almost shouldn’t be allowed to exist, but it doesn’t work to treat it like that because then they will just hide even more.’ A participant from a newly started unit expressed a similar view, but highlighted the importance of being aware of structures:

I think it’s awful that sex buyers are turned into social pariahs. This is a societal expression of norms, history, culture, and patriarchy. And I don’t like turning individuals into monsters, because we have to live next door to these people. These men could be my brother, son, neighbour, or uncle. I get very worried when society is so categorical and talks about sex buyers in that way. I don’t think it’s nuanced and adequate, and not helpful either.

The participants may be seen as diplomats in how they manoeuvred in relation to political ambitions and the public debate, and how they used their discretion as social workers to avoid being drawn into political debates (Hasenfeld, 2000). Even if their overall goal was to decrease the demand for commercial sex, they tried to distance themselves from politics and to instead focus on their role as social workers or therapists. By focusing on social work, and especially therapeutic aspects of social work, they place themselves within a psychological or addiction discourse rather than the political discourse in Sweden that frames sex purchases as oppression (Lahav-Raz, 2021). Because of this, and of their discretion, their professional role and their clinical work differ from that of John Schools. While John Schools primarily focus on educative and normative aspects of prostitution, the social workers at KAST primarily focused on individualised and therapeutic aspects (Gurd & O’Brien, 2013).

Ambivalent moral work

The participants had varying views on repression and punishment in relation to social work with individuals purchasing sex. Most of them thought that repression and punishment lead to increased shame and stigma, which makes it more difficult for clients to seek help. They expressed that these factors increased the suffering of buyers (and of sellers). One from an established unit said:

If you do get caught, as it is now, your whole life can be ruined anyway. But many of them say that it’s not the fine that’s the worst, it’s everything afterwards. You have a criminal record for 5 years, you don’t dare to change job, your family, all that. Should you be put in prison on top of that? And people might become more afraid of seeking help, because then you become even more worried. They are worried enough about seeking help as it is.

Others thought that repressive consequences for a behaviour could help people to understand that what they are doing is wrong and that they need to change. One from a newer unit said:

I think that when you get a strong consequence for a behaviour, which applies to sex buyers as well, then you can seek help. If you don’t get a strong consequence, I think it takes a lot to come to us. [KAST]

The newly started units were organised under the same unit as domestic violence services, or worked with sex purchasers as part of their work with domestic violence offenders. The three established units had previously not had these organisational ties to services targeting men’s violence against women. Some participants expressed a worry that this was beginning to change, and that the purchase of sex had begun to be strategically and organisationally framed as incorporated in men’s violence against women. A participant from an older unit said:

It’s worrying that the government has decided that prostitution and human trafficking for sexual purposes should be organized under men’s violence against women. It’s a huge deterioration since you exclude boys and men who are exploited, women who exploit others get away, and transgender people disappear

completely ... And when people from surrounding municipalities contact us, there's only the 'domestic violence unit' to refer them to: "But this is not violence". It's so hard for the person to recognize themselves in that.

Those who worked at the newly started units were more positive towards repressive measures and more severe punishments. At the same time, they expressed an ambiguity in relation to repression, and emphasised the importance of acknowledging the individual and of striving for positive change. Other participants clearly distanced themselves from repressive measures. While all participants focused on individual problems and solutions, some of them also spoke of structural explanations for men purchasing sex, such as power and gender. On the one hand, they focused on individual explanatory models and behavioural changes related to the clients' problems. On the other hand, some raised the issue of power and responsibility in their sessions with clients, more or less educationally, by informing the clients about the harms done to women selling sex. This is an educational and moral element in some of the social workers' clinical practice, which is similar to that of John Schools (cf. Gurd & O'Brien, 2013). However, it differed among the participants if they expressed a moral opinion on the rights and wrongs of purchasing sex. A participant from an established unit was clear that she did not care if the client's actions were defined as sex purchases, since her focus was on individual needs:

Well, I actually don't give a fuck [if the client has purchased sex]. And why I think this way, it's to focus on the right thing, because why would I value that in a session? Well, that would be pin-pointing that you've done something criminal: 'We have prosecution for this, if you bought sex, then you're a criminal and it's clear as hell that you should be fined for it.' In my world, I would have then the wrong focus.

