Big Sister is Watching You! Gender Interaction and the Unwritten Rules of the Amsterdam Red-Light District

Manuel B. Aalbers

AMIDSt / University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

It is generally accepted that in sexual interaction men are the hunters and women the gatherers. An expressly sexual environment such as a red-light district would be expected to only reinforce this image. Strikingly enough, however, it is precisely prostitutes who seem able to break with these established gender roles. This ethnographic study uses participant observation to demonstrate how assumptions about sexual interaction may be specious: Female prostitutes are frequently not the passive victims and male clients not the active sex-hunters they are taken for. Both the communicative function and protection of privacy play an important role in these processes in a red-light district. In the red-light district, gender interaction is bound by social regulation and unwritten rules that greatly exceed the influence of formal institutions. In this paper, the case of the red-light district "De Wallen" in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, is discussed in the context of several disciplines including urban anthropology, social psychology, geography, gender studies, and urban sociology.

Windows offer the sensation of great openness: culture flows through these windows, as it were, from private to public spaces and vice versa. It may be a conspicuous claim that "I have something to trade," made by a scantily dressed young woman in a window framed by red neon lights. ... Through the window the market displays its goods, and forms of life other than one's own can be inspected, at least surreptitiously, in passing. And this is a two-way flow, for windows allow you to keep an eye on the street scene. (Hannerz, 1993, pp. 154-155)

Habermas (1962) views public space foremost as the domain of communication, and in the red-light district, voyeurism concentrates preeminently on the communicative function of windows. Window prostitution is the ultimate example of "invited voyeurism." According to Brunt (1996), urban public life revolves mainly around watching and being watched. This is even more the case in a red-light district than in other urban public areas. Prostitutes are watched by visitors to the area, but the prostitutes themselves also watch the people who pass by their windows. In this case, voyeurism is executed not only in its most extreme but also in its purest form: Nowhere else is "people watching" as important as here.

As Tani (2002, p. 349) argues, "Usually, the media and the literature on prostitution emphasize the subject/object relationship between men and women, representing men as active sex-hunters and women as passive victims." In other words, life in a red-light district reinforces the ideas many people still have of the man as hunter and the woman as gatherer (cf. Brunt, 1996). After all, men roam

around looking for their "prey" while the women behind the windows are the ones who allow themselves to be hunted. These women's purpose is to gather men. After all, if they do not gather any men, they do not earn any money. Furthermore, the women are not mobile, while the men must track down the women and thus take initiative.

Is the situation as simple as it seems? How do men and window prostitutes communicate with each other? Are the men the only ones who hunt, or do the women hunt too? Are the men all tough hunters, or do they also allow themselves to be hunted? In other words, to what extent is the image of the man as hunter and the woman as gatherer in a red-light district correct? How do men choose a woman and in what ways do women pick a man? Who is watching and who is being watched? Also, we may ask how people protect their privacy in a place where securing privacy is highly regarded but complete anonymity is not guaranteed. Arising from all these questions is the core issue of this study: What social rules apply in a red-light district? The answers to these questions paint a picture of one component of the structure of urban life and of its inhabitants and their culture, which is part of this life. Window prostitution should in this respect not be viewed as something that is outside social reality, but as an aspect of it (see Aalbers, Bodaar, Kloosterman, & Pinkster, 2004): "We must then accept these 'moral regions' and the more or less eccentric and exceptional people who inhabit them, in a sense, at least, as part of the natural, if not the normal, life of a city" (Park, 1952, p. 51).

OVERVIEW

I addressed study questions within the context of an empirical case study and through a discussion drawing on the insights of several disciplines, including urban anthropology, social psychology, geography, gender studies, and urban sociology. In the next section I discuss the importance of

A first draft of this paper was written in graduate school under supervision of Lodewijk Brunt in 1999. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments and Lodewijk Brunt for his comments on a very early draft of this paper. Finally, I am indebted to the valuable language and grammar suggestions of Moriah McSharry McGrath. The usual disclaimer applies.

Address correspondence to Manuel B. Aalbers, AMIDSt, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Prinsengracht 130, NL-1018 VZ, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; e-mail: M.B.Aalbers@uva.nl.

privacy in public space and in particular in a red-light district, with a view to the work of Lyn Lofland and Erving Goffman. Next, the structure of the research is discussed, followed by the results of the research project, based on Lodewijk Brunt's discussion on the different styles of hunting. In the subsequent sections, I discuss these styles of hunting in light of the work of Goffman and Lofland, as it relates to the assumed passive sexual role of women and assumed active role of men. In this segment, I use the work of Phil Hubbard, among others, to argue that the presence of prostitution disrupts sexual and spatial orders. In the final subsection of the Discussion section, I argue that life in a red-light district is regulated by unwritten rules and implicit social regulation.

