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# **Becoming Male Sex Worker, Doing Masculinities. Socio-Sexual Interactions and Gender Production in Men Selling Sex to Men in Italy and Sweden**

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# **Becoming Male Sex Worker, Doing Masculinities. Socio-Sexual Interactions and Gender Production in Men Selling Sex to Men in Italy and Sweden**

*Marco Bacio, Cirus Rinaldi*

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Abstract: Although masculinity is a powerful concept in both sociology and gender studies, previous research forgot to analyse sex work under this perspective. Even though the actors involved are men, and previous studies have highlighted the importance of masculinity not only in the relation man-to-woman but also in the “gay world”, there is a lack of attention in male sex working. Then, the aim of this paper is to analyse sex work under the perspective of masculinity in order to understand what type of relationships are created between sex workers and their clients and which role it is played by masculinity, how the relation is shaped by it. Moreover, we explain how doing sex work is also a way to do masculinity, a mean through which sex workers can elevate themselves under different perfectives: socially, economically, and culturally. Thanks to a sample of 45 male sex workers interviewed between Italy and Sweden and that use the internet as a mean to find clients, we show how the job of selling sex to other men cannot avoid the categories of masculinities. This is true for both “heterosexual” and gay escorts. At the same time, we also find “space for resistance”, where some gay sex workers are able to establish relations that go beyond the standard concept of masculinity.

*Keywords: male sex workers, masculinity, prostitution, Italy, Sweden.*

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## 1. Introduction

Male sex work, despite not being a new phenomenon in the history of human sexual behaviours and practices from ancient times to nowadays (Kaye, 2014), has seldom been the object of specific theoretical analysis and empirical research in sociology and, furthermore, has often been neglected by social policies and interventions (Scott & Minichiello, 2014; Weitzer, 2009). Traditionally both psychological, medical, and epidemiological scientific analysis have depicted males involved in offering and exchanging sexual services with other males as a “pathological” or “at risk” population, thus creating a “social problem” (Blumer, 1971) linked to the “spectre” of homosexuality, to the menace of “corrupting the young”, or to the spreading of the “gay plague”. The limited amount of sociological research and analysis conducted on this topic, especially in the Italian context (Rinaldi, 2012; 2020), show how the sex worker’s stereotype is overall linked to the image of the “[female]prostitute”, therefore to a practice which has been essentialised so to be *naturally* considered as “feminine”, and based mainly on the rhetoric of trafficking and control (Agustin, 2007). Male sex work has received less public attention than female sex work for a number of reasons which can be synthetically attributed to a male’s *presumed* better chances – as he is considered a “natural” inhabitant and legitimate occupant of public spaces – of eluding social control and stigmatization. This is compounded by a general cultural unease associated with the spectre of homosexuality and the threat that sex work implies, even if only in symbolic terms: that of “encouraging homosexuality” (Rinaldi, 2016). This is why this phenomenon is normally “swept under the carpet”, as it testifies to the fact that even men identifying as heterosexual can, “under certain terms”, have sex with other men, thus behaving in a way that threatens to blur the seemingly existing boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality.

In the present paper we will present a synthesis of multi-sited research on male sex work focusing mainly on the self-perception, the learning practices, and the entering in the “career” of a sample of male sex workers trying to highlight how the process of becoming and acknowledging to be “in the trade” is also a way for *doing* masculinity(ies) and *doing* sexuality(ies).

## 2. Doing masculinities/doing sex work: filling the gap in the literature

If *essentialist* or *naturalist* theorists and perspectives view sexuality as a “fact”, or a series of established, natural, stable characteristics (Weeks, 1985), *anti-naturalist* and *constructivist* positions focus instead on the analysis of the production of meaning. Symbolic interactionist perspective has enabled

us – particularly through reference to the dimensions of social learning, of the use and of the negotiation of sexual meanings understood as a “repertoire” that the subject enacts – to understand that we develop a language and identify “sexual” names and meanings we then assign to specific situations, subjects, and identities. We learn to *become sexual* and use sexual meanings just like we learn the use of any other meaning. Social actors, in particular, use meanings available in cultural repertoires, in *scripts*; in other words, in cognitive structures generated by the union of different combinations of structured concepts (schemes that identify general knowledge of objects, events, and behaviours), that lay out an organized and adequate pattern of actions that recurs in specific circumstances, in a given context, to achieve a certain goal, according to a specific gender configuration (Gagnon & Simon, 1974; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). The general hypothesis behind this paper is based on the idea that people do not just “react” to sexual-physiological sensations, but rather their symbolic system plays a key role in the (social) organization of the sexual gendered experience. Each social situation defines behaviours and practices and enables social actors to grant themselves the “authorization” to carry out specific sexual behaviours. In every social situation, specific behaviours, mutual expectations of the social actors involved (sexual practices), and specific narratives that evoke (or re-trace) culturally available sexual scripts in order to justify what is happening (Gagnon & Simon, 1974), occurring both concretely and symbolically. So to speak, our *being sexual* varies according to the rituals and performances in which we are involved as part of our daily lives. Such is the case any time we perform a role to communicate our identity to one or more audiences from communicative, expressive, aesthetic, and verbal points of view. From a symbolic interactionist approach, our being sexual is more likely something we do, a *doing (oneself) sexual(ly)*. It follows that, like other spheres of social life, sexuality is based on a *performative imperative*, whereby *we must necessarily appear to (female or male) others* (Edgley, 2015), or at least a competent and plausible sexual(ised) and gendered social actor. The moment we take *centre stage* from the *backstage* and stand in front of an audience lends itself to an understanding of the ways that social actors “dress up for” a particular role or, conversely, “take off” their clothes (Goffman, 1969); the same is true for the reverse movement from one’s presence on stage to their retreat to the backstage. Any kind of social-sexual interaction must be somehow staged and “tuned” in order to reach a balance of actions and therefore to get at a common shared definition. So to speak, doing sex is just more than “sex”, since sexuality can be considered as a material and symbolic resource, we “do” sex to perform some other identity features; so once we are involved in socio-sexual interaction at the same time we are “doing” gender (West &

Zimmerman, 1987), producing negotiating and performing specific sexual meanings.

