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Researching men who pay for sex: Using online methods for recruiting and interviewing

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Abstract

The use of online tools for recruitment and data collection are increasingly offering researchers access to hard to reach groups, and providing data about sensitive topics that were previously inaccessible to the research community. In this article, drawing on the experience of researching men who pay for sex with female sex workers in the United Kingdom, I explore the complexities of conducting online research, arguing that online research is indeed a valuable research tool, but that it should not be seen as the ‘easy’ option. This article outlines my rationale for using online methods and how traditional interview and recruitment practices and ethical issues were altered by this approach. A discussion of transformations in space and time follows. Finally, I reflect on how engaging with certain methods can reveal insights into the practices of those we research.

Keywords

Online methods, sex work

Introduction

Online methods are increasingly being drawn upon by researchers. This covers a range of approaches, including web surveys, studies of online forums, ethnographic studies online interviewing, email interviewing and online focus groups (Ayling and Mewse, 2009; Comber, 1997; Cook, 2011; Hinchcliffe and Gavin, 2009; Mann and Stewart, 2000). Others use the Internet to recruit participants but combine this with traditional face-to-face or telephone interviews (Sanders, 2008). Many initial studies using online methods focused on exploring topics that relate directly to using the Internet (Hine, 2000; Mann and Stewart, 2000). However, researchers are now increasingly using online methods to conduct research into a range of topics that do not focus on the Internet such as health and sexuality (Ayling and Mewse, 2009; Liamputtong, 2006; Willis, 2011). This article critically reflects on the experience of conducting a qualitative study of men who pay for sex that used online methods for recruitment and interviewing.

Researching sex work has been fraught with challenges, due to the stigma attached to its subject matter, the perceived dangerousness of participants and the barriers faced in reaching hidden populations. These methodological

challenges mean that researching male clients is a ‘sensitive topic’:

research which poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it ... [furthermore] sensitive topics present problems because research into them involves a potential cost to those involved in the research including, on occasion, the researcher. (Lee, 1993: 4)

Consequently, there are common problems with ethical approval, access, recruitment, stereotypes and researcher safety (Melrose, 2002; O’Neill, 1996; Sanders, 2006a, 2006b; Shaver, 2005). Researching men who pay for sex has further methodological barriers due to their stigmatisation and desire for anonymity; Plumridge et al. (1997), for example, stated that the majority of their participants declared

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they had never told anyone about their activities before. There are also a number of legal ambiguities surrounding the industry (Sanders, 2008) that may deter potential participants. Despite such barriers, a variety of successful projects about male clients have been undertaken using online methods for access, recruitment and data collection (Earle and Sharp, 2008; Holt and Blevins, 2007; Katsulis, 2009; Martilla, 2008; Sanders, 2008; Soothill and Sanders, 2005; Williams et al., 2008).

This article opens by documenting the shifting social and cultural landscape of sexual commerce, focusing specifically on the rise of the Internet and electronic communication. I then outline the study that forms the basis of this article. The critical reflection of my own empirical work starts by offering a rationale and justification for the use of online methods for the study. I then call attention to the challenges of transferring traditional methodological procedures into the online realm. The following section explores the implications of transformations of space and time. Finally, I demonstrate how critical reflection about the method used can offer an increased understanding of the topics we choose to study.

Shifting landscape

Researchers have documented that there are now a number of online message boards and websites for clients and sex workers to exchange information, advertise their services or review their experiences (Bernstein, 2007; Earle and Sharp, 2007; Pettinger, 2011). Sanders (2008) argues that the 'revolutionary' impact of computer-mediated technologies has reshaped, repackaged and expanded the spectrum of the sexual services industry. These researchers have highlighted the role of the Internet in beneficially shaping sex workers' practices and conditions, including the opportunity the Internet presents to side step third party management through personal advertising, offering more autonomous working conditions and increased economic benefit. Advertising through speciality websites, offering specific characteristics or services targeting a specific audience, can also maximise sex workers' profits (Bernstein, 2005; Sanders, 2005a; Sharp and Earle, 2003).