SETTING

The setting for this study was the red-light district "De Wallen" in Amsterdam. It is important to note that in The Netherlands, prostitution has been legalized since 2000.¹ However, legalization does not mean that prostitution is left completely to the free market: In The Netherlands, it is currently more regulated than it was prior to legalization. Examples include the use of brothel licensing to control illegal immigration and taxation of registered prostitutes, which also enables legal action against nonlicensed prostitutes offering their services (cf. Brants, 1998; Outshoorn, 2004). Contrary to the impressions of many foreigners, Dutch citizens in general do not support or encourage prostitution and sexual commerce (Wonders, 2004). Nonetheless, in The Netherlands, prostitution is much more accepted as a social fact than elsewhere. Brants calls this "regulated tolerance": Even before being codified in legislation, it involved "self-regulation, enforced if necessary through administrative rules, but always with the criminal law as a threat in the background," although "it is not an offence to make use of the services of a prostitute" or to offer services as a prostitute (Brants, 1998, pp. 624-625). Because of the unique situation in The Netherlands, Amsterdam's major red-light district De Wallen is not just associated with danger, immorality, drugs, and crime (Hubbard, 1997), but also with tolerance, excitement, and freedom, making De Wallen one of Amsterdam's major tourist attractions.

In Amsterdam, the commodification of bodies has been perfected to the level of an art form. The red-light district resembles the modern open-air shopping mall in the United States. Relatively clean streets, little crime, a neon atmosphere, and windows and windows of women to choose from—every size, shape, and color (though not in equal amounts). The red-light district seems designed to be a tourists' Mecca. The range of services for the leisure traveler includes sex clubs, sex shows, lingerie and S&M clothing shops, condomories, and a sprinkling of porno shops. But the character of Amsterdam's red-light district is different from most other sex tourist locations because it is centered in an historic district ... and surrounded by an old, well-established residential neighborhood. (Wonders & Michalowski, 2001, p. 553)

¹ But as Brants (1998) argues, before the official legalization in 2000, prostitution was regulated in a way that was similar or even equivalent to legalization.

Figure 1. Street scene in the Amsterdam red-light district De Wallen (photograph taken by Marcel Heemskerk).

The commodification of sex is not very hidden in the De Wallen, and commerce is indeed open to everyone (see Figure 1). Unlike other red-light districts, De Wallen is not visited only by heterosexual men seeking sexual pleasure and members of groups that are usually seen as "undesirables"—although there are indeed many of these people—but also by locals there for other purposes. The crowd on the street includes locals passing through on walks as well as couples, women, homosexual men, business people, and families with grandparents and children in tow (Wonders, 2004). The Amsterdam red-light district announces itself slowly. Both physically and socially, the area is not very strictly separated from its surroundings, and borders appear relatively porous. The occasional sex shop can be found on the adjacent streets among cultural institutions, respectable cafes, child-care facilities, and residential housing (often located above the window brothels and the sex shops). This does not imply, however, that De Wallen is no different from the rest of the city. As I will show in this paper, the Amsterdam red-light district is characterized by its own set of socially and spatially defined rules.

PRIVACY IN PUBLIC SPACE

People have different strategies to "survive" in public space. The more threatening a situation is, the more people will use these strategies. Goffman (1971) names eight *territories of the self*. These territories are determined according to place and situation, and their importance also varies situationally. Firstly, there is a distinction between public space and private space. The protection of privacy is more important in public space (*frontstage* in Goffman's terminology) than in private space (*backstage* in Goffman's terminology). Additionally, the preservation of a certain territory can be more important in some places in public space than in others (Goffman, 1971). In certain situations—for instance, on a crowded subway train—people are forced to drop their claim to a certain territory. The question is, to what extent do these

territories of the self play a role in human behavior in a red-light district? And which territories play the most important roles in this environment?

Lofland (1973) also addresses the ways in which people protect their privacy in public space. People react to the unordinary by becoming familiar with it, giving it a place, or ignoring and excluding it (Deben & Rings, 1999; Lofland, 1973). According to Lofland, living with strangers is possible because we have stripped some of them of their strangeness. We have to protect ourselves from others. We do this by, among other things, creating a symbolic shield of privacy in public spaces. Lofland describes six ways in which this shield is created. Two of these tactics are of great importance to the gender interaction in a red-light district. The first is to minimize expression. A neutral facial expression will not provoke irritation in others and it also protects one's privacy by not revealing emotion. On the other hand, singing and speaking to oneself in public spaces are seen as a taboo in Western society.

The second tactic is to minimize eye contact, as focusing on someone in public space might invade his or her privacy. This does not mean that observing others is forbidden. On the contrary, it is often pleasing to some people to be observed because it acknowledges their self-esteem (Lofland, 1973). However, social interaction is contingent not only on the individuals involved but also on the sexualized nature of the surroundings (Hubbard, 2000). The question is whether the principles described by Lofland are discernible when prostitutes and (potential) clients make contact, or if they must drop these privacy shields to be able to make contact. Especially in a red-light district, many people may be reluctant to give up their privacy shield, but dropping it may be essential to making contact.

METHODS

To answer this question, I observed prostitutes and potential visitors at different times and at different locations in the biggest and most famous red-light district of Amsterdam, locally known as "De Wallen" or "De Walletjes." In addition to De Wallen, Amsterdam also has a smaller red-light district, "Ruysdaelkade." Initially, I thought this would be a better location for the research project than De Wallen because it is clearer in the Ruysdaelkade whether people are residents, patrons, or sight-seers. However, it turned out to be more difficult for me to go unnoted in the Ruysdaelkade because of its small size and its physical layout (a long strip along a canal). Therefore, I chose De Wallen as the location for observing the behavior of prostitutes and visitors. In De Wallen, a larger concentration of potential hunters and gatherers could be found. Moreover, due to the greater area and the multitude of small streets and alleys in De Wallen, I was less conspicuous than in the Ruysdaelkade.