By following this reasoning, male prostitution takes on a paradoxical role: on the one hand, it attracts all the social fears and anxieties of “trespassing” between genders and the corruption of bodies and, on the other, it can be understood as a tool that specific classes of males use (or have used) to produce “their own” masculinity. Analysing male sex work in sociological terms means at the same time analysing it as a cultural practice to be interpreted with respect to the existing relationship between the different masculinities involved (Connell, 2005; Masserschmidt, 2018), within the relations produced between the regimes of heterosexuality and homosexuality, of the potential asymmetries that exist, in the way acts, conducts, desires, and identities can be subjected to processes of stigmatisation. In contrast to female sex work where it is the “prostitute” who is the focus of analysis and intervention (Serughetti, 2019), in the case of the offer of sexual services exchanged between men, it is the client who usually attracts the most reflection (Benadusi, 2005), while the sex worker – especially when he defines himself as heterosexual – has raised more theoretical and control policies’ concerns (Scott, 2003), representing in fact a threat to the impermeability of sexual orientations and the compactness of gender regimes. According to historical data and evidence drawn from the prevailing scientific literature, urban contexts (with their commercial exchanges, the guarantee of anonymity of the large suburbs, etc.) have always been the propelling centres of different groups, cultures, and prostitutive activities (Garofalo Geymonat, 2014). The characteristics of male sex work, in particular, due to the social invisibility of males as providers of sexual services in the public space and their lack of recognition within interventions and policies (Bacio, 2021a), do not allow an overall data on the dimensions of the phenomenon (Rinaldi, 2020). These elements of opacity profoundly characterise the study of masculinities involved in sex work due to political and ideological rhetorics that throughout the main social developments of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have alternately and in contradictory terms expressed evaluations and analyses of a phenomenon that both reinforces and, at the same time, challenges hegemonic masculinities, making them subject to revision and, certainly, coming to represent masculinity tout court as more fluid as it would appear. Reflection oriented towards analysing in sociological terms the transformations, production, and organisation of masculinities involved in the provision of sexual services to other males appears, therefore, very limited (while the historical analysis is generally broader and more relevant) (Benadusi, 2005; D’Emilio, 1983; Chauncey, 1994; Norton, 1992; Reay, 2010).

Between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the construction of homosexuality and its cultural invention as a “species” (Fou-

cault, 1978) is directly linked to the appearance of expert knowledge that will reinforce the relationship between criminal activity (prostitution), homosexuality, and “perverse” masculinities, differentiating the different masculinities involved (“prostitutes” and “clients”) by characteristics, temperament, and treatment (Weeks, 1981).

The main focus of attention is concentrated on the “prostitute” who assumes hypervisibility as a subject who threatens the gender order with his failed masculinity, which manifests itself through specific signs to be read as evidence of degeneration (Crozier, 2003). Positivist classificatory compulsiveness was aimed at surveilling not only those considered criminal but also anyone who could be potentially suspicious and dangerous; positivist reflections were thus bent to the construction of the public security apparatus and devoted to the social defence of public order against a series of dangerous subjects, including brigands and anarchists, minors to be corrected and women with a sexual appetite to be controlled, and other ungovernable citizens, including “pederasts” and “inverts”, and prostitutes.

The sociologically relevant research of the period is usually criminological in character and identifies subjects who are dangerous to the social order and who are traitors to the gender order and social coexistence (Carlier, 1887); at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sexology reproduces pathologising discourses and generally analyses, as Weeks points out, the subject of male prostitution at the same time as the aetiological definition of the homosexual subject, identifiable through discrete characteristics (Weeks, 1981). The same interpretation has been offered during Nazi and fascist totalitarian regimes, where the most cruel persecutions were those against “passive pederasts” or “inverts” and not those against “active pederasts” – in fact, while the latter still somehow enacted the proactive male role, the former betrayed the male role and were associated by the common feeling of the time with the female role (Benadusi, 2005). The postwar era saw the theme of male prostitution analysed in the massive research on American male sexuality by Alfred Kinsey, which does not, however, problematise any dimension related to masculinity (indicating only a mere taxonomic distribution between those who sell and purchase services) (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948). Journalist reports began to appear from the 1970s with collections of life stories of prostitutes reconstructed with scandalous tones (Harris, 1973; Lloyd, 1976). From the 1980s, the rhetoric and scientific interpretations of the period are clearly oriented – especially after the discovery of HIV/AIDS – to portray prostitutes as a “risk group” (Rinaldi & Bacio, 2022). In particular, the scientific accounts of the 1980s and 1990s associate the prostitute more closely with a condition of “bisexuality” and with the world of drug addiction within an epidemiological representation that constructs male prostitution as a prototype repository of the disease and transmitter/

carrier of the infection from the gay population (considered as the source of primary infection of the virus) to the heterosexual world (Morse et al., 1991; Scott, 2003). The MSM subject – who may have a partner, a wife, children – that is, the new epidemiological category of the “male who has sex with other males”, coined specifically to focus attention on behaviour and not on identity as risk factors for sexually transmitted diseases, creates greater anxiety because it makes identities even more ambiguous and fluid, as well as depicting gender boundaries as penetrable and vulnerable, and transmission risks higher. The emergence of a gay culture allows for the possibility that men who self-perceive, define, and identify as “gay” begin to sell sex to other males who specifically require their services. However, it is interesting to note that as socially stigmatised identity instances are more consolidated, the greater the likelihood that “normative” identities are no longer involved in the sex-economic transaction: if conduct is no longer linked to the practices that are enacted and the roles they represent but rather expresses a core identity that is consolidated through the choice of the object of desire (a “gay” identity), it will no longer be “(real) males” who provide their services, but *othered* males who are with people of their own kind, or a series of “deviant types”, delinquents, unemployed, and other marginal people who are in search of immediate gains to satisfy their need for drugs (Kaye, 2014). The new contemporary scenarios no longer view prostitution as pathological or delinquent conduct, but rather as “sex work” (Perkins et al., 1994; Morrison & Whitehead, 2007), within which male sex workers (and female workers) seek to overcome the stigma attached to their activity, to differentiate the personal dimension from the professional one, and to claim better and safer living conditions (Browne & Minichiello, 1996).