A participant from a newly started unit, on the other hand, clearly stated that purchasing sex is wrong: 'But I still think, if you look at a societal level, there are far too many people who don't really see that this is wrong.' Moral opinions combined with considerable discretion led to the professionals interpreting their role differently, and how much their opinions diverged from the condemnatory discourse in Sweden differed (cf. Hasenfeld, 2000). It varied what the participants thought about the Sex Purchase Act, even though there was a shared view that this was just one legislation among others that they had to relate to. While some expressed an acceptance of the Act's existence, they preferred not to talk about it either during the interviews or with their clients. They did not want the law to be developed, nor for the sanctions to be made more severe. This was related to an opinion that too much focus was being placed on repressive measures, which instead ought to be focused on social and preventative measures. As one from an established unit sarcastically pointed out:

In my opinion, prison isn't the solution for all problems, nor are harsher punishments. And it's very much: 'crime, police, and give more resources to the police'. No one talks about preventive work, and if they do, they just shout about it a bit as a side-issue: 'and what about the social services, what do you do?' But more resources for the police, not more resources for the social services or for the disadvantaged neighbourhoods that are on their knees with people going wild shooting [each other]. No, it's just criminality and more police, that will obviously solve everything.

Some participants from the newly started units thought that the law should be developed, and that treatment should be included as an alternative sanction. Thus, therapeutic social work and repressive measures were closely linked for some participants. In one of the cities, all fathers who purchased sex were reported to the social authorities, a praxis that politicians have proposed should be implemented nationally (Fritzon et al., 2020). Most participants were strongly opposed to reporting fathers who buy sex, for several reasons. Firstly, they expressed that they already did so if they had worries about a specific child, since social workers in Sweden are obliged to do so. Secondly, it was perceived as counterproductive:

I think that children who've not been in danger might start getting harmed, because of a lot of interrogations and so on, which I don't think is normal for children. And it does something to them and creates anxiety ... I think there's a danger that it will turn everything on its head and that it will create anxiety and emotional harm.

It was also perceived as an odd suggestion that would confuse things in a harmful way:

We think it's very important that the children don't get involved in the reasons that lie behind why our clients come to us, so we never meet the children. We can meet the partner, but the children shouldn't be involved in the sex addiction or the adult's sexuality. It's important that the children are allowed to be children.

A few from the newly started units thought that it might be a good idea, either as a way of reaching out to what may be dysfunctional parents, or to bring about normative change. One participant expressed that to risk losing your children might be a motivating factor for change, and that reporting fathers who purchase sex may be a powerful tool to get the father to stop purchasing sex. Thus, the participants' professional discretion were based on different moral values and assumptions, and they did diverse moral work with their clients (Evetts, 2013). They had different opinions regarding repressive measures as a means of changing clients' behaviour, and they had different attitudes to governance in their work with clients. Some focused on the individual's own motivation and ability to change, a form of governance through knowledge and motivation. Others were more positive towards using repressive governance (shame and deterrence), such as using the children to enforce change. This can be understood in relation to how moral assumptions guided the professionals in their work with clients, and how they used their discretion in relation to political ambitions and governance (Hasenfeld, 2000).

Several of those who worked at the newly started units had a background working in prisons, primarily with sex offenders. Those with experience from prison work had a more positive attitude towards prisons and towards severe punishment, even if they were careful in having opinions about punishment in relation to purchasing sex:

What I know from experience of working in prison is that if you get a prison sentence, you are more likely to undergo treatment. But well, I really don't want to say that the punishment for purchasing sex should be stiffened to imprisonment, I have no opinion, or I don't want to have an opinion, that's how I can put it.

Those who had worked at KAST for a long time, some of whom had experience from prison work in the distant past, expressed low confidence in prison sentences and in the ability of prisons to function as anything other than people-depositories:

Well, I guess it hasn't changed radically since I worked in prison, and then there wasn't much room to talk about anything. It was quite controlled, and you didn't really talk about problems. You didn't talk about how to move forward, how to work towards a solution or an improvement or how to change your life.