However, the increased advertising opportunities provided by the web are not the only significant factor. At the beginning of 1999, PunterNet was set up.¹ Initially established for male clients, the website's home page describes its purpose as,

to facilitate the exchange of information on escorts in the UK. This web site aims to promote better understanding between customers and ladies in hopes that everyone may benefit, with less stressful, more enjoyable and mutually respectful visits. (PunterNet.com)

The site requires no fee and guests can view the majority of the message boards and all field reports² without registering. Many similar national and local sites have appeared with

other sites describing themselves as a 'meeting place for like-minded people' or a place 'bustling with punters, massage parlours and working girls sharing information, news & gossip ... helping to build on an already healthy community'. The Internet is seen as transforming commercial sex by offering men a space to share their experiences and information in a safe environment, where their practices are normalised (Sharp and Earle, 2003: 41). Furthermore, the Internet offers anonymity to both buyer and seller, in addition to offering the ability to 'communicate, gain information and purchase products provide[ing] the user with the opportunity to find the best resources for their particular need, desire and budget' (Castle and Lee, 2008: 188). Consequently, it is argued that the Internet will help the commercial sex industry to continue to grow (Earle and Sharp, 2008). These Internet sites offer a window into a previously hidden and hard to access world. As such, shifts pertaining to the organisation of, and practices within, the sex industry have provided the opportunity to address the absence and silence of male clients in much sex work research.

The study

Methodological framework

My projects' overarching aim was to explore the commercial and non-commercial sexual and relationship experiences of men who pay for sex. As I was interested in exploring subjective experience, it was necessary to generate what Geertz (1973) calls 'thick description'.³ So, instead of simply *describing* what men were doing when paying for sex, this approach allows the *meaning* of acts for an individual, such as experimenting sexually or seeking companionship, to be understood from a man's perspective. The variety of men who engage in paid-for sex, the multiplicity of their motivations and the heterogeneous nature of heterosexual life suggest that there is no single, objective reality of sexual experience. The aim of the social researcher is to understand how these multiple realities are constructed and interpreted (Campbell and Wasco, 2000). An interpretive epistemological stance, where the social world is understood through an examination of the interpretations of the world held by its participants, and a constructivist position which suggests that social properties are dependent on interactions between individuals, rather than simply 'out there' and independent from their construction (Bryman, 2004), were characteristics of my approach. My goal was therefore to describe life worlds 'from the inside out', from the point of view of those who participate (Flick et al., 2004: 3), to explore engaging in paid-for sex and wider relationships from the perspective of the men involved.

Recruitment and data collection

Studies have used publicly available information from online commercial sex websites as data, such as those that conduct

content analysis of field reports (Earle and Sharpe, 2008; Holt and Blevins, 2007; Soothill and Sanders, 2005). This approach would not have allowed me to address my research aim. In order to explore a male client's subjective experiences of commercial and non-commercial worlds, it was essential to gain firsthand accounts of their experiences. Thus, the Internet was used to facilitate recruitment and data collection and not as a primary source of data. In addition, a local newspaper was contacted which ran an article publicising the research and included a call for participants.

After observing a regional website, similar to PunterNet (which was open access and required no password to view⁴), I contacted the moderator. The use of gatekeepers⁵ (i.e. the moderator), and confirming one's identity as a genuine researcher by offering detailed information about the study, in order to be allowed to post a message, has been a successful recruitment method in other studies (see Reid, 1996; Sanders, 2005b). The moderator allowed me to post requesting participants and posted herself confirming that she had spoken to me, offering reassurance that I was a genuine researcher, and encouraging people to take part.

In total, there were just over 40 enquiries about the project from the online and newspaper calls. After interviewing began, a snowball sample was generated as participants posted on the local message board, encouraging others to participate. In addition, one participant posted the message on PunterNet and a smaller board. Six months after my initial post, I posted again encouraging participants to take part with an explicit emphasis on MSN Messenger and telephone interviews. This generated a further 11 participants. Overall, 35 men agreed to be interviewed: 13 came from the local board, 17 from PunterNet,⁶ 1 came from a smaller board⁷ and 4 came from the local paper. All potential participants were asked to send a brief written biography about their involvement in commercial sex. This acted a 'filtering system' to select those who were serious about participating and suitable for the project (see Sanders, 2008: 20). I decided to let participants choose what to discuss in their biographies to establish, first, what they would be prepared to discuss and, second, to gauge what they thought the project was about. Contributions varied from one line to eight pages. No one showed any overtly violent or sexual behaviour, and no one was rejected on the content of their biography. Semi-structured interviews were conducted: 10 face-to-face, 18 via telephone and 7 using MSN Messenger.

Rationale and justification for using online methods in sex work research

Illingworth (2001) argues that 'the use of the "Internet for Internet's sake" must be resisted' (p. 1.2); thus, researchers must justify and explain the extent to which the method benefits and is applicable to the project. There is a danger that researchers will use the Internet for recruitment because they 'can' and as it is easier than other recruitment strategies

(Hamilton and Bowers, 2006: 825). Following Seymour (2001), it was the specific nature of the research that challenged me to explore more expansive methods of data collection.