The empirical part of this research took place in three phases: during the last 3 months of the years 1999, 2001,

and 2003.² I chose three time frames so as to allow outcomes of the first and second data collections to be "tested." No important differences were established among these 3 years.

The research population consisted of the women behind the windows of the brothels of the red-light district and the men who come to De Wallen to "visit" these women. Identifying the female subjects in De Wallen was simple. Whoever was located behind a red window and was scantily dressed belonged to the research population; other women did not. The selection of men included, generally speaking, all men in the red-light district, but focused on those who were not only window shopping but also intending to purchase the services the prostitutes offer.

After choosing De Wallen as the location, I needed to select the technique for observation. By remaining in one location, I could quietly observe. However, such standing still would clearly distinguish me from the other men in the red-light district. Thus, I chose participant observation: "just" walking about much like the other people. Had I, for example, observed only the alley called "Trompetsteeg," I might have concluded that the initiative was mainly taken by men, while observing only "Boomsteeg" would have suggested that the initiative was for the most part taken by women. Therefore, I made observations throughout the red-light district as a whole instead of in only one specific area.

Although the observation might have been participatory, there was no form of participation in a social group, since the men in the red-light district do not form a social group. Logically, participation in the group of prostitutes was even more difficult for me (a male) than it might be for female researchers. Therefore, a mild form of participant observation was chosen—"mild" because full participant observation was limited by the gender-specific nature of the red-light district, as well as by the fact that the men in the red-light district do not form a social group or a community in which one can participate. In both methodology and theory, this study drew on ethnographic methods as applied in urban anthropology, social psychology, and urban sociology, and linked to the work of the previously mentioned Goffman, Lofland, and Brunt.

To access the women as well, I also made contact with about 30 prostitutes after several days of simple observation. This involved brief informal conversations with the women about their attitudes regarding the men who pass by their windows. Contrary to my expectations, a strikingly high number of women did not object to such conversations, as long as they did not take too long. I presented myself as a passerby who was interested in their opinion and did not introduce my status as a researcher. This position of anonymous researcher, both with regard to the prostitutes and to the visitors of the red-light district, can be easily justified: Neither prostitutes nor clients are identified by

² There was no special methodological reason for selecting the last 3 months of the year; pragmatism determined the observation period.

name or other personal details in this study, nor were they compromised in any other way during this research project or by the results of it.

As Cupples (2002) argues, researchers must pay attention to the ways in which both the sexuality and the erotic subjectivity of the researcher impact the research project. First of all, "it is impossible to escape our sexuality" in a field in which we are sexualized subjects; secondly, "the field itself can have a seductive quality"; and thirdly, "we do not only position ourselves in the field, we are also positioned by those whom we research" (Cupples, 2002, p. 383). As sex and sexuality are to a large extent about interaction with others, my positioning among the other men in the social space of the red-light district explicitly made me a part of this interaction. As Cupples shows, this position of "betweenness" is exactly what has been advocated by a number of (feminist) geographers as a valuable strategy for dealing with difference. But, as indicated above, my betweenness was limited to a spot among men of the research population. This is not just a limitation, considering the fact that, as Cupples notes, "Our sexualities, like other aspects of our personalities, become a source of knowledge and a resource to be utilized or explored, and the participant observation work we engage in can be invaluable in developing theoretical abstractions on sexuality" (2002, p. 384). In other words, while betweenness may be limiting, it also offers a rich perspective based on the individual's experience.

RESULTS

Styles of Hunting

Observations in De Wallen did not support the hunter-gatherer characterization. I found that there was not just one method of initiating encounters in the red-light district. In some cases the man clearly took the initiative, in others the woman. Often it was not crystal clear who was leading the initiative, and a shared initiative occurred. More useful than two or three categories is a scale of taking initiative on which every position is possible. The forms of "solitary hunting" described in the next subsection are the ones closest to the extremes, while the forms of "hunting together" in the subsequent subsection are the ones located more in the middle of this scale. This classification serves as a heuristic device, a way of looking at reality, rather than reality itself.

The Dutch sociologist/anthropologist Brunt (1996) described three different styles of hunting: the encirclement, the direct approach, and the natural approach. The discrete and cautious encirclement occurs mostly in the shared initiative: "The hunter positions himself strategically in the scope of the prey, in order to enable nonverbal communication in the form of body language, and especially eye contact. Were this to result in any encouragement, the hunter moves up [or the roles of hunter and gatherer/prey are switched], until the ultimate step is taken and the prey is approached directly" (Brunt, 1996, p. 66, my translation). The direct approach occurs with both the man

and woman as initiator. "In this strategy, the hunter does not hide his intentions and goes straight after his goal" (Brunt, 1996, p. 66, my translation). Both these styles of hunting are mostly used in combination with the natural approach. "In the natural approach deliberation is made use of, it is all about a stylized form of not being committed. The hunter puts the emphasis on being 'spontaneous,' ... taking surroundings and context into consideration" (Brunt, 1996, p. 67, my translation).

