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A critical perspective on differences: 'the prostitute' and women involved in prostitution

Abstract

This article discusses the continuities and discontinuities between 'the prostitute' as representation(s) and prostitution as lived experience(s). Women (men, and transgendered) involved in prostitution are subjected to othering processes, processes that stigmatize, disempower and potentially silence them as Others. Representations of 'prostitutes' in academic discourse, popular discourse and in the media constructs 'the prostitute' as disparately as: 'victim of patriarchy', 'economic entrepreneur', 'undeserving victim', 'unfit mother', 'commodity', 'dirty and sexually indiscriminatory' etc. Reductionist and stigmatizing representations of 'prostitutes' have both symbolical and material consequences for women with prostitution experience. I argue that one of the main challenges for social work research on prostitution is to counter rather than to participate in othering processes. Through othering processes, women with prostitution experience are constructed as different from other women. With an and/both approach to difference, differences are considered to be fluid, shifting and discursive as well as enduring and embodied. Women with prostitution experience are not only constructed as 'different' but also consequently have 'different' experiences. Doing research that counters rather than participates in othering processes implies both deconstructing difference and making visible the effects of constructed difference.

Keywords: prostitution; othering processes; difference; representation

1. Introduction

Before I started to do research on prostitution, I worked as a social worker in a program providing social services to people with prostitution experience. During the almost three years I worked in the program I came to meet many (mostly) women who for different reasons and under different circumstances had entered into prostitution. These women occupied multiple subject positions, they were intimate partners, employees, students, artists, activists, mothers, feminists, migrants, and so much more, but yet their prostitution experience had fixed them as Others, as 'prostitutes'. Prostitution experience involved finding tactics to cope with or to counter othering processes. The lives and identities of the women I met seemed to be both positioned against and entangled with representations of 'the prostitute'.

The talk about prostitution as well as representations of 'prostitutes' in discourse often mask the complexities, multiplicities and individualities of women with prostitution experience. When I was offered to join a research project on prostitution experience I was at first reluctant to enter into the world of talk about prostitution, my main concern being: how to do research on prostitution experience without reinscribing women as Others?

In this article I will discuss the othering processes that intersect in the construction of 'the prostitute'. In doing so I hope to make visible and critically discuss the continuities and the discontinuities between 'the prostitute' as representation(s) and prostitution as lived experience(s). I will also discuss the ethical challenge to do research that counters rather than participates in othering processes.

2. The study in short

Prostitution is a difficult and contested field overloaded and invested by a series of antagonistic discourses, practices and ideologies. Despite this, prostitution is, in popular discourse, often constituted as something self evident: sex for money, and something transhistorical: the world's oldest profession. Within prostitution research prostitution is, depending on theoretical and analytical focus, analyzed diametrically different, for example as: a patriarchal institution and a form of violence against women; as a form of work; and/or as a sexual expression. Disagreements on what constitutes prostitution could be understood as a manifestation of fundamentally different ideas on (hetero)sexuality, femininity, masculinity, freedom, work, violence and power (Jaggar 1994).

The research field of prostitution is politically and ideologically charged and to a large degree characterized by universalizing theories. The politicized nature of the subject and the fact that research is produced in a field fraught with tension and antagonistic understandings often leads to subjugated knowledges. My PhD project is situated in the field of feminist narrative studies and draws on interviews conducted with twenty women with prostitution experience. The aim of the study is to explore the multiplicities of prostitution experience in relation to the contexts in which these experiences are lived and told. With the study I strive to produce a space in which prostitution is not pre-theorized, a space in which different ways of making sense of prostitution can co-exist and enter into dialogue with each other. Considering the difficult and contested character of prostitution, and with an understanding of prostitution as neither transhistorical nor self evident but rather as a phenomenon that has to be deconstructed and contextualized, I have chosen a genealogical approach to narrative analysis (see Tamboukou 2008). One of the key processes in genealogy is to challenge dominant discourses by focusing on subjugated knowledges, what has been relegated or kept silent (Tamboukou 2003). The focus on subjugated knowledges reveals struggles and the relationship between truth and power. As Foucault states:

"What it really does is to entertain the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter hierarchies and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a true science and its objects." (Foucault 1980, 83)

Subjugated knowledge is the knowledge of the Other. Recognizing subjugated knowledge requires attempting to see through the lenses of the othered group.