Initially I thought that the Internet would be used as a tool to recruit participants who would then take part in face-to-face or telephone interviews if they were too far away to travel. As outlined earlier, male clients are a difficult group to research due to the nature of their activities and concerns around researcher safety. Conversations with supervisors made it clear that I, as a young female researcher, would not be granted ethical clearance to recruit male clients in similar ways that female clients have been recruited, such as via approaching them in street locations. I felt that an ethnographic study of off-street locations (see Sanders, 2005b, for a version with female sex workers) could be too complex in terms of requiring gatekeepers. In addition, approaching clients in parlours for interviews or observing them without their explicit consent could present ethical issues. Thus, I needed to find an accessible place where men who pay for sex could be found and where I could safely approach them. The message boards that bring together male clients online provided this. Therefore, the use of online forums to recruit men who pay for sex was primarily chosen for ethical and safety reasons; admittedly this was also easier than other potential methods.

It is well documented that online methods increase access to hard to reach populations. The increase in perceived anonymity may enhance participation from stigmatised groups or those who may be unwilling or dislike traditional interview styles, and may encourage participants to discuss sensitive issues more easily (Graffigna and Bosio, 2006; Hinchcliffe and Gavin, 2009; Matthews and Cramer, 2008; Meho, 2005). The use of the online message board enabled me to post a detailed message that participants could read in their own time and space. I could have made posters and placed these in public locations but these could only have contained brief details about the project and people would have had to stop to read and take down details. I could have placed posters in indoor sex work locations but again this would have been a brief message. I could have placed a small advert in the back of a newspaper but this would have contained even less information. Thus, the online post enabled me to explain the study in some depth, demonstrate support from the website moderator and provide details that supported my bona fide researcher status without participants having to make any contact at all, or, reveal to anyone that they were interested in the study.

Kvale (1996) suggests that interviewing in qualitative research 'is a specific form of conversation', which generally involves the researcher directing questions to a participant (p. 19). Located in constructivist approaches, the qualitative interview's purpose is to allow the researcher to formulate interpretations and thus understand the meaning of participants' experiences (Warren, 2002). It was never my initial

intention to conduct interviews via computer-mediated communication (CMC). I assumed that face-to-face interviews would be best at capturing the data required as I would have been able to develop rapport easier and act on any nonverbal cues given. After my online post and the newspaper article, I received a good response. However, interest soon tailed off. After some reflection, I reassessed my strategy in light of the discussions around stigma that came up in interviews. I recognised that stigma was a key issue for men who pay for sex, and the desire to protect their identity was profound. I realised I could still understand the meaning of participants' experiences using digital communication tools which could help retain participants anonymity, so I then posted a second message online offering MSN messenger interviews and promoting telephone interviews, which I had already offered. After this second call, several men agreed to be interviewed by MSN.⁸ The desire to stay anonymous which MSN provided was a motivating factor for taking part for some as the following comment on a message board demonstrates:

I did email Natalie to take part but lost my nerve. I got a reply today asking if I still want to take part and that I could talk via MSN if I feel better with that. I have replied saying I would prefer MSN and await her reply.⁹

Considering 7 out of 35 men took part via MSN, this method was attractive for a key proportion of the sample. I believe the anonymity provided by online methods motivated some participants to be included, who would otherwise have declined due to the secretive and stigmatised nature of their activities.

Anonymity is thought to enhance disclosure and encourage disinhibition, enhancing validity (Hinchcliffe and Gavin, 2009; Joinson, 2001; Wood and Griffiths, 2007). Thus, the 'electronic cloak' (DiMarco, 2003) of virtual reality may have encouraged participants to not only take part, but also to discuss their experiences more openly than if we had met, as there was no fear of exposing themselves to stigma or ridicule and the interview could be terminated at the click of a button had participants felt threatened or judged. Concerns have been raised however that given this anonymity, how can researchers be sure that interviewees are who they say they are and that they are answering 'truthfully'? In my study, I sought to avoid this by using the written biography mentioned above as screening tool; I triangulated interviews with each other and the biography submitted and as I had numerous conversations with many participants, I was able to check there was consistency across their interviews. In addition, some participants invited me to check their online blogs or offered their usernames on the various forums they used, which suggested that they were genuine clients. These techniques together helped to address issues around data fraud.