However, even within the most recent production, analyses have summarily taken into account the negotiation of the masculinities involved with rare exceptions regarding male hierarchies and gender order in South American contexts (see the contribution included in Aggleton, 1999; Prieur, 1998; Carrier, 1995; Mitchell, 2015), participation in sex work as a “deviant” activity within Indonesian youth street gangs (Alcano, 2016), and research such as Logan’s, that have intertwined variables such as the relationship between economic sexual exchange, personal characteristics, and sexual behaviour according to the sociological theories of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005), specifically looking at the size of the sex worker population and their geographical distribution in the United States.

Whether some of the research place male sex work on the pole of the hypervisibility of the “prostitute” (in the case of a threat to the gender order) or on that of its invisibility (linked to the paradigm of victimisation as an essentially female dimension, as a patriarchal expression of male dominance) (Weitzer, 2010), in both cases the analyses have profoundly neglected the

role played by the activity in the construction and organisation of the masculinities involved. Few other research have questioned male hierarchies in male sex work: Rebutini (2013; 2014), following Italian scholar Paola Tabet (2004), has studied male sex work in Morocco and has proved how selling sexual services is to be considered as an obligatory passage towards “autonomy”, a temporary “strategy” of a transition from a subaltern masculinity to a hegemonic masculinity (Rebutini, 2013); while Cirio Rinaldi (2020) has collected data relating to survival street male sex work highlighting the existence of multiple subaltern/hegemonic masculinities which subvert traditional and normative gender performance but, at the same time, they remain bound to apparent models of reiteration of hegemony through forms of hyperbolic and “exaggerated” masculinity, a kind of “cost” and “sacrifice” of male honour that men involved in sex work have to pay in order to continue to be “male” in traditional terms; the same results appear in Özbay’s research in Turkish male sex work arenas (Özbay, 2017).

The following sections will focus on the situational production of masculinities involved in male sex work arenas aiming at highlight how the very category of sex work is best understood as a way to do gender relations among men, even though these relations go beyond sex and sexual behaviour and can exceed our knowledge on genders and sexualities.

### **3. Research design and sample characteristics**

The sample of this study is constituted by 45 male sex workers: 16 are part of the “Swedish group”, 20 are part of the “Italian group”, and 9 are defined as “international group”. All the interviews in Italy have been carried out in a single city: Milan. While the interviews in Sweden have been made in different parts of the country; of course, the majority were in Stockholm. For reasons connected to privacy, we do not declare where the interviews were made. The 9 interviews with “international” sex workers are divided as follows: 6 in Sweden and 3 in Italy.

About some characteristics of the interviewees: at the time of the interview, the youngest sex worker was 20 and the oldest 57, the mean is above 32 years old, that means that the sample is largely constituted by younger sex workers. The length of presence in the market is extremely wide: one sex worker has been interviewed in his first and only month of activity, while the sex workers with more seniority is selling sex in the last 29 years; the mean is a little bit above 6 years. Differently from previous studies on male sex workers (Rinaldi, 2020), a larger part of this sample was constituted by men that defined themselves as gay (24) and bisexual (10), while only 5 men declared to be straight; 6 sex workers adopted other definitions such as “fluid”, “bisexual/gay”, “gay/straight”, “I do like everything”. Among the 24 gays,



there is also a sex worker who declared to be in transition from female to male (or FTM). We discuss the implication of the sexual orientation of the sample later in the empirical sections. But another important aspect of the men interviewed is that they are largely “out” (23) and only a minority is still hidden (12), 5 prefer not to answer and other 5 are straight. Finally, we present their education, in terms of the highest level achieved. The relative majority of sex workers (17) have a high-school diploma, followed by those who have a master degree (14), and by male with an undergraduate degree (7); 6 reported a low level of education (middle school or lower) and 1 holds a PhD. So, the male sex workers we interviewed have high level of education.

We get in contact with almost all interviewees through two escorts websites – for privacy reasons we are not going to name these websites. There, we opened a free account as “client” (the other alternative was as “escort”), where we presented ourselves and our research, we showed some pictures of us, and we asked for participants. Then, we started to write a message (only in English in Sweden and in Italian or English in Italy) to every sex worker that was online in Stockholm and Milan. As Walby (2012), we always wrote the same kind of message, presenting ourselves and our project, with a “call for participation” at the end. The response rate has been particularly high, especially in Sweden, while Walby (2012) received less than 10% of positive replies. Pruitt (2008) considered unlikely that sex workers would respond to messages coming from self-identified sociologists, suggesting hiding at the beginning the researcher identity in order to receive more positive feedbacks. We did not do that. It has been always clear our role as sociologists, even though we paid for ads (as sex workers do) and although our profiles were formatted as client profiles.

In order to make the process of finding sex workers to interview easier, we offered to the interviewees 500 Swedish Crowns (or SEK) (around 50 euros) in Sweden, and 30 euros in Italy. The interviews were particularly long. The standard length was around 1 hour and 45 minutes, with the shortest around 1 hour and a half, and the longest above 2 hours and 15 minutes. The interview, then, became something more than answering questions. For the sex workers it was the first time to think about what they are doing without the fear of being rejected or judged by someone. Finally, due to a lack of an office in Stockholm, most of the interviews in Sweden have been carried out in public places, usually a café on *Vasagatan*, a street near Stockholm Central Station, other times we have been hosted at sex workers’ places. In Italy, almost all the interviews have been carried out in a university office in the city centre of Milan. Although the level on intimacy was higher in Italy than in Sweden, we do not think that these different locations had any impact on the interviews.