Some participants described how different opinions about repressive measures in relation to their role as social workers emerged in discussions with colleagues:

There have been some discussions among us colleagues, about this with putting someone in their place. I don't do that at all, and I don't believe that it's in any way supportive for a person, no matter what you have done. The police can do that, not me ... 'well, you need to tell them that it's criminal, that you don't do that, this is Sweden', you know that attitude.

Thus, moral values did not only differ between the units, but individual values also differed between colleagues in the same working group, and they were doing moral work at both a group and an individual level (Hasenfeld, 2000). This involved the participant's attitudes to repressive measures, if they tried to govern their clients, and what connection they thought that social work and the judiciary system should have to each other. How the participants navigated their professional role in relation to repressive measures was also linked to the purchase of sex being a political topic in the public debate in Sweden, where the newly started units stood closer to the Swedish discourse depicting the purchase of sex as an expression of men's violence against women.

Discussion

The participants' substantial discretion means that their work is to some extent based on their own judgements and opinions. This has led to a diversity between the units and among colleagues in

how they understand and interpret their clients' problems and how they design the treatment. The participants' stories reveal an ambiguity in which they both strive for increased specialisation and evidence-based practice, and for more refined and individualised treatment. On the one hand more central control and alignment, on the other hand, more local solutions, autonomy, and room for manoeuvre. The established and the newly started units strive in different directions, which may be related to differences in knowledge, experience, and organisation. However, this disparity can also be an expression of how the discourse on buying sex as a social problem has changed over time, where the different units have different discursive understandings of the phenomenon. Due to the established units' experience and specialisation, they are in a different claims-making position than the newer units (Loseke, 2010). However, this is not about being in a claims-making position or not, but a struggle between different positions and a transformation of these positions. The variations were also due to how the professionals use their discretion in relation to moral and political opinions regarding the purchase of sex. While some participants had a firm foundation in a therapeutic discourse, and some were grounded in social work, others had their main point of departure in structural understandings based on gender inequality (cf. Lahav-Raz, 2021; Skilbrei & Holmström, 2013).

The social work with sex buyers in Sweden operate in two competing discourses: a normative discourse that depicts the purchase of sex as morally reprehensible with a focus on repressive measures and harsher punishments, and a medicalisation discourse, which depicts the purchase of sex as a form of addiction or psychological problem (Lahav-Raz, 2021; Grönvall, 2021). The participating social workers tried to navigate social work's role in relation to social policy and political ambitions regarding the purchase of sex in Sweden. They are providing individual support for a problem that is interpreted as being caused by structural factors. Thus, the purchase of sex is constructed as a social problem that is at the intersection between political forces that explain it as an expression of men's structural violence against women, and a therapeutic discourse with psychological and medical explanations rather than social ones (Olsson, 2021; Scoular, 2015). The participants navigate between a focus on the individual and his situation, while simultaneously having moral opinions on the issue, with some trying to generate change through governance and punishment. The participants are doing moral work, but are also acting as diplomats and as specialists on both an individual and group level. This involved their own moral values, professional ideals and ideas about social work's role in relation to the judiciary system (Hasenfeld, 2000). The participants' descriptions of how they perceive their work and their professional roles show that the purchase of sex is a focal point for the operation of divergent interests, intentions, and objectives, where they as professionals navigate between several subject positionings. By navigating between different subject positionings, the social workers become part of and interact with these aspects and goals. They thereby play a role in how Swedish society deals with the purchase of sex as a social problem (cf. Blumer, 1971; Loseke, 2010).

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The purchase of sex is a politically sensitive topic, in which norms, values and morality may both be strong and change over time and context. Commercial sex can be understood as a phenomenon that is constructed as a social problem, but how the phenomenon has been explained and targeted has changed over time and across different contexts. In the Swedish context at present, the purchase of sex is primarily conceptualized as a consequence of gender inequality and as an expression of gendered oppression.

This study takes its starting point in the complex intersection between lived experiences, social norms, and prostitution policy. This study directs its focus at the experiences of men who purchase sex in a Swedish context, an institutional context coloured by a specific perspective on commercial sex. The thesis explores men's perceptions and experiences of buying sex, and how the purchase of sex is constructed as a social problem in social work practice.

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