Complicating the situation is that there are multiple subjugated knowledges. This is certainly true for personal narratives about prostitution experience. Prostitution is made sense of in multiple ways and narrated about from multiple positions. In order to allow for the multiplicities of prostitution experience the study has an inclusive site and participant selection strategy. The goal has been to create as diverse a sample as possible, research participants have therefore been recruited from different prostitution sectors through a number of different channels; through social work programs, sex workers' rights organizations, self-help organizations and by directly contacting individual women through escort sites and outreach in the street milieu. In selecting participants considerations have been taken to age, class, ethnicity, prostitution sector, the duration of prostitution experience etc. The majority of the twenty women who participate in the study were, at the time of the interview, currently involved in prostitution, some of the women had left prostitution and thereby talked about their experiences in retrospect. The interviews were of narrative character, open and with questions encouraging free narration. In structuring the interviews I have drawn on Hydén's idea of the narrator focused interview. (See Hydén 2000) The goal in narrative interviewing is to generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements (Riessman 2008). This type of interview was chosen due to the probability that it would generate extended narration.

3. Othering processes that intersect in the construction of 'the prostitute'

Othering processes are processes by which a dominant group defines, categorizes and constitutes its Others. In and through these processes ideas about difference acquire meaning and social significance. The concept of the Other has predominately been developed in relation to anthropological representations of race and ethnicity (Said 1978, 1989) and in relation to representations of women (de Beauvoir 1949). The notion of the Other is intimately related to the notion of 'us'. A dominant group defines itself through its representations of the Others. The Other is what 'we' are not. An important form of control exercised over Others is the control over their process of representation (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1997). To be defined and categorized as Other involve stigmatization, disempowerment and silencing.

Otherness is not static, nor a personal characteristic, rather it is embedded in power relations which involve processes of exclusion and inclusion, oppression and domination, as well as difference in access to material and symbolic resources. Othering processes consist of interconnected discursive and non-discursive practices. Discourses shape our ideas and concepts as well as our practices, our politics, our laws and our institutions. They also ascribe meaning onto our physical bodies. 'The prostitute' has no inherent meaning, she is constituted differently in different cultural and historical contexts and discourses. As opposed to women with prostitution experience, 'the prostitute' is in this study understood as an analytical character (see Westerstrand 2008).

Othering processes are mediated by the structures and forces of power and knowledge. Academic discourses on prostitution make up a central part of these formations of power/knowledge. In the latter half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century 'the prostitute' was actively produced as a marginalized social-sexual identity within medical, psychiatric and legal academic discourses (Bell 1994). The problem of prostitution was initially constructed as a problem of public health and public nuisance, and as an issue of morality. Women within prostitution were constituted as unruly, immoral and diseased, their bodies were consequently subjected to control, regulation and surveillance (Phoenix 1999).

Historically women with prostitution experience have had little access to the discourses with which their lives have been entangled. However, within feminist research theories about prostitution have been developed drawing on personal narratives of women with prostitution experience. Radical feminist discourse has by its focus on structural rather than individual factors and by asserting the primacy of gender over all other axes of differentiation, reconstituted 'the prostitute' as 'a victim of patriarchy'. However, the othering processes that women involved in prostitution are subjected to are not only effects of gender, they are related to a number of intersecting power structures: gender, class and ethnicity being the most prominent. 'The prostitute' is consequently a social category in which numerous categories of difference intersect, women with prostitution experience are often gendered and classed as well as racialized.

The othering processes that intersect in the construction of 'the prostitute' are related to a number of power structures and patterns of exclusion/inclusion, oppression and domination. These processes are discursive and non-discursive and have symbolical as well as material consequences for women with prostitution experience. To explore how women with prostitution experience are affected by, cope with and counter othering processes I will now turn to a discussion on the continuities and discontinuities between 'the prostitute' as representation(s) and prostitution as lived experience(s) as manifested in the narratives of my research participants.