Even though the empirical case in this research project was limited to one of two red-light districts in Amsterdam, the different styles of hunting and ways to take initiative are found beyond Amsterdam. In other red-light districts one can also find different strategies in which the man is not always the hunter, nor the woman always the gatherer. A good example of this is Wonders and Michalowski's (2001) description of the interaction between a male tourist and a female prostitute in Havana's (sex) tourist district. Although Wonders and Michalowski used the following observation to contrast the soft-sell sex trade in Havana to the hard-sell sex trade in Amsterdam, their research also shows that female initiative is common in two very different cultural and spatial contexts. In fact, they show that prostitutes in Havana approach men using a combination of two of the three styles of hunting—encirclement and the natural approach:

A woman, usually decades younger than the object of her immediate interest, approaches a foreign tourist. Brandishing a cigarette, she asks for a light, or maybe points to her wrist and asks for the time. The opening gambit leads to other questions: Where are you from? Where are you going? For a walk? Would you like me to walk with you? Have you been to such-and-such disco? Would you like me to take you there? If the mark seems interested, the woman turns the subject to sex, describing the pleasures she can give, often with no mention of price unless the man asks. If they agree to go off to a disco or for a drink, the subject of sex may not even be openly discussed. (Wonders & Michalowski, 2001, p. 559)

Solitary Hunting: The Direct yet Natural Approach

In this study, when men took the initiative, they were straightforward in their approach to the women behind the windows. Sometimes the prostitute then opened the window herself, other times she waited until the man tapped on the window. The man often addressed the woman in English—probably because it was often unknown whether or not the woman spoke Dutch, but maybe also because the man himself spoke better English than Dutch. Men did not begin by listing desires and inquiring about prices; few had an involved introduction. Something like a plainly pronounced "Hey ... how are you? Fine?" was a common and also accepted opening. Not all introductions could be understood because of the (lack of) volume, but the reaction, body language, and facial expression clearly showed that it was rare for men to immediately start out by negotiating the price. Such an introductory sentence was hardly ever replied to, and yet seemed to be part of the unwritten rules of De Wallen. Whether a neutral open-

ing sentence was meant to make the woman or the man himself feel at ease was unclear, but it seemed that the man wanted to express something like "I am okay, you can trust me." If the introduction was too long, the man may have been sent away. "Pay first, then talk" was (literally) the women's motto. The negotiations over price often took place partly in the doorway and did not last very long. Not only the men who quietly approached the women but also the ones who were more obvious about it negotiated the price in very soft voices. When men continued haggling, most women closed their windows before long. Sometimes the men looked indignant, but generally they gave up and moved on.

But the prostitutes were far from passive: "it is common for women to hover near the doorways of their small window booths, hooting and calling at men to 'come here!' in a number of different languages" (Wonders & Michalowski, 2001, p. 553). A woman taking the initiative would tap on her window or call out to men passing by. It was notable that there were plenty of women hunting for men who seemed to be disinterested in them. The men's attention had to be drawn by tapping on windows, exuberantly twisting breasts and other body parts, and shouting out phrases like "Hey lover boy," or "One minute, one minute ... come inside." Most men did look up for a moment at the women shouting for their attention, but then moved on.

Some women took up an active role at more quiet moments of the day. The female enticement was probably prompted not only by commercial motives but also by boredom. At the same time it could be a matter of "construction worker mentality" (cf. Feigelman, 1974). The same way "tough" construction workers are almost obliged to whistle at nice-looking women, scantily clad women might also whistle at nice-looking men out of habit. It was notable that some women selectively employed this enticing behavior. Most women reported clearly preferring young men. Furthermore, White men were preferred (even by Black women) over Arabic and Black men. But there were also other prostitutes who appeared to make no distinction. This was confirmed by brief conversations with prostitutes. Young men were preferred not only because they ejaculate sooner (and therefore do not take up as much work time), but also because they were more often capable of giving the women sexual pleasure or because they were cleaner. Moreover, prostitutes often had regulars. The aversion to Black or Arabic men is more difficult to explain. Women mentioned issues such as "personal taste," "can be violent," "more often want strange things," and "smell bad." Some women also indicated that they would more easily lower their prices for men they found attractive than for men they did not find attractive.

Hunting Together: A Natural Encirclement Approach

Aside from hunting by men and hunting by women, another common form of initiating is carefully hunting for each

other one step at a time. This shared initiative presented in many forms. Following are four examples from field-notes:

The man walks by the windows and smiles at the woman of his choice. As soon as she smiles back he approaches her. The woman opens the window and after a brief introduction a calm price negotiation begins. Within 30 seconds the man enters.

At the Sint Annedwarsstraat a man suddenly stops at a window. The woman behind the window notices this and opens her window. After a very brief introduction the negotiations commence. They do not go well and the woman tells the man to leave. He moves on. Carefully I follow him. The man ducks into an alley. He casually looks at the women. A woman taps her window. He smiles back, hesitates for a moment and then walks along, to the end of the alley, around the corner and immediately into the next alley. He is now walking slower while looking at the women more carefully. Right before the end of the alley he once again stops quite abruptly. The woman behind the window notices this and smiles at him. Carefully, he smiles back, causing the woman to show a big smile. He motions her to open the window, which she does instantly. He greets her and asks how she is doing. "Okay" is the answer and the man partly steps inside. The woman raises her hand as if she is trying to say "Until here and no further." "What do you want?" The answer cannot be made out. She whispers the prices in his ear. He hesitates for a moment and then agrees by nodding. He enters and, while he is reaching for his wallet, she closes the curtain.

While the two examples above seem similar to situations in which a man is the initiator, the two following examples appear to be closer to the woman taking the initiative.