Despite the advantages in terms of access that online methods seem to offer, samples derived in this way are thought to

be unrepresentative and exclude those without online access or skills (Duffy, 2002; Illingworth, 2001; Steiger and Göritz, 2006). They tend to be self-selecting, as is the case for many studies, but limited to those who are already online (Nicholas et al., 2010). This means that the sample excludes certain geographical and socio-economic groups that a researcher might want to have represented, as well as excluding those without financial access to computing equipment and skills or the comfort to use those skills.

Research does suggest that the overall make up of Internet users is becoming more aligned with the general population (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2008). Comber (1997) argues that 'sampling bias may be less of a concern to the researcher when they are interested in particular (especially 'deviant' or hidden) types of behaviour, as distinct from looking for representative or generalizable behaviour' (p. 5.8). He goes on to suggest that there is not always reliable information about the composition of a representative population anyhow. Willis (2011) argues, in his study with young lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer (LGBQ) people, that there was a compatibility between the research population and the technology (p. 144) due to the high levels of young people online. Furthermore, he argues that the Internet is a central technology in the socio-sexual lives of this group. The ONS (2008) reports that in early 2008, 75% of men had accessed the Internet in the last 3 months. The growth of the sex industry online means that a substantial section of the population of men who pay for sex with women in the United Kingdom have access to and are using the Internet. Thus, in my study, similar to Willis, there is a compatibility between the research population and the technology.

When considering sampling bias, it is not just demographics that are important but also the practices participants engage in. Buying and selling sex takes many forms and operates in different ways across a range of contexts (see Agustin, 2005, 2007). Although street sex work has visibly decreased in the United Kingdom, some women still sell sex on the street; these women do not operate online as outlined above (Ellison and Weitzer, 2016). Buying sex from street-based sex workers is frowned upon within online sex work communities (see Sanders, 2008); thus, those directing their practices towards street locations may be less actively involved in engaging with the online community. It is however not impossible, and some men who pay for sex with street-based sex workers may be active online. There may also be cases where men pay for sex with both street and off-street sex workers, but the stigma and hierarchy within the sex work community means that they are unable to reveal this online.

My study was guided by purposive sampling, where participants were sampled around a particular topic, that of the legal and consensual consumption of sexual services; thus issues of bias, as in other qualitative research that seeks rich data reflecting the complexity of experience, were less of a concern (Hamilton and Bowers, 2006: 823). When making

theoretical and empirical generalisations, one must remain aware that those who engage in online sex work only represent one subsection of the sex industry, albeit a growing and significant subsection. The aim of the study is not to make sweeping generalisations about all clients across the spectrum of the industry. Instead the aim is to offer some data on a sensitive topic of which little is known, by speaking to a group that are problematic to access, thus contributing to a developing literature about male clients while recognising the limits to generalisability.

Transforming traditional research methods

Skills

Online interviewing requires different skills from both researcher and participant (Selwyn and Robson, 1998). It is well documented that non-face-to-face contact can result in a loss of paraverbal cues (Hinchcliffe and Gavin, 2009; Schneider et al., 2002; Seymour, 2001). The physical, emotional and visual aspects of face-to-face interaction are missing from text-based interaction due to a lack of physical proximity. Often, this lack of nonverbal communication is not problematic as Ayling and Mewse (2009) demonstrate the 'lack of nonverbal cues did not appear to present great difficulty to either the researcher or participants, as all were experienced in communicating using text-based instant messaging' (p. 507). The use of symbols, acronyms and the description of emotion are used by participants to convey emotions (see Davis et al., 2004; Hamilton and Bowers, 2006; Willis, 2011). These expressions should be used with caution as participants can use the same expression differently. Jowett et al. (2011) reveal that some participants used capital letters for emphasis while others apologised if they accidentally capitalised their text as they felt this meant shouting. Ayling and Mewse (2009) found that 'it was possible to discern a sense of hostility in participants' text that had a different feel to the rest of the interview' (p. 570). In my study, one participant revealed that he was crying when discussing the difficulties with his wife. However, I was dependent on him revealing this information. Had we met face-to-face, he might not have revealed this and he might not have been comfortable displaying such emotion. Expressing empathy during such situations and throughout the interviews without the use of nonverbal communication presented challenges. Jowett et al. (2011) used mutual disclosure. However, mutual disclosure was not appropriate for this study; I would have felt uncomfortable discussing my own relationships or details about my intimate life with participants. Instead, I tried to empathise saying things like 'that must be hard'. During transcription of verbal interviews, body language, tone and other physical cues may not be recorded (Mann and Stewart, 2000) which raises questions about how important the loss of nonverbal cues is overall.