4. Continuities and discontinuities between 'the prostitute' as representation(s) and prostitution as lived experience(s)

Narratives of women with prostitution experience are both entangled with and positioned against representations of 'the prostitute'. The symbolical and material consequences of othering which the participants in my study narrate range from being shamed and miscredited as 'a prostitute' to being subjected to violence and discrimination. Notions of 'the prostitute' such as: 'undeserving victim', 'commodity' or 'dirty and sexually indiscriminatory' produce not only stigmatizing and discriminatory practices but at times also dangerous encounters and traumatizing events. It is not possible to do justice to the complexity of the narratives of my research participants in a short article of this kind but I will attempt to sketch an overview of some of the continuities and discontinuities between 'the prostitute' as representation(s) and prostitution as lived experience, using a few extracts from four of the participants' narratives. I

have chosen these particular extracts because they touch on themes that are recurrent in many of the participants' narratives.

With a genealogical approach to narratives and a focus on the productive qualities of discourse, experience is seen as not something that happens to an already fully constituted experiencing subject, but rather as the site of subject formation (Brah 1996). Subjects are seen as not fixed by nature, but as socially constituted. Discourses and practices inscribe social relations, subject positions, and ultimately subjectivities (Brah 1996). A non-essentialist position on the formation of subjectivity calls for, with the words of Rajchman: *"a practice which is a matter neither of finding a true nature nor of obeying an incontrovertible principle."* (Rajchman 1986, 166) In such a practice the central question is not who we essentially are, but who we have been constituted to be, and who we might become. To be involved in prostitution entails the risk of being constituted as a 'prostitute', and as a 'prostitute' as 'different from other women'. As stated earlier 'the prostitute' does not have an inherent meaning, being constituted as 'a prostitute' could therefore hold a number of different meanings ranging from 'victim of patriarchy' to 'whore'.

Some of the research participants make sense of their entry into prostitution as a result of them, previously to this entry, being constituted as 'whores' or 'sexual beings for others'. In Elena's narrative about the beginning of her prostitution experience she describes the chain of events and experiences that constituted her as a particular kind of subject, as a 'whore' and a 'sexual being for others'. She makes sense of her entry into prostitution as a result of her in her early teens being stigmatized as a 'whore' after having had sex with an older boy and the events that followed on that. Shortly after the incident which led to rumours being spread about Elena she was subjected to a rape. She describes the rape as reinforcing her feelings of shame and unworthiness.

Maybe this is all that I am good for. Maybe you never have to ask me for permission, maybe you don't have to respect my body or... That's really it, you don't have to say any more. Maybe you don't have to show me the respect you show other girls... He just made it so easy for me to feel that I wasn't worthy in the same way. Because the rape was... it wasn't the cruellest but it was pretty cruel and very arrogant. We were not even twenty meters away from the others... I could see them and hear them talking so it was really just around the corner. I don't remember exactly, but I do remember that there was something so very arrogant about what he did. It was really his right and my duty, he made it so clear.

Elena understands her being constituted as a 'sexual being for others' as contributing to her later entering into prostitution. There on the other hand describes how she initially drifted into selling sex without thinking about it as prostitution. Discourses on prostitution as something dirty, ugly and foreign made her conclude that prostitution was not about her, 'the prostitute' was (an)other woman, (an)other with a distorted voice, hidden face and awful experiences.

You know when you watch somebody on TV sitting with their back against the camera, speaking with a distorted voice... then that is somebody else. – God it must have been dirty! They probably were in some sort of basement with dirty mattresses

in a brothel somewhere... Or, they did it exactly the way I did it. It is very hard to grasp. It is not about me!

With time, Therese narrates how she was invaded by the Other, how the discourses about prostitution as something dirty, ugly and foreign and their connections with the non-discursive practice she was involved in created a continuity between her and 'the prostitute', she started perceiving herself as dirty and ugly, and ultimately became foreign to herself.