At the Oudezijds Achterburgwal an elderly man has been pacing back and forth for a while. He seems to be indecisive. Most women pay no attention to him. Even more so, they ignore him. After a while, one of the women taps her window. She motions him to come to her. Which he immediately does. "Do you wanna look or do you wanna fuck?" He looks as if he does not understand her. "Come inside" she says and motions him to enter. He does. She closes the door and talks to him. Soon after that the curtains are being closed.

Another man walks past the windows and is smiled at by a woman behind the window. He looks at her attentively, but does not smile back. When the woman also taps her window, he does smile back but moves on. I follow him. He walks down the street, pays no more attention to the other women and walks back to the woman who drew his attention. He waits for another one of her smiles and then walks up to her. She has opened the window even before he reaches her and, friendly, wishes him a "Good afternoon." He mumbles something, after which the woman names her price. The man agrees by nodding and enters.

As argued above, hunting together takes a position between the man as a hunter and the woman as a hunter. It is a less direct way of approaching and of being approached. But like the two styles of solitary hunting, the natural style of hunting is applied to keep from disrupting or discrediting the position of the other. Prostitutes also use this technique to make preliminary checks of the man who approaches: The time used to discuss the wishes of the man and those of the prostitute allow the prostitute to check any dangerous signs and determine what type of client the man is (Sanders, 2004). As I show in the next section, this type

of behavior by both prostitutes and men can be explained through the work of Goffman and Lofland.

DISCUSSION

Watching and Being Watched

Out of the eight territories of the self—within which one “retains” and protects oneself from intruders—described by Goffman, two are clearly visible in the conduct of people in a red-light district. First, we can see people keeping information to themselves. Goffman (1971, pp. 38-39) claims that “the set of facts about himself to which an individual expects to control access while in presence of others” varies according to environment and culture. In a red-light district one wants more privacy than elsewhere. But especially here, the “right not to be stared at or examined” (Goffman, 1971, p. 39) is violated. A red-light district, after all, cannot exist without the notions of watching and being watched. Second, there is “conversational preserve.” This is “the right of an individual to exert some control over who can summon him into talk and when he can be summoned; and the right of a set of individuals once engaged in talk to have their circle protected from entrance and overhearing by others” (Goffman, 1971, p. 40). Here, the women involved also may have to use ways to fend off the advances of unwanted men (cf. Snow, Robinson, & McCall, 1991). A prostitute is not obliged to respond to a man if she—for whatever reason—does not feel like it, and a man is not obliged to react if a woman calls out to him. In other situations one would be surprised if someone did not respond when called, but in a red-light district this is acceptable. If a prostitute and a man do have a conversation, it is considered normal that they speak softly to one another so others do not hear them and to secure the privacy of both parties. It is important for not only the prostitute that the “deal making” takes place in circumspection, but also for the man. Both parties apply interactional strategies to soften the humiliation or dampen the prospect of aggressive compensatory behavior that often follows on the heels of rejection or failure (Goffman, 1952; Snow et al., 1991).

The tactics of privacy preservation in public spaces of minimizing expression and eye contact (Lofland, 1973) are applied alternately in the red-light district. Most men avoided eye contact for as long as possible. Once they wanted to make contact with a woman, eye contact was inevitable. Men in the red-light district always avoided expression. The behavior of the men fits in with the principles of Lofland. For women the situation is different. Some women minimized expression and eye contact; others made a deliberate decision to attract men. The fact that not all women opt for minimal expression and minimal eye contact can have various explanations. Naturally, they may want to attract clients, but perhaps they also want to feel more at ease in the space. To them, the red-light district might rarely be an all-controlling reality, but it is indeed their everyday reality, while it is only a small part of the reality of most men—a reality which they

often prefer to deny. Moreover, men find themselves in a public space while the women are in a semiprivate space. Obviously they are being watched, but they are accustomed to that. Most men are not. They feel watched by the women behind the windows and also by other visitors to the red-light district. As one man commented after a walk through the Amsterdam red-light district, “I’ve never felt so objectified in my life. I felt like a piece of meat walking through there” (Wonders & Michalkowski, 2001, p. 553). Feeling ashamed and uncomfortable, many men give up on their hunter role. In this way, they become the gatherers and women the hunters.

Passive Women, Active Men?

In sex and gender research men are often seen as active and powerful, and women as passive and exploited. Ethnographic research in the Amsterdam red-light district shows that these assumptions are often deceptive. Everyday reality in a red-light district is much more complicated than many sex and gender scientists would like us to believe.

For example, the fact that several women indicated that they would more easily lower their prices for men they find attractive refutes the idea that a prostitute “is indifferent not only to sexual pleasure but also to her partner” (Davis, 1961, p. 265), as many commentators have argued. The “sexual enjoyment thesis” is also supported by the findings of Savitz and Rosen (1988, p. 206), who showed that “most prostitutes found some forms of sex with customers very satisfying and, to over 60%, it was at least *sometimes* (or more frequently) orgasmic.” Their results reveal that “the prostitute is *not* the legendary mechanical, dispassionate feigner of sexual passion that some have depicted her. Judging from their own words, most of these women greatly enjoy sex” (Savitz & Rosen, 1988, p. 207).