Finally, we never accepted real names and we did not want to use the name they usually utilized when meeting clients. Moreover, we also re-named all the interviewees with another name according to their country of origin in order to guarantee the maximum level of privacy.

#### **4. “Heterosexual” sex workers and masculinity’s defence techniques**

Plummer (2005) stressed that sex is the core of the gay male experience, and that gay sex is revolutionary sex. Indeed, there is a paradox: “gay male sexuality may be the key to heterosexual male sexuality – it may suggest the routes that most men would take if they were not shaped by relations with women. Gay men become the champions of the pleasure principle” (Plummer, 2005, p. 12). Also, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have noted a hybridization of hegemonic masculinity, because some heterosexual men have appropriated aspects of gay masculinities (such as metrosexual identity). The boundaries are blurred. Then, we need to see which type of masculinities the sex workers we interviewed support, and if they tend to stress the old dichotomy between masculine and feminine or if they adopt a more nuanced balance between them.

In this section, and in the next two, we present the behaviour of the sex workers we met between Italy and Sweden and the way they employ masculinity to justify their presence in this market. We divide our interviewees in three groups: first, those sex workers who self-define as heterosexuals; second, those sex workers who self-define as homosexual and that stress the importance of masculinity in their activities and in relation with clients; third, those sex workers who self-define as homosexual and that do not stress masculinity in their activities and relation with clients.

In the first group, Bo, for example, represents an *unicum* since is the only sex worker we met that is also a drug user and that used to sell sex to pay for his drugs and defines himself as straight. So, he was “obliged” to have sex with men in order to have money for the drugs. According to Rinaldi (2020), this is part of the repertoire that sex workers use to justify their presence into sex work. Indeed, the men he met always affirmed their heterosexual status outside sex work, as a way to divide between what is work and an obligation and what is private life and the place where they can express their real identity. But Bo affirms his heterosexuality in a different way: at first, he clearly defines himself as heterosexual, despite the sex he used to have with men; but, at the same time, he states that he does not fall in love with men and that, more importantly, having sex with men is not a problem. In other words, Bo is not trying to distance himself from the “stigma of homosexuality” (Rinaldi, 2020).

B: I did not really like men; you cannot really like a prostitute. Sexuality with men makes you want to get the hell out of here. That is not really about holding hands, it is more just “fuck and forget”. It is a way to express the feeling to a person you have not met before. I met my clients, but I have not really known much about them... Then, I started again later, I have done it sometimes, but you see... I guess I am attracted to men: they pay me, so I did not really mind, that is a sort of advantage.

(Bo, 48 years old)

Bo is not disclaiming what he did when he was a young guy. Instead, Bo highlights that having sex with men is not “holding hands” or having a relationship fulfilled with emotions, but it is more “fuck and forget”, he does not like what he did, but male clients were attracted by him, and he used this as a sort of advantage in what it was he real aim: buying drugs. Similarly, in Italy, Alessandro does not try to distance himself from the other men he has sex with, but differently from Bo, his sexual encounters make him change his own definition of his sexual orientation. He is confident on what he is doing and even on saying that he is not straight anymore, but bisexual. Deepening his activities with men, Alessandro points out that he is only top with his clients, also saying that he cannot work with top clients since he does not perform anal sex as bottom. This is an important point of discussion that go in the same directions: Alessandro is affirming his masculinity. As we know, masculinity is situational (Connell, 2005), it is something that the subject “does”, more than something that a man is: “masculinity is not just an idea in the head, or a personal identity. It is also extended in the world, merged in organized social relations” (Connell, 2005, p. 29). In order to affirm his masculinity, Alessandro employs the very old, but still widely used, cleavage between active and passive (or top and bottom) men: the former can remain “men” and, in certain cases, they can even remain heterosexuals. The latter, at the opposite – in being receptive, is assuming the role of the woman, losing all the male traits. Indeed, Connell (2005) called one of the chapters of her book “A very straight gay”: stressing that even gay men can experience hegemonic masculinity in their path to achieve the acceptable “compulsory heterosexuality” (Connell, 2005). The most employed characteristic is to reject effeminate gays, always considered as bottom. Even though Alessandro is not gay, he knows perfectly the rule of thumbs that equates top and straight and bottom and gay, and strategically, he uses it in describing his activities. Finally, Alessandro says that doing sex work is not easy, “not a job for everyone”. In this way, he transmits that having sex with men is an effort, it is something easy for him, but not that easy that everyone can do it. Paradoxically, only “true” men can have sex with other men, without being gay (Ward, 2015). Indeed, as Lasén and García point out, “masculinity is a homo-social enactment

grounded in a compulsive demonstration of male attitudes and manners by men for other men's gaze. Any failure in following cultural stereotypes of manhood runs the risk of being read as a breaking of one's own masculinity. By denying other men's virility and by pointing to their flaws, men can reach a position of legitimacy for their own male embodiments" (Lasén & García, 2015, p. 725). Alessandro, then, replying to the cisgender researchers, needs to affirm his masculinity (as top), denying the masculinity of his clients, labelled as bottom, implicitly feminine. But the story of Alessandro takes an interesting turn at the very end of the interview:

A: No, I never experienced bad things. I must say that I work a lot with passive guys, because passive guys like men. The others [sex workers] are almost all effeminate, I have noticed this, even colleagues that I know are very much effeminate. Clients identify me as straight not as gay, I am very requested also for this reason, when I go to their places, clients see that I am strong, and it is difficult that they decide not to pay me.

M: You are very masculine.