The lack of nonverbal cues is also thought to impact on understanding, as ambiguities can be present (Hewson, 2014). The use of several interviews, in between which the researcher can read the transcripts and then ask for clarification in the next session, is useful here. As transcripts are already typed and may only need anonymising, this meant that follow-up sessions can take place relatively quickly, for example, I undertook interviews the following day. Therefore, while I had space to reflect and read the transcripts, the conversation and rapport was still fresh in my mind. This was unable to happen for the face-to-face interviews, as I required more time to transcribe the data. The electronic paralanguage (Mann and Stewart, 2000), text speak or abbreviations used to increase the speed of typing can present challenges. As well as having to negotiate sex work terminology (e.g. GFE the Girl friend experience), I had to negotiate text talk too. The text talk was harder and I was better informed about commercial sex language. I found myself having to ask participants what certain acronyms meant; this clarification did enable a shared understanding between myself and participants that addressed any ambiguity (see Willis, 2011).

In order to encourage rich data, I opted for open-ended questions that invited a longer response instead of a closed question-and-answer dialogue like Davis et al. (2004). Conversations were at times disjointed but the data were rich and conversational in style. While I did not end up with large blocks of text as for face-to-face interviews, I did end up with up to 5–10 lines of text from participants offering rich and detailed insights enabling meanings to be explored. However, the use of online interviewing in this study was not an attempt to replicate the face-to-face interview; instead it was a tool to talk to participants who would have otherwise remained inaccessible (see Deakin and Wakefield, 2013).

As well as participants needing to be comfortable enough with technology, as suggested above, the researcher needs to be experienced in online communication to be able to respond appropriately, for example, sensing hostility or emotional upset despite distance and time lapses (Ayling and Mewse, 2009). Mann and Stewart (2000) argue that silences can be unsettling for researchers and participants. Silences can be read as not paying attention, being offended and not wishing to answer the question, as well as simply just reflecting on the question. I felt that silences were awkward and negative; consequently, I would frequently fire off questions or responses to what participants had just said while they were thinking, and comments such as 'slow down mate' were made (see Illingworth, 2006). Therefore, in some instances, I was moving the interview on too quickly. Jowett et al. (2011) argue that listening indicators, such as 'ok', 'yeh' and 'I see' could be useful to communicate attentiveness but while useful on occasions, they argue such interruptions affected the conversational flow and felt unnatural. One participant in my study came up with a method for enabling the conversation to flow by using [...] to indicate that he was not finished and would continue talking.

In order to encourage participants to be comfortable enough to discuss their intimate practices, rapport is necessary in traditional interviewing (Seymour, 2001). It has been claimed that developing rapport is hindered in online contexts. Using online interviewing that takes places over a number of sessions is a strategy to enable rapport to develop (Cook, 2011). Personally, I found that rapport was established easily and quickly. This may have been, as Letherby and Zdrodowski (1995) in their work using letter writing claim, that participants may feel less exposed if they write rather than speak. Or, perhaps this was as participants were already used to using technology to communicate generally, as well as to interact within commercial sex. Also, I was more relaxed and comfortable during online interviews, as I expand on below. The use of email prior to interviews can help to establish a relationship that carries on into the interview and this was used to help participants understand the context of the interview so there were no surprises in terms of the sensitive content.

Jowett et al. (2011) argue that online interviewing as well as taking longer than traditional interviewing produces less data. I was not concerned about the quantity of data, more the quality and I found it easier to keep online interviews on track as I found it easier to ask direct questions and to keep the conversation on track. Also, if participants did go off on a tangent, it was less awkward to ‘interrupt’ using the online medium. In face-to-face situations, I found this difficult and tended to let participants carry on talking rather than interrupting them.

In order to overcome these challenges, it is important that the researcher is skilled and knowledgeable about online communication. Illingworth (2001) goes as far as to argue that online researchers require more skills than for those conducting traditional research. These skills include establishing rapport and trust, typing skills, being culturally competent in the research field as well as with the technology and being able to manage the conversation with only a keyboard (Illingworth, 2001: 15.1). A good interviewer must remain attentive and responsive to both the verbal and nonverbal cues from participants (Hamilton and Bowers, 2006). If the researcher asks a question that could be emotionally impactful, then asking for clarification if an answer is short could help tease out the meaning in more depth.