One of the implications of this research project is that Edwards’ claim that men are motivated to use the sex industry by a desire to maintain sexual mastery and power over women (Edwards, 1993) is too one-sided. As we all know, some men even use the sex industry out of a desire to abandon their powerful role in daily life to subordinate themselves to prostitutes. Men who use the services of prostitutes do not do this solely out of a desire for power. Plain sexual desires and emotional desires (e.g., many men visit prostitutes to talk to them) are not necessarily connected to the desire for power (cf. Frank, 2003). See also Monto (2001, p. 140), who (in his review of the literature) points out that there are many explanations for seeking out prostitutes (which all have some support from existing data): “Clients may seek sex with prostitutes because they are attracted to the illicit or risky nature of the encounter, because they want to have greater control over their sexual experiences, because they have difficulty becoming involved in conventional relationships, because they want to avoid the responsibilities or emotional attachment of a conventional relationship, or because they are interested in companionship, intimacy, or love. Additionally, ... clients

pursue encounters with prostitutes because they are interested in sexual practices to which they do not have access." Although some of these explanations may be connected to the male desire for power, this is not necessarily so. Or, as Law (1997) argues,

Spaces associated with prostitution are sites where different sexual moralities are negotiated and constructed as *both clients and prostitutes* seek to locate their oppositional roles through intersections of power and difference. Far from being spaces of male mastery and domination where women's bodies are commodified and consumed, sites of commercial sex work may be spaces where prostitutes resist the voyeuristic gaze through performances that undermine any scripting of heterosexuality around notions of masculine power and feminine lack. (as cited in Hubbard, 2000, p. 205)

Similarly, some liberal feminists (e.g. Ronai, 1992; Ronai & Ellis, 1989; Wood, 2000) have argued that strippers gain agency and subjectivity through their discourse and are therefore more than mere sexual objects of the men who want to use their services. They and other liberal feminists perceive stripping and prostitution as forms of work, as long as they are entered into freely (Allwood, 2004). They come to similar conclusions on strippers as does this research on prostitutes: It is not always clear who is watching whom, as the female dancers and the prostitutes watch the customers as much as they are watched (Murphy, 2003; Ronai, 1992; Ronai & Ellis, 1989; Wood, 2000). Murphy (2003, p. 330), in her research on female strippers, also concluded that the characterization of strippers as objectified victims of a "sexploitation" system that trades their bodies for financial gain is overly simplistic. "Strippers are neither pure object nor pure subject but negotiate their own agency resources and constraints." She argues that work as a stripper "cannot be viewed as either entirely liberating or entirely constraining: strippers are neither completely with nor completely without power" (Murphy, 2003, p. 308).

Thus, cases from studies with prostitutes and strippers show that women are not just "(unwittingly) reproducing gendered power relations" as Koskela (1997, p. 309) argues, but also have the ability to confront these stereotypes and take control. In fact, while prostitutes may be empowered in the specific social and spatial setting of a red-light district, many men who visit prostitutes and thus have to commodify sex feel rather powerless, as they (like many nonvisitors) argue that visiting a prostitute is a sign of lack of success in the uncommodified sexual marketplace. While the general social norm might be one of domesticated hetero-sex in which the predatory female role is antithetical to patriarchal conventions that associate femininity with passivity, suggesting that the sight of women taking a more active sexual role is one that provokes male anxiety (Bondi, 1998; Hubbard, 1998), gender interaction in a red-light district may paradoxically stimulate a predatory female sexual role, because many men will feel uneasy in a setting of commodified sex. As many prostitutes themselves argue, the practice of prostitution

"often exposes and challenges patriarchally established notions of femininity by making the relationship between sex, money and power apparent" (Hubbard, 1998, p. 72). In this way, prostitutes disrupt sexual and spatial orders (Hubbard, 1999). Hubbard highlights the ambiguous status of the spaces of prostitution. In his view, these spaces are both constraining and enabling: "As *heterotopias*, they become spaces which sow the seeds of new social orders, orders that respect the rights of women to sell their bodies if they so choose" (Hubbard, 1999, p. 214).³ From this viewpoint, it would be hard to agree with the claim of radical feminists who perceive prostitution as an inherent form of male violence or an infringement of human rights (Allwood, 2004). Barry, for example, claims that prostitution is "the most systematic institutionalized reduction of women to sex" (Barry, 1995, p. 65) and that prostitution is the foundation for all other forms of sexual exploitation of women (Barry, 1995).⁴ Barry's claim that prostitution is the institutionalized and industrialized exploitation of women holds some truth. However, we should not forget that some women chose to work as prostitutes. Moreover, the work of Hubbard (1998, 1999), Lasker (2002), Law (1997), and myself shows that prostitutes are not merely passive victims of exploitation or sexploitation.⁵ Instead, it highlights the role of prostitutes in disrupting social and spatial orders.

Conclusions

As Goldenberg, Cox, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon (2002) demonstrate, sex can be a source of anxiety, shame, and disgust for humans, and is always subject to cultural norms and social regulation. Thus, although the Amsterdam red-light district has the image of a place in which anything should be possible (e.g., Van Straaten, 2000), life there is in fact bound together by unwritten

³ Lasker (2002) even argues that curtailment of red-light districts to confined urban spaces conceptually separates women from pornographic sexual discourse, thereby denying women meaningful access to a powerful source of the construction of female sexuality.