A: Yes, I am only top and for me being bottom and take it in the anus it is really against nature. I tried myself once with my former girlfriend with a finger, but...

(Alessandro, 34 years old)

These final sentences confirm what we wrote about the cleavage between top and bottom gays and the fact that even straight guys are aware of these differences and employ them when needed, to affirm their masculinity. More importantly, Alessandro calls being bottom as something "against nature". The hardest thing he said against his clients throughout the whole interview. This turn, at the end of the interview, we think, was much needed for him, because he wanted to reaffirm his virility that has been widely challenged, even attacked, during our encounter. Anal virginity is the proof of his manhood.

Gunther, member of the international group, says that doing sex work "is not a big thing", diminishing what he is doing. This is a strategy to "save his face", according to Rinaldi (2020), who heard the same words from the sex workers he met in Palermo and Naples. In order to "do it" (to have sex with another men without being homosexual) Rinaldi (2020) affirms that the subject needs (1) to justify to himself and to others why he thought to do it, why is doing it, why he will do it, and why he will stop doing it; (2) to understand what it means to do it and what to feel; (3) to manipulate his interactions with clients and other actors involved in sex for sale in order to provide plausible justifications for their actions. These subjects (who define themselves as heterosexual men) conform to the "hetero-cis-norm" (the hegemonic masculinity of heterosexual men) even though they deviate from it

(since they have sex with other men), but they follow the norm even when they deviate from it, because they represent themselves as heterosexuals, they act as “males” even though they deviate from the traditional norm.

As Alessandro, also Gunther is aware of the difference between top and bottom guys. Gunther goes even further and defines his clients as people that “want to be treated like a woman” and “want to be dominated”. As the previous interviewee, he describes what he does as something that does not characterize him, because he is able to close his eyes during the sexual act, and then to push this memory away when everything is done. This behaviour falls under the concept of repertoire. Indeed, Rinaldi (2020) focalises his attention on the so-called alignment actions (Hewitt, 1998): every subject tries to make coherent its actions, to justify its behaviour, and the idea of itself. This, especially in sex work, is much needed for those men who are afraid of being stigmatized as “deviant”. These alignment actions are a way to speak and to communicate with others in order to avoid stigma and negative judgments from the other member of the society. Rinaldi (2020) highlights two types of alignment actions: “reasons” and “accounts”. The “reasons” are public explanations that we give in order to explain to others and to ourselves why we did what we did and why we are going to do what we are going to do (Hewitt, 1998). In the case of Gunther, the main reason he employs is the need of money and the unavailability of finding other ways to earn money. These “accounts” are used to neutralise the sexuality of the men who sell sex to other men. So, the accounts are a sort of excuse that sex workers provide. The excuses that men sex workers provide are a clear message that men who sell sex to other men give legitimacy to the gender and sexual norms of our society. In doing so, they try to neutralise the effects of their actions. Indeed, the social world of sex workers shares the same normative and gender and sexual values of society at large. Gunther gives us an example of reason within the following extract:

G: When I really need, when there is just the last saving: “ok, I can sell my body”, it is better than losing your health because you are on the street and you cannot eat. I would rather do it for an hour and I can feed myself, wash myself, clothe myself and everything... I consider myself a person in this situation and I will do whatever to keep myself fed and alive because I do not have any other people in my life that take care of me, so this is my way out, you know some people start to deal drugs, instead of doing something which may put me in prison I do something I can make the same amount of money, but I am not doing no-one wrong except maybe for myself... it is a joke, these men, this whole action, the whole fucking society, it is all a joke. The way people behave, it is just one of the little symptoms in our society.

(Gunther, 22 years old)

In these sentences, Gunther gives us many “reasons” that explain his presence in sex work. To justify what he is doing, he compared sex work with an illegal activity, as selling drugs, in order to show that he is doing the right thing or, at least, that he is not doing a bad thing like selling drugs. The only one who he harms in so doing is himself. The problem is not him or the activity of selling sex, but it is the fact he is alone, and that society is unjust and pushed him in this situation. He is not to be blamed; he is to be admired for doing what he is doing without “losing his face”. Gunther, as Alessandro, defines sex between men as “unnatural”, highlighting that sex should be done in order to reproduce the human species. But, contrary to the Italian sex worker, Gunther affirms his heterosexuality not by being only active but through not sharing an orgasm with his clients. His masculinity is saved through a paradox: he can barely achieve erection and he never ejaculates during his encounter. While Alessandro is proud of his ability of having an erection and warns his friends that this is a difficult job to perform; Gunther employs a different account, he is able to have sex with men, because he wants it, but he is also unable to achieve an erection and, paradoxically, this is a sign of his masculinity, which is further confirmed by the fact that he does not reach an orgasm with his clients. What should be a sign of weakness, in Gunther, is instead a sign of virility, his heterosexual virility that confronts the homosexual femininity of his clients.

Nikolas, 38 years old, who is, as Alessandro, member of the Italian group defines himself as straight but also “uninhibited” since he has been in the market in the last eleven years. He both acknowledges his past inability and his present ability to get an erection. He stresses, contrary to the previous sex workers, that clients he met do not like to meet heterosexual sex workers and that he used to lose some of them for this reason. Finally, since he is straight, he cannot “fuck as a gay”. Whatever that means, it is interesting to stress that with this definition, Nikolas tries to distance himself from the homosexuality of his clients. He is not gay, he cannot have sex as a gay man can, and the actions are just mechanical, something that you learn to do, not something that you like. Nikolas affirms his dominant masculinity in a more nuanced and subtle way.