Using technology

There are other factors apart from the researcher’s skills which can impact the data collection process. Technical hiccups with software, Internet access and security caused some barriers. Most literature explores issues with technology during data collection, however, I experienced technological difficulties before this phase. My initial email contacting the website administrator did not appear to be successful, as there was no reply; I interpreted this silence as a negative response. However, on observing the board some weeks later, there was a post at the top of the main board which read

‘FOA [*sic*] of N Hammond’. The post explained that my email had been received, but all replies were bouncing back, and asked me to email a phone number and I would be called. It would seem that the moderators email address or the content of the message was deemed too *risky* by the university to get through. While it is important to provide details which authenticate the researcher, those conducting work on sensitive topics and using language which may be deemed as ‘sensitive’ could be blocked by institutional anti-spam filters which may use keyword detection to block messages. Had there been no message board, or had I not been observing the message board, then the research could have suffered an unnecessary obstacle at the first hurdle. The solution here would be to use a non-university email address but this presents challenges in establishing genuine researcher status.

On some occasions, I found when interviewing with a mobile broadband connection, it was unreliable meaning that interviews dropped out or the messaging programme crashed leaving me (and possibly my participants) frustrated and stressed (see Willis, 2011). This can waste time as the problem needs to be identified and rectified, but it also interrupts the flow of the interview as it has to be established where the connection was lost and some of the conversation must be repeated (Jowett et al., 2011).

Ethics

Using online methods presents new challenges in terms of safe spaces, and storing online conversations with their sensitive contents and participants email addresses embedded must be addressed by researchers (Beddows, 2008; Duffy, 2002; Wood and Griffiths, 2007). I had to be sure that as soon as possible after the interview I was able to remove email addresses. To ensure confidentiality and to protect anonymity, the information that participants disclosed was protected by the safe storage of material. For example, any electronic media were kept on my personal laptop that required a password to log on and was used only by me. Ethical requirements stipulated that I was not allowed to use public University computers to contact participants or conduct interviews for fear that others could access the contact details or data. I printed off emails as they were read and kept hard copies in a locked cabinet. Emails were then deleted and a programme was used to clean the computer removing traces of such communication as much as is possible.

Electronic communication also presents new challenges for obtaining informed consent. However, if a participant chooses to fill the form in and returns it via email, even without typing his name in the signature area, this is understood as explicit consent (see Madge, 2007). As with others, I seemed more concerned about confidentiality and online security than participants (Ayling and Mewse, 2009). This may be as participants are used to discussing and arranging their involvement in commercial sex online and already take their own precautions.

A key ethical issue around protecting participants and doing no harm needs special consideration in online research especially those conducting sensitive research. McCoyd and Kerson (2006) argue that researchers are more limited in their ability to refer participants to support services if required. It is best practice to stop interviews and offer the opportunity to have a break, or to terminate the interview and/or refer participants if they become distressed. Due to the lack of nonverbal communication, it might be harder for the researcher to judge the nature and intensity of participants' emotion. Thus, the researcher must be alert for subtle cues that demonstrate distress such as the use of symbols or tone, as well as relying on participants to reveal their own emotions, as mentioned above. While such methods are useful, they are not a definitive indicator of participant's emotional state, or their need for further support. In my study, I was reliant on one participant revealing that he required further support: 'I have found this interview useful, how would you suggest I might take it further? Do I need a shrink or counselling?' (Huw, married). The researcher may need to enquire how the participant is or what impact the interview has had at the end. Having multiple interviews may offer participant's the opportunity to talk through any issues the research may have raised. It could be for those conducting sensitive research that they offer details about support services at the end of the interview or as Willis (2011) did, provide details of support services on the research website prior to interviews taking place, which participants can be directed to during and after interviews.

One area where the use of online interviewing is potentially useful in terms of ethics is addressing the safety and wellbeing of the researcher. As noted above, there were significant ethical concerns about my safety as a young female researcher interviewing men who pay for sex. The use of online interviews can help to address some of these safety concerns (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013). I conducted many interviews out of working hours and some late in the evening; thus, it would have been problematic arranging to meet safely in such instances. In addition, ethical constraints dictated how and where interviews could be conducted, that is, they were conducted on university premises and thus during working hours. Using online interviewing side stepped this issue. I also felt that I was more relaxed¹⁰ during online interviews as I was at home or my desk, spaces that I was familiar and comfortable with.

Transformations

Time

Using online interviews saved time as there was no need for transcription, no time was spent travelling to interviews and the data were instantly saved and archived reducing costs (Seymour, 2001; Wood and Griffiths, 2007). The ability of the virtual realm to cut across such barriers meant that communication was no

longer temporally bound, which reduced the potential negative impact of these ethical constraints in terms of the loss of participants. It was more straightforward to find a 'time and place' that was mutually convenient for participants and myself. This meant that those who worked full time or would not have had time to participate could do so. This is particularly useful for those who engage in practices that they keep secret. It enables them to initiate and arrange contact when it suits fitting in with the priorities of their daily lives (Seymour, 2001).