I started to see myself in a different light. When I was out around people in regular clubs, regular places, places where I had always liked to be, all of a sudden I got this immense feeling of alienation, I thought it was showing. I had monologues in my head, while I was pretending to enjoy myself I was really thinking – If you would have known who I really am would you still like me? Do you know what I do when I'm not here? Doesn't it show, isn't it written on my forehead? My self esteem was affected in a way that I didn't expect. When I started identifying with it - this is who I am, this is what I do, this is where I ended up, it all became very destructive.

While Elena describes how being stigmatized as a 'whore' preceded her entry into prostitution Therese describes how her involvement in prostitution led to her internalizing the stigma, producing not only feelings of shame but also leading to a lack of ability to protect herself against the risks involved with prostitution.

I more and more became the kind of girl who sells herself, and like I said, it takes over your existence. In the end you can no longer shield yourself from it. You close the front door, lock it, close the blinds, count the money and clean up but you are... It infects you in a way that I wasn't prepared for... that it would affect my psyche, that I would get so pulled into it. In the beginning I saw it as an act, getting paid and then I'll continue on with my ordinary life[...] After a while something is building up inside of you something that I wasn't prepared for. I became so aggressive, I just hated them so fucking much. It got disgusting, it got hard, their demands were different and it would be a lot of nagging about doing it without a condom and stuff like that.

Both Elena's and Therese's narratives illustrate how interconnected discursive and non-discursive othering processes can create continuities between 'the prostitute' and prostitution as lived experience. Being constituted as a 'whore'/'prostitute', and as such as a particular subject: a sexual being for others, dirty and an undeserving victim produced certain experiences in the women's lives.

The research participants' narratives reveal a number of different tactics employed in order to resist and counter othering processes, and to prevent continuities between 'the prostitute' and themselves. Participating in the study, narrating their experience, is one of these tactics. Many of the participants directly state that they chose to participate in the study to challenge stereotypical ideas about 'the prostitute' by telling their story. In their narratives they position themselves against notions of 'the prostitute' and thereby talk back to the cultural stories that have scripted them as particular kinds of subjects. This talking back, this changing of the terms of one's representation could be understood as a tactic for gaining agency.

Other tactics have to do with avoiding clients who treat you like a 'prostitute'. Selma for example talks about the screening of clients as a way to avoid encounters in which she would be made to feel like a commodity, like an object.

A – And then when the person contacts you, do you talk over email before you meet?

S – Yes, because the people I meet they are the ones that... It says in my ad that I want them to tell me a bit about themselves. I don't think it's too much to ask. I like to know if it's a nice person and if they seem to be, then they get my number. I mean my other number, and then we talk and decide a time...

A – Is it important to you to have that communication, do you use it to get a feel for what kind of person he is?

S – Yes, because I don't want to feel like a hole... You know when somebody is like – "When can I book you for?" – "Oh, you can come in half an hour because I'm just lying here spreading my legs and waiting for men..." That's not how it works for me!

Doing 'respectable feminine sexuality' and doing class are other tactics the research participants narrate as means to avoid being inscribed as 'prostitutes'. Alicia describes how she, through her self representation in her escort ad, attempts to avoid attracting men with negative attitudes towards 'prostitutes', by representing herself in 'a classy' way.

I knew which type of men I wanted to attract so right from the start I talked about me loving the opulent and luxurious and I charged quite a lot right from the start. I think you get rid of the worst guys in that way. I never wrote anything like – Damn I'm horny come and fuck me in the ass, it would never even occur to me to do something like that. I never even mentioned the word anal sex on my site. I've written that I can offer certain special services but I don't write what kind of services, the regulars know what it means when you write special services. You don't have to be so graphic all the time either. I've never showed any pictures in which I expose myself, I think I might have shown a nipple once. So it's those types of men... I mean I attract the type of men who thinks it's exciting not to see it all, the kind of men who appreciate to be a gentleman and like to seduce. While I've met one girl and she really... well she flaunts all that she's got and she posts all these Manga BDSM-pics. If you do that you need to be aware that there is a quite large group of men that already have bad attitudes towards women who sell sex and think that such women deserve to be humiliated. Those men exist and then I think it's even more important to make it clear that I don't like that kind of thing.