## **5. Homosexual sex workers want to behave “like men”**

It is important to stress, as we did in the literature’s review section, that previous literature lacks the study of gay sex workers and their masculinities. This happened because the majority of research in this field has been on male street sex workers or on men who sell sex in public places, such as outdoor cruising areas, or in saunas, dark rooms, video clubs, etc. As we pointed out before, the visibility of these arenas enhances the sex workers’

need to affirm their masculinities over their clients, while sex workers who sell sex online can take advantage of this situation and release the stress related to their masculinities. Once again, we employ the research of Rinaldi (2020) to understand if the behaviour of gay sex workers is similar to what we saw in the previous section about sex workers who identified as straight, or if they tend to what has been called “homosexualisation” of male sex work (Johansson, 1990). The group of sex workers who identify as gay is formed by 23 men (we excluded the FTM escort). The first man, Esad, 30 years old, member of the international group, explains that his presence in sex working is related to the dimension of his penis. He “would never do this”, it is his penis that dragged him in this market. Logan (2014) stresses the importance of specific masculine traits (such as the dimension of the penis) as a factor that explains not only their presence in sex work but also the ability to make more money. Having a big dick is highly rewarded from clients. Esad seems to know this rule. At the same time, Logan (2014) also highlights that being top is another way to make more money, even in this case Esad confirms the research results of the American author.

Esad specifies that he just has clients that are younger than him. In the previous pages, we did not find a reason that can justify this assumption. Probably, it is possible to assume that having young clients is a way to save face, in Goffman’s (1961) terms. The stigma consists in that sex workers meet clients who are old, and fat, and ugly: saying that they are always younger than the sex workers or that they do not allow old clients to give oral sex is a way to distance themselves from the stigma, and provide a valid account, in Rinaldi’s sense of the word, in order to present a consistent image of the self to others (Goffman, 1961). Indeed, it is more than unlikely that Esad is able to meet only clients that are younger than him, especially because he is a young guy as well.

Also, other kinds of behaviour of sex workers who define themselves as straight are replicated in the sex workers who define as gay, blurring the boundaries between the two categories. What happens is that clients, especially “straight” clients but also those who are gay, are looking for sex workers who resemble the idea of masculinity and virility. Another example comes from Lorenzo, 35 years old, from the Italian group. Lorenzo stresses the dichotomy between gay and straight, active and passive, masculine and feminine. He resembles the idea of a masculine man; gay clients, acknowledge that and his success in sex work comes from this. A very typical idiom in the Italian gay scene is to be “*fuori dai giri*” (“outside the circles” – something that stresses that some gay guys prefer to stay out, outside, far away, from stereotypical gay behaviour); and the expression he used “I have never been a regular in gay clubs”, exactly goes in that direction. Connell (2005) stressed that gay men are in a position to adopt, negotiate, or reject a partic-

ular gay identity. To be noted here is that Lorenzo, in rejecting the stereotypical gay identity, is reinforcing the dichotomy between masculine and feminine gays. The former does not participate in the gay scene, while the latter are constitutive part of it. In the last years, we witnessed the multiplication of sexual subcultures and sexual identities in the gay world. Indeed, men (in the metropole) never had so much power, but “man” does not represent a homogenous group of people: the meaning of masculinity, the varieties of masculinities, the difficulty of reproducing masculinity, the nature of gender, and the extent of gender inequality all come into question and are furiously debated (Connell, 2005). Moreover, “masculinity is shaped in relation to an overall structure of power (the subordination of women to men) and in relation to a general symbolism of difference (the opposition of femininity and masculinity)” (Connell, 2005, p. 223). In our case, the structure of power is produced by the subordination of gay to heterosexuals. This dichotomy is particularly toxic, not only because it puts gay men in a position of subordination to heterosexuals, but also because it divides gay men between good and bad, between those who can resemble straight man, and those who surrender to feminine traits.

Emanuele, who is versatile but more passive, recalls how he started:

E: I will be honest with you: for a period, I was also cross-dressing. During that period, I met extremely beautiful clients – they were really defined and muscled, they were personal trainers. These are people that are not interested in meeting gay guys... I met 3 or 4 personal trainers in a few weeks... These are clients that are looking for transgression, being borderline, they have the fantasy of meeting an androgynous person. It is a guilty pleasure for them. In the gay world, there is the myth of the Alpha-man. In the bisexual world... the myth of androgyny is widespread, more than everyone thinks. They are looking for creatures that are in between male and female. I must tell you, these personal trainers, if you see them, you would never suspect anything, but they asked me to have anal sex as passive, I mean, I had to fuck them while dressing like a woman!

M: So, you were in shock because you thought that in dressing like a woman you would have more masculine clients, but it happened the opposite.

E: Exactly, the opposite!

(Emanuele, 28 years old)

It is clear that Emanuele is impressed by personal trainers. This category resembles the stereotypical images of a young, strong, fit, dashing, muscled, and good-looking man, something that many gay people would fantasize about. The surprise, in the story – that is also what is interesting for us, is



that the stereotype does not match the reality. Indeed, Emanuele's dream becomes a nightmare, when clients ask to be penetrated by him. Once again, this story confirms both the heterogeneity of the audience of clients and the importance of the dichotomy masculine and feminine. Previous research on straight male clients (Huysamen, 2019a; 2019b) looking for sex with men and trans women stress that having sex with a trans woman means that clients can continue to define themselves as heterosexual or, at worst, bisexual, avoiding the label of being gay. The dichotomy between top and bottom and masculine and feminine took centre stage in Emanuele's accounts. According to him, clients are not the same and the main difference among them is whether they are active or passive. From here, very different behaviour occurs. It is not just the service or the position. It is the whole picture that changes. Masculine clients, those who are top, need to be venerated. They deserve your full attention. Effeminate clients, those who are bottom, can be used as an object; they want to be treated as an object. As we saw before, even Emanuele confirms what Logan (2014) found in his study, about the economic benefits of being active in sex work. Finally, Emanuele provides us with more details about sex work and the dichotomy masculine/feminine:

E: It all depends by the segment of the market. There are active guys that want masculine partner, even though you are passive. Then, if you have a more defined body is a plus in that segment. But there are also active guys that ask you to be feminine. Some want me to dress like a woman, like wearing underwear or something, because they want a feminine body, like androgyny, as I said... Then, your body needs to be smooth, shaved, and wonderful! [...]