⁴ Though rejected by Barry, the distinction between forced and voluntary prostitution may be useful for understanding these spaces. Barry suggests that we should strive for a world without prostitution. While most would agree that it is important to strive for a world without human trafficking or forced prostitution, striving for a world without prostitution per se would probably bring the world more social disorder because of the negative externalities that the end of prostitution would bring about. In stating that there "are no biological givens about sex that are not social and political constructions" (1995, p. 22), Barry makes the mistake of many social constructivists by asserting that everything is socially constructed. Things can only be socially constructed within a material (or in this case biological) context. The fact that femininity is socially constructed doesn't mean that femininity is only or merely a social construction; femininity is also constructed materially or biologically (e.g., the presence of certain and absence of other characteristics). The denial by social constructivists of the material and biological contexts in which social constructions take place is one of the basic mistakes of much, but fortunately not all, post-positivist science which leads to a fundamental misrepresentation of society. If we are to bridge the gap in sex research between biomedical essentialists and social constructivists, as Bancroft (2000) strives to, one should not only reject positivist biological, medical, and psychological science that neglects social constructions, but one should also reject oversocialized accounts that neglect or even deny the existence of material and biological facts.

⁵ Likewise, the work of Murphy (2003), Ronai (1992), Ronai and Ellis (1989), and Wood (2000) shows the same for strippers.

rules.⁶ This research has shown that Lofland's principles of privacy preservation in public spaces (minimalizing expression and eye contact) as well as Goffman's territories of the self and his rules of securing personal information and conversational preserve can be used to explain socially and spatially specific unwritten rules (see also the "Watching and Being Watched" subsection). In the prostitute-man communication in a red-light district, an introduction is desired, provided that it does not take too long. Not until the introduction is complete do price negotiations, which occur quietly, commence. The men are expected to behave modestly and calmly, while the prostitutes have more freedom in their behavior. A shouting man is looked upon with disapproval, while a woman shouting is completely acceptable. Understanding and discretion regarding the need for others' privacy are required but must sometimes be broken down in order to get down to business. In this the man can take the initiative, but so can the woman. Frequently, a prostitute and a client get down to business one step at a time. These unwritten rules apply specifically to the social situation as well as to the geographical location. Although it may be assumed that men in a red-light district are the ones watching and prostitutes the ones being watched, the socially and spatially specific rules of a red-light district may turn things upside down: "Big Sister" is watching you!

Strikingly enough, it is precisely prostitutes who appear to be able to break with established gender roles. The image of the man as hunter and the woman as gatherer is not always correct in the specific setting of a red-light district: Female prostitutes are frequently not the passive victims and male clients not the active sex-hunters they are usually taken for. Men are not always practiced at verbalizing their desire in their role as sexual initiators or as comfortable in making direct sexual requests, as Brunt (1996) and Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, and Anderson (2003) suggest. According to Brunt (1996), men are still the hunters and women the gatherers, in spite of the evolving women's emancipation. The question is whether or not this image is still valid in other cases, if it is not even valid in a red-light district in which it *appears* that men are the hunters by definition while women are the gatherers.

It is often supposed that the public nature of public space generally decreases. Van Straaten (2000) even claims that this especially involves the public nature of De Wallen in Amsterdam. However, the relative anonymity and the image of a place in which anything should be possible are indeed the very expressions of publicness. The facts that not everyone knows each other and there is no great explicit social regulation are characteristic of this very urban public space. It is also a highly controlled public space: Money couriers and pimps preserve the safety and the prostitutes literally keep an eye out on the street. Furthermore, there appears to be a powerful form of implicit social regulation:

"Self-regulation precluded intervention by the authorities. In reality, the area was allowed to become an increasingly self-contained and self-regulated part of town" (Brants, 1998, p. 627). "Big Brother," the idea that everybody is kept under complete surveillance by the authorities as in Orwell's *1984* (1950), is a concept that is implemented in more and more red-light districts and (urban) spaces that are disrupting the moral social and spatial order. However, the unwritten rules of a red-light district go far beyond the influence of the formal institutions. Institutional Big Brother-type regulations such as police and video surveillance but also including the structure of public space can hardly accommodate the needs for privacy specific to a red-light district. A red-light district even loses its right to exist when the feelings of lack of safety are shielded too much, because this comes at the expense of the protection of privacy. The eyes of "Big Sister" offer an alternative: implicit social and spatial regulation based on unwritten rules.