While time was saved in some areas, as Willis (2011) found, online interviewing took much longer than face-to-face interviewing and often ran for several hours, taking place over three or more sessions. However, this level of involvement is problematic for some (Jowett et al., 2011; McCoyd and Kerson, 2006). It is important that researchers prepare participants for this, as well as working hard to maintain interest and participation. I found that when I was honest with a potential participant and explained that an online interview may take up to 4 hours over several conversations, he told me that was 'ridiculous' and he would not be taking part! While it is important to be honest with participants, it might have been better to state that the interview may take place over several sessions rather than give a specific period. One participant remarked during one session when he had to leave that he 'didn't know where the time's gone' suggesting that even though we had been chatting for some time, it was not problematic. While some face-to-face interviews happen over multiple meetings and can take some time, neither some participants nor I were prepared for this in this study. While there can be timesavings, it may not be as straightforward as first assumed.

Space

In online interviewing, the researcher has no control over the conditions in which participants are taking part in research, and distractions which the researcher is not aware of may interrupt participant engagement (Ayling and Mewse, 2009; Illingworth, 2001). The researcher's control over the interview process can be reduced as participants can easily end the interview, they maybe chatting to others online or undertaking other activities (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013; Hewson, 2014; Willis, 2011). It was apparent during several online interviews that participants engaged in other activities. One man made cups of tea and changed from his work clothes into his casual clothes and another was chatting to others online at the same time. Davis et al. (2004) argue that once disruption has occurred, it can be hard to repair the flow of the conversation. I did not find this, but I was (naively) shocked that participants were doing other things whereas I was giving my full attention to the interview. Others have discussed how the lack of shared physical space allowed participants to transgress certain boundaries. Ayling and Mewse (2009) found that participants flirted and asked personal questions about the interviewer's sexual feelings. While it is not certain that

these participants would not have done this if they were interviewed face-to-face, the online medium certainly makes this easier. While I experienced no open flirting during online interviews, I did feel that once the conversation was flowing that they felt more informal than face-to-face interviews. The use of text talk and abbreviations as well as being in my own surroundings meant the interviews had a more relaxed feel. In addition, as participants often use the online realm to mask or manage certain characteristics (Seymour, 2001), I felt I could do the same. It was known to all participants that I was female but when interacting online, they did not know my age, what I looked like or what I was wearing and this helped me to relax more and as a result be more friendly than perhaps I was during face-to-face interviews. In addition, as I was unaware of participants' nonverbal cues, they were unaware of mine and when reading text, there is no need to control your voice and body language when something upsets you. I did not have to hide my face if someone revealed something that I found problematic (Letherby and Zdrodowski, 1995).

As described earlier, I felt safer and more comfortable doing online interviews in my own safe spaces, similarly participants might be more comfortable using online methods as it allows them to take part in their own spaces and as they are used to typing revealing messages at their computers (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006). The geographical range of participants was also extended and I was aware that I was communicating with participants who were not local (see Hinchcliffe and Gavin, 2009).

The transformation of space that using online interviewing brings can increase access to disabled or marginalised groups. Seymour (2001) argues that people with disabilities use technologies to bypass aspects of the body that hinder participation in everyday life. This means that virtual spaces become accessible to participants who would, even with the researchers best efforts, be excluded from such research. Again, the use of technology offers those with disabilities a sense of independence to partake in research that could be considered sensitive, or that they do not wish for anyone else to know that they are involved in. I interviewed one participant who was blind, but due to the use of technology, this enabled him to take part in both paid-for sex and my research.

Parallels

The use of online mediums for interviewing and recruitment require further reflection beyond just the process. While the nature of male client's practices online was not a primary focus of the research initially, it quickly became apparent that the use of the Internet was key for those involved in the sex industry. The use of online tools enabled me to enter the world of commercial sex. My place in that world requires reflection.