E: If you go to some places, like [the name of a gay sauna in Milan] you find these young foreigners that sell their bodies. There are a lot of them[...]. They are young, nice, black, and they have a huge dick, it is more than enough.

(Emanuele, 28 years old)

Emanuele, with his own words, confirms what the previous sex workers said about the importance of the dichotomy masculine/feminine. But he also opens up the possibility for resistance. Clients want different types of sex workers, it is not just top and bottom, because inside this there are multiple possibilities, and the next section will highlight this space for resistance. At the same time, Emanuele also stresses what Rinaldi (2020) found in his research and that we have illustrated in the first section of this chapter. In public places, like gay sauna, there are young, non-white and foreign sex workers. For them, it is enough to have a big penis and the willingness to have quick encounters with male customers. As previous literature has convincingly shown, having the role of the active (or being top) gives to sex

workers more respect and power in the eyes of a majority of clients that tend to be receptive (or passive, or bottom). At the same time, as Logan (2014) pointed out, other characteristics such as race, produced different types of requests from clients. As we saw in Connell (2005), specific traits such as a muscled body are awarded as masculine, while being skinny or fat are associated with femininity.

If we compare this section and the previous one, we find more similarities than differences. Gay sex workers tend to stress the importance of the dichotomy masculine/feminine as much as straight sex workers do, and the encounter itself is constructed to observe this pattern. As opposed to this, the next section will highlight a different behaviour by some of the sex workers that define themselves as gay. This, not only to illustrate that a different behaviour is possible, and that resistance can occur, but also adding a new perspective to the literature of male sex working and masculinities.

## **6. Beyond masculinity. A space for resistance**

In this last section, we analyse the behaviour of those sex workers that define themselves as gay and that, in our opinion, do not stress masculinity for both themselves and their clients. It is important to remember that for Rinaldi (2020) online escorting is more emancipated, organised, and stratified (in terms of race, sexual orientation, identity construction, and sexual practices; but also, in terms of age, appearances, and ways to perform it). The concept of “homosexualisation” of sex work has been cited, at first, by Johansson (1990) in the “Encyclopaedia of Homosexuality”, without explaining properly what those words mean or with a research in support of it. As we know, Walby (2012) analysed the behaviour of male-for-male internet escorting in one of the few studies of this topic. The Canadian sociologist did not analyse masculinity as a prominent argument or highlight the concept of “homosexualisation” but, indirectly, his work is an important contribution concerning this new phenomenon. Even though the research of Rinaldi (2020) contributed to confirming the standard idea about the dichotomy of masculine/feminine in sex work, he affirms that contemporary prostitution assumes the characteristics of sex work, with demands of “normalization” and the formation of new identities or, at the contrary, with the request of a different problematization of the heteronormative representations (Rinaldi, 2020). Three of the sex workers we interviewed – one for each group – go in the direction of marginalising, when not completely refusing, the idea of masculinity and related dated dichotomies.

Guillermo, 28 years old, member of the international group, underlies the important of having chemistry with his clients and the fact that he is a “horny boy”. Second, he likes to ejaculate, reaching an orgasm, even if his

clients do not require him to perform this service. Finally, Guillermo defines himself as fully versatile, as his clients are. All these three characteristics go in the direction of the “homosexualisation” of male sex work. Indeed, compared to the previous sex workers we quoted, Guillermo does not talk about his clients in terms of age – being younger or older than him. The focus is on having fun together, something that heterosexual sex workers will never aim for, while homosexual sex workers will not always consider this important. Moreover, reaching an orgasm is a sign of deep involvement with his clients: it is not like defining the penis as “a muscle like any other” as a straight escort declared; but a way to recognize what is pleasurable in the encounter and indulge on it (Bacio, 2021b). Moreover, the fact that Guillermo defines himself as versatile is another important sign of going beyond the dichotomy active/passive. Indeed, if the top guy is masculine, and the bottom guy is feminine, what does the versatile guy resemble? A mix of the two previous identities or a third hybrid one? We argue that versatile sex workers, especially but not exclusively, are those who are able to go beyond the dichotomy and, in doing so, they are also able to subvert the preconstructed masculinity of the related gay subculture.

Another example comes from Sven, 25 years old, member of the Swedish group. Sven explains why is doing sex work: his penis, even though it is “not super big”, it is “above the average” and this is the “reason” (Rinaldi, 2020) of his presence in the market. So, like Esad, he is aware that having a big size is positively evaluated by clients. At the same time, Sven affirms that what he offers to clients goes beyond this: “they mostly want to meet me as a person, not meet me as a person with a cock”. Also, he compared his activities with one of his friends who is a sex worker as well: “this black guy has a really big dick and costumers just want that, they just want his dick” and “he does not talk to anybody... but he is not rude, because that is what the customers want, it is what they expect”. These observations combined, according to Sven, highlight the fact that those who are ultimately responsible for this behaviour are the clients and their idea of masculinity: a black guy who is top, masculine, and with a big penis. The “black guy” is not rude, he just must adopt himself to clients’ tastes. This is an important feature for the “homosexualisation” of male sex work. In order to subvert the dichotomy, clients need to change their expectations of what sex workers can offer, not only in terms of services, but especially in terms of masculinities. At the same time, sex workers have to challenge these expectations offering something more than “just sex”. Indeed, Sven, who entered sex work for the dimension of his penis, also stressed that when he started to offer more to his clients, they reacted positively: not only did they continue to ask for his services, but they built a relationship that went beyond sex. Sven, at this point, is also allowed

to ask his clients for money when he is struggling, without providing them sexual services.