REFERENCES

- Aalbers, M., Bodaar, A., Kloosterman, R., & Pinkster, F. (2004). Seks en de stad [Sex and the city]. *Rooilijn*, 37, 316–318.
- Allwood, G. (2004). Editorial: Prostitution. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 12, 149–152.
- Bancroft, J. (Ed.). (2000). *The role of theory in sex research*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Barry, K. (1995). *The prostitution of sexuality*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bondi, L. (1998). Sexing the city. In R. Fincher & J. Jacobs (Eds.), *Cities of difference* (pp. 177–200). New York: Guilford Press.
- Brants, C. (1998). The fine art of regulated tolerance: Prostitution in Amsterdam. *Journal of Law and Society*, 25, 621–635.
- Brunt, L. (1996). *Stad [City]*. Meppel, The Netherlands: Boom.
- Cupples, J. (2002). The field as a landscape of desire: Sex and sexuality in geographical fieldwork. *Area*, 34, 382–390.
- Davis, K. (1961). Prostitution. In R. K. Merton & R. A. Nisbet (Eds.), *Cotemporary social problems* (pp. 262–290). New York: Harcourt Brace World.
- Deben, L., & Rings, P. (1999). Reglementering en disciplineren van het gebruik van de openbare ruimte [Regimentation and discipline in the use of public space]. *Sociologische Gids*, 46, 245–256.
- Edwards, S. S. M. (1993). Selling the body, keeping the soul: Sexuality, power, and the theories and realities of prostitution. In S. Scott & D. Morgan (Eds.), *Body matters: Essays on the sociology of the body* (pp. 89–104). Washington, DC: Falmer Press.
- Feigelman, W. (1974). Peeping: The pattern of voyeurism among construction workers. *Urban Life and Culture*, 3, 35–49.
- Frank, K. (2003). "Just trying to relax": Masculinity, masculinizing practices, and strip club regulars. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 40, 61–75.
- Goffman, E. (1952). On cooling the mark out: Some aspects of adaptation to failure. *Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Relations*, 15, 451–463.
- Goffman, E. (1971). *Relations in public: Microstudies of the public order*. New York: Basic Books.
- Goldenberg, J. L., Cox, C. R., Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., & Solomon, S. (2002). Understanding human ambivalence about sex: The effects of stripping sex of meaning. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 39, 310–320.
- Habermas, J. (1962). *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* [The structural transformation of the public sphere]. Frankfurt, Germany: Suhrkamp.
- Hannerz, U. (1993). Thinking about culture in cities. In L. Deben, W. Heinemeijer, & D. van der Vaart (Eds.), *Understanding Amsterdam: Essays on economic vitality, city life and urban form* (pp. 141–156). Amsterdam: Centrum voor Grootstedelijk Onderzoek/Het Spinhuis.
- Hubbard, P. (1997). Red-light districts and toleration zones: Geographies of female street prostitution in England and Wales. *Area*, 29, 229–237.
- Hubbard, P. (1998). Sexuality, immorality and the city: Red-light districts

⁶ Or "codes," as a social worker in Tani's paper on prostitution in Helsinki calls them (Tani, 2002).

- and the marginalisation of female street prostitutes. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 5, 55–72.
- Hubbard, P. (1999). *Sex and the city: Geographies of prostitution in the urban west*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
- Hubbard, P. (2000). Desire/disgust: Mapping the moral contours of heterosexuality. *Progress in Human Geography*, 24, 191–217.
- Koskela, H. (1997). Bold walk and breakings: Women's spatial confidence versus fear of violence. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 4, 301–319.
- Lasker, S. (2002). Sex and the city: Zoning "pornography peddlers and live nude shows." *UCLA Law Review*, 49, 1139–1185.
- Law, L. (1997). Dancing on the bar: Sex, money and the uneasy politics of third space. In S. Pile & N. Thrift (Eds.), *Geographies of resistance* (pp. 107–123). London: Routledge.
- Lofland, L. H. (1973). *A world of strangers: Order and action in urban public space*. New York: Basic Books.
- Monto, M. A. (2001). Prostitution and fellatio. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 38, 140–145.
- Murphy, A. G. (2003). The dialectical gaze: Exploring the subject-object tension in the performances of women who strip. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 32, 305–335.
- Orwell, G. (1950). 1984. New York: Penguin.
- Outshoorn, J. (2004). Pragmatism in the polder: Changing prostitution policy in The Netherlands. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 12, 165–176.
- Park, R. E. (1952). *Human communities: The city and human ecology*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Ronai, C. R. (1992). The reflexive self through narrative: A night in the life of an erotic dancer/researcher. In C. Ellis & M. Flaherty (Eds.), *Investigating subjectivity: Research on lived experience* (pp. 102–123). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Ronai, C. R., & Ellis, C. (1989). Turn-ons for money: Interactional strategies of the table dancer. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 18, 271–298.
- Sanders, T. (2004). The risks of street prostitution: Punters, police and protesters. *Urban Studies*, 41, 1703–1717.
- Savitz, L., & Rosen, L. (1988). The sexuality of prostitutes: Sexual enjoyment reported by "streetwalkers." *The Journal of Sex Research*, 24, 200–208.
- Snow, D. A., Robinson, C., & McCall, P. L. (1991). "Cooling out" men in singles bars and nightclubs: Observations on the interpersonal survival strategies of women in public places. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 19, 423–449.
- Struckman-Johnson, C., Struckman-Johnson, D., & Anderson, P. B. (2003). Tactics of sexual coercion: When men and women won't take no for an answer. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 40, 76–86.
- Tani, S. (2002). Whose place in this space? Life in the street prostitution area of Helsinki, Finland. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 26, 343–359.
- Van Straaten, S. (2000). De Walletjes als themapark voor volwassenen [De Wallen as a themepark for adults]. *Rooilijn*, 33, 438–443.
- Wonders, N. A. (2004). Seks en de aandacht van de toerist in Amsterdam [Sex and the tourist gaze in Amsterdam]. *Rooilijn*, 37, 325–331.
- Wonders, N. A., & Michalowski, R. (2001). Bodies, borders, and sex tourism in a globalized world: A tale of two cities—Amsterdam and Havana. *Social Problems*, 48, 545–571.
- Wood, E. A. (2000). Working in the fantasy factory: The attention hypothesis and the enacting of masculine power in strip clubs. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 29, 5–31.

Copyright of Journal of Sex Research is the property of Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.