As a woman involved in prostitution Alicia can not control the meanings that are ascribed to her body, but by doing 'respectable feminine sexuality' she attempts to avoid being constituted as 'a prostitute' and the risk to be degraded and hurt by men with negative attitudes towards 'prostitutes'. Alicia's narrative is an example of how the narratives and experiences of the participants are both entangled with and positioned against stigmatory ideas about 'the prostitute'. By positioning herself against 'the prostitute' as an 'unrespectable' woman she attempts to resist the whore stigma at the same time her narrative reproduce the stigmatory idea of 'unrespectable' women as undeserving victims.

In this section I have attempted to give a short overview over some of the continuities and discontinuities between 'the prostitute' and prostitution as lived experience as manifested in the narratives of my research participants. As discussed, women involved in prostitution risk being constituted as 'prostitutes'. Some of the research participants narrate how them being constituted as 'prostitutes' have produced certain experiences in their lives. The participants

also narrate tactics to avoid being constructed as 'prostitutes', tactics ranging from screening clients to doing class and 'respectable feminine sexuality'. Many of the participants also describe participating in the study as a tactic to challenge stereotypical representations of women with prostitution experience, and the conflation of 'the prostitute' and women involved in prostitution.

5. How do we do research that counters rather than participates in othering processes?

Women involved in prostitution are constructed as 'prostitutes' and are thereby differentiated from other women. Stigmatizing representations of 'the prostitute' have been challenged through feminist research. Within feminist research personal narratives have been made central in theorizing based on the idea that the understanding of power has to be grounded in the embodied existence of material beings (Sanders 2005). The fact that research is founded on personal narratives does not in itself prevent the (re)production of othering stories and practices. A genealogical approach entails a critical perspective on the processes and procedures by which knowledge is produced. Producing knowledge on a stigmatized phenomenon as prostitution is complicated since it involves the risk of reinscribing women with prostitution experience as the Other. Academic discourse can both reinforce and undermine power. Foucault acknowledges this in stating:

"We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it." (Foucault 1986, 101)

Research that involves personal narratives about prostitution experience potentially has empowering consequences in challenging stigmatizing representations and breaking silence. A research project having an emancipatory attempt does not however guarantee that it has an emancipatory outcome (Riessman 2008). In examining academic discourses on 'prostitutes' and prostitution Phoenix argues that a central and fundamental question is: "*in what ways are prostitute women like or unlike other women?*" (Phoenix 1999, 35). The question of difference emerges as a central question for prostitution research. Phoenix argues that differentiating between 'prostitutes' and 'other women' allows for an examination of the specific differences between women but at the same time foreclose the space to pose questions about their similarities (Phoenix 1999). Notions of 'difference' and 'representation' constitute important issues for feminist theory, politics and practice. I have, what Bradley terms, an and/both (rather than an either/or) approach to difference (Bradley 1996). Differences are then considered to be fluid, shifting and discursive as well as enduring and embodied. As Archer puts it "*The boundaries of difference are constantly re-negotiated and in flux while broad structures of inequality remain consistent and in place. [...] 'Pure' (or 'true', absolute) difference is obviously an illusion, yet axes of difference are formed within power relations that may have profound lived realities and can sometimes feel, or be lived, like a very real gulf of*

difference" (Archer 2004, 462). The category of 'the prostitute' is with this approach to difference understood as at once a contested fictitious space and a site of 'real' identities and inequalities. Women with prostitution experience are both constructed as 'different' and as a consequence have 'different' experiences.

In this article I have made visible both continuities and discontinuities between 'the prostitute' as representation(s) and prostitution as lived experience(s). I have argued that the ethical challenge to do social work research that counters rather than participates in othering processes implies a critical perspective on difference, and a practice of both deconstructing difference and making visible the effects of constructed difference. If we fail to deconstruct difference we risk reproducing it, as difference is an ongoing interactional accomplishment (West and Fenstermaker 1995). By exploring the multiplicities of prostitution experience and destabilizing 'the prostitute' as identity category we may attempt to counter the othering of women involved in prostitution.

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