The last example is Ernesto, 25 years old, member of the Italian group, who belongs to the “new” generation of sex workers which seems to have a different approach to what they do than the older. Ernesto, for example, does not have problem in sleeping with clients, without asking them the price of an overnight. As in Guillermo, what matters is the right chemistry. As with Sven, what Ernesto is offering is something more than sex. Another interesting feature of Ernesto comes from one of the services he offers: domination. Ernesto, as Guillermo, declares to be fully versatile. But Ernesto goes beyond that. Indeed, the dichotomy masculine/feminine is fundamental in domination, where one takes the role of the master, and the other one the role of the slave. Ernesto continues to be versatile even here. A real exception compared to both the other sex workers we interviewed and to previous literature on male sex work. Therefore, Ernesto perfectly reflects the “homosexualisation” of sex work first theorised by Johansson (1990), indirectly quoted in Walby (2012), discussed without proof by Rinaldi (2020), and finally demonstrated here in our research. Guillermo, Sven, and Ernesto go beyond the stigma associated to their activities and they behave freely against the stereotypes and the dichotomies of sex among men. These three sex workers are not masculine, either feminine, are not top, either bottom, are not hegemonic, nor showing signs of subordinated, marginalised, or complicity masculinity. The fact that over 45 interviews, only 3 embraces this type of masculinity, a sort of “neutral” form, shows that the path and the journey towards the “homosexualisation” of sex work is still long, but possible. It is not going to be easy to subvert the hegemonic norms behind the current dominated dichotomies, as the first and second empirical sections of this chapter showed. But there is resistance, and where we find resistance, we also find possibilities for a change.

## 7. Conclusions

Both Connell (2005) and Plummer (2005) have discussed the presence of multiple forms of gay subcultures. They both stated that in these multiple ways of being gay it is possible to find resistance and subversions of hegemonic forms of masculinity. Plummer (2005, p. 18), specifically, wrote:

“Past thinking on sexual identities has depended on a rather crude binary system, but this is starting to change. At the very least, in the modern Western world, new identities may be starting to appear: the ‘S&M’, the fetishist (e.g., foot fetishist, underwear fetishist, armpit fetishist), the macho gay, the passive gay, the chubby gay, the ‘buff gay’, the queer, the vanilla gay, the hypersexual, the man who is not really

interested in sex, the sex crazed, the 'chicken hawk', the 'bear', the jock, the good husband, the voyeur, the heavy pornography user, the masturbator, sugar daddies, rent boys, the polyamorous – to name only a few. Start to put adjectives in front – sexy, unsexy, attractive, unattractive, rough, tender, philandering, serial killer, aging, married – and a further world of proliferating sexual identities opens up. Use the world 'sexual' to identify the kind of body you have – beautiful, macho, thin, sick, fragile – and whole new embodied sexual identities appear. Put them alongside other categories – man, woman, Asian, Chicano, African American, Japanese – and another world of 'hyphenated' sexual identities starts to appear. New dialogues work to splinter and fragment any one unitary model of the male sexuality."

Indeed, gay sex in the gay world – as some sex workers have said – is an "open book" with infinite possibility of enjoyment. At the same time, both straight and gay sex workers tend to simplify this world using the dichotomy masculine and feminine to explain all types of activities. In the first empirical section, we analysed the behaviour of the sex workers who define themselves as straight, comparing the sample with the one of Rinaldi (2020) who met almost exclusively self-identified straight sex workers in a porn cinema in Palermo. There, (street) sex workers need to affirm their masculinity. Constantly. They feel judged by their clients and their virility is under attack. Indeed, sex workers tend to position themselves inside hegemonic and normative gender rules in order to avoid stigmatisation (Rinaldi, 2020). On the contrary, online sex workers met in Italy and Sweden do not experience the same judgement since they can easily hide themselves behind the websites they use to advertise their services. Even though they ended up meeting clients, these encounters were less stressful than for the sex workers that Rinaldi met (2020). Then, only the interview became the place where to justify their behaviour. According to Rinaldi: "since some male sex workers are not able to compete with other men in the conventional world (for reason attached to economic, class, and ethnic inequalities) and their masculinity is emptied of hegemonic characters, in doing sex work, their activities become a value, one of the few values they can spend in the society at large, they can be male and, in this way, dominate their clients" (Rinaldi, 2020, pp. 257-258).

The five straight sex workers interviewed express the same need of affirming their masculinity and of overcoming their clients. Anyway, what they said and the way they said it is different, blurred, and nuanced. Among these five straight sex workers it was possible to identify different "heterosexual lines": it can be to make an effort for reaching an erection, or not having an erection as a sign of virility; it can be to do a handjob, to try to avoid sucking, or to let clients do a blowjob on them. These sex workers employed different ways to affirm their masculinities, but their behaviours led to the same result. At the same time, the majority of gay sex workers

– the object of the second empirical section – share the behaviour of the heterosexual colleagues: they stress the importance of masculinity, and the services they offer are tailored by the dichotomy active and passive, that resembles the dichotomy masculine and feminine. We can explain this common behaviour stressing that the hegemonic character is so widespread that minority groups, such as gay, tend to adapt and seek to obtain the same type of hegemony instead of trying to subvert it. The gay sex workers we presented are more market oriented and they adapt their activities to what clients desire. Finally, we presented three male sex workers that define themselves as gay but that showed a different behaviour. They all tend to what has been called “homosexualisation” of male sex working, in other words the subversion of dichotomies in sex, sexual practices, and sexual behaviours. Even though exploratory, compared to the previous two sections that were sustained by wide research on this subject, in the final section we showed space for resistance: the possibility of going beyond preconstituted forms of masculinity (and femininity) in both sex work and sex among gays.

The hope is that future research will continue in this direction. Starting from a different representation and disposition of both clients and sex workers: because what they do is as important as the way they do it and the characteristics of their actions can go beyond the “old” dichotomy about sex and sexual behaviour.

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