Promotion – field reports

As Sanders (2008) has demonstrated, men who pay for sex arrange research interviews in a similar way to their paid-for

sex encounters. Similarly, recruitment and interviewing required me to participate in the ways in which some of the men were living out and managing an aspect of their identity that was potentially secret or indeed stigmatised. The importance of anonymity required by some during the research emphasised the stigma these men felt paying for sex held, and the consequences if their activities were revealed. When arranging the interviews, it was made clear by some that this was similar to the process of arranging commercial sex meetings. In both the research and commercial sex, men had to find time, locate a private space, have access to technical facilities and be able to cover their tracks. For example, one participant who lived with his parents had to negotiate the time of the online interview around his parents. One man only ever paid for sex when he was working away and our multiple conversations (we spoke four times) could only be arranged then. Arranging and conducting interviews took place while men were not nearby their usual place of living; this reflects how they themselves would arrange their own commercial sex encounters – from a distance. The method and data when collected thus have a parallel quality, evident in the similarities between online interviews and engagement in sexual commerce. The anonymity allowed men to engage with interviews in a similar way they explore paying for sex. For example, after a set of online interviews, one participant agreed to a phone conversation. However, this was not necessary as I had enough rich data – in effect, he was testing me out in a similar way that men and women involved in commercial sex interview one and other prior to moving offline.

The online forums enabled participants to comment on my performance and credibility as an interviewer and to produce a form of 'field report' and recommendation, mirroring the practices they take part in when reviewing and recommending (or not) women they choose to visit in paid-for sex. Some participants promoted the research:

I did my telephone interview with Natalie today (lasted about 45 minutes). ... I do urge any of you lazy buggers who still haven't got round to it to give her a hand, though, as I'm sure her work can do nothing but good. ... Make an effort, chaps!

My professional ability to conduct the research, ask questions and put participants at ease was commented on, as were issues of trust and genuine identity. These skills parallel, albeit modestly the emotional labour and impression management work that sex workers undertake in terms of their ability to help men relax, earn their trust and establish their credibility as genuine sex workers (see Sanders, 2008). Recommendations resulted in more men taking part, as Mark (48, married) told me during an interview:

Well I saw the request ... when I look at [message board] ... some of the guys that've been involved ... quite a few have passed comment afterwards about what a lovely lady you were and things like that and that you didn't bite and all sorts of stuff like that and

have been encouraging others ... one of the topics has been ... 'please guys go and see Natalie to go and put the record straight to say it as it is, not as it's being portrayed in the media'.

Overall, the use of online methods requires careful reflection as the method itself can be a useful source of insight into the practices of the research population under study.

Conclusion

It appears that the transition from site-focused face-to-face interaction to technology-mediated remote interaction requires abandoning the idea of physical immersion in physical field sites as the basis of authentic knowledge (Jordan, 2009: 187). While the use of online research tools for recruitment and data collection present significant opportunities, especially for accessing hard to reach populations, researchers should remain cautious. As this article has revealed and Illingworth (2001) notes, the 'transference of conventional research procedures and devices to the online setting is problematic and requires careful consideration' (p. 18.2). The use of online tools requires careful thought, accommodations, a reasonable level of skill in CMC by the researcher and should not be seen as the 'easy option'.

It is clear that drawing on online methods for recruitment and data collection can help side step many of the challenges that researchers face with researching hidden populations, such as men who pay for sex. Indeed, studies that are grounded in online methods have provided an insight into the organisation and experiences of men who pay for sex, insights which have for a long time remained invisible. It is important that online researchers remain aware of the self-selecting nature of their samples and recognise the limitations to empirical and possibly theoretical generalisability. The aim was never to replicate face-to-face interviews but to provide data on an otherwise inaccessible population (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013). As Comber (1997) argues, the use of online methods has issues but opens up possibilities such as access to hard to reach groups and interesting information on a sensitive topic and provides data which 'can lead research in new and exciting directions' (p. 5.10).

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Notes

1. See Sanders (2008) for a review of PunterNet's origins and development, also Earle and Sharp (2008).

2. A field report is 'a written report of an experience with a prostitute by a client' (PunterNet.com).
3. Thick description explains behaviour and the context of that behaviour so it becomes meaningful to those outside that context (Geertz, 1973: 5–6).
4. This changed part way through the project and a logon identity was required to view any of the message boards.
5. See Liamputtong (2007) for a full review of using gatekeepers to access hard to reach or vulnerable populations.
6. It is hard to be accurate about the numbers from the message boards as some men had seen it in numerous places, so I was never sure which post prompted them to take part.
7. I only became aware that someone had posted the message on a third site when I enquired where a participant had heard about the research during an interview.
8. It is hard to be certain how many men agreed to be interviewed from each 'wave' of recruitment as I posted a second message and emailed men again who had expressed an interest but had not got back to me, emphasising MSN and telephone interview. Whether they had not got back to me was due to nerves or being busy I am unsure.
9. I have not given the website this came from nor the pseudonym of the participant to protect confidentiality and anonymity.
10. I have written elsewhere about the emotional impact of and my own safety concerns around, conducting research with men who pay for sex, especially how I felt leading up to face-to-face interviews (see Hammond, 2010).

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