Sex Education
Vol. 10, No. 2, May 2010, 145–156

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Participation in sex work: students' views

Ron Roberts[a]*, Teela Sanders[b], Ellie Myers[a] and Debbie Smith[c]

[a]*Department of Arts and Social Sciences, Kingston University, Penrhyn Road, Kingston, UK;* [b]*School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK;* [c]*Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, Torrington Place, London, UK*

Increasing evidence points to student involvement in the sex industry. The current study comprised a cross-sectional sample of 315 undergraduates at a London university. Using a semi-structured questionnaire, data were gathered on students' financial and employment circumstances and their views on participation in sex work. Results suggested awareness of student sex work was widespread, and considered understandable by the majority. Students principally attributed participation in the sex industry to their financial situation. A relatively high proportion (16.5%) indicated that they would be willing to engage in sex work to pay for their education, with 11% indicating they would work as escorts. A model of willingness to undertake sex work was able to explain over one-quarter of the variance. These findings are explained in relation to the mainstreaming of sexual consumption, the supply routes of sexual labour from privileged socio-economic positions and the effects of student debt.

Introduction

There have been significant changes in the economic, social and cultural acceptance of sexual consumption in the urban economies of western countries during late capitalism. The organization and marketing of the sex industry is such that 'sex' as a product is now sold alongside mainstream industries (Hawkes 2004). Through a process of 'upscaling' (Brents and Hausbeck 2007), corporate styles of marketing and business presentation that mimic traditional industries have been adopted by sex businesses. Sexual consumption has been normalized not only through the 'striptease culture' (McNair 2002) or because of a desire to be part of a 'pleasure saturated culture' (Illouz 1997), but also because of economic adaptation and acceptance that has produced the 'mainstreaming' of sexual consumption (Attwood 2006). The presence of lap dancing clubs alongside 'ordinary' leisure venues has become part of corporate entertainment and mass consumption, whilst less 'desirable' aspects of the sex industry (e.g. street prostitution) have been designed out of urban centres, criminalized and considered 'uncivil' (Scoular et al. 2007). This process of 'upscaling', in the 'respectability' of sexual commerce (Bernstein 2007), suggests major changes have occurred in the commodification of sexuality and the purchase of sexual commerce.

The tolerance of sexual consumption and mainstreaming of sexual labour, most evident in the form of lap dancing, suggests significant changes are taking place in terms of the acceptability of sexuality as a legitimate labour option for some women and men, and perhaps a mainstream option for some groups such as migrants, those on welfare benefits, single mothers and students. The reasons for 'choosing' to engage in sexual, physical and

*Corresponding author. Email: r.a.roberts@kingston.ac.uk

ISSN 1468-1811 print/ISSN 1472-0825 online

DOI: 10.1080/14681811003666507
http://www.informaworld.com

emotional labour in the form of either direct (genital contact) or indirect (non-contact) sex work is largely because of the profit margins. Exotic dancing, for example, allows women to work for fewer hours and higher rates of pay, parading their bodies, and performing 'emotional consumption' (Egan 2005), as they dance to fulfil men's fantasies.

There is evidence that despite financial vulnerability being the central reason for entering sex work, it is not only women from lower social classes that enter the sex industry. Bott (2006) found that both working-class and middle-class women enter exotic dancing, and that this form of work is becoming a 'career' option for younger women. Following the ideas presented by Bernstein (2007) regarding the 'new respectability' of the sex industries, which allows new types of worker and customer to enter sexual commerce, the research presented in this paper investigates attitudinal changes amongst students regarding working in the sex industry. As such, this research contributes to knowledge about the routes into sex work and the general attitudinal climate within which students make decisions about entering sex work. The current paucity of knowledge in part stems from alarmist panics about 'trafficking', which means that questions about the pathways into diverse sex markets have been ignored by policy-makers who have over-emphasized the 'demand' side of sexual consumption – something that is evident in the UK Home Office (2008) review *Tackling the Demand for Prostitution*, a part of the Coordinated Prostitution Strategy's aim to disrupt the sex markets.

Students and sex work

In recent years, anecdotal reports of students selling sex (Barrett 1997) have been followed by numerous media stories of students participating in different types of sex work, including lap dancing (BBC 2008), escorting and prostitution (Chapman 2001; Whitaker 2001; Brinkworth 2007; Dolman 2008). The phenomenon appears to be international, having been documented in the United Kingdom, the United States (Weitzer 2000), Australia (Lantz 2004; Sedgeman 2004), and France (Duvall Smith 2006), where it has been estimated that approximately 2% of students fund their studies through sex work. On the basis of earlier research (Roberts et al. 2000), UK estimates of 3–4% are close to the French figures. However, methodological difficulties present in this type of research (Roberts, Bergström, and La Rooy 2007a) make it difficult to arrive at precise figures, not the least of which is that 'student status' is considered an attractive characteristic by clients of sex workers and so could be used in descriptions of sex workers in an attempt to increase their business irrespective of whether they are students.

The major argument for explaining student participation in sex work implicates economic necessity – as is the case for non-student sex workers (O'Neill 1997). Abolition of the maintenance grant and the introduction of tuition fees have increased the average debt amongst UK students – current estimates suggest that those who began their courses in 2007 will graduate with over £21,000 of debts (BBC News Online 2007). By contrast, sex work is established as a relatively well-paid occupation (Moffat and Peters 2004), which would permit students to have more money and time for studies than the poorly paid jobs usually available.

In addition to anecdotal evidence and journalistic interviews with student sex workers who attest to the role of debt in beginning sex work (for example, Brinkworth 2007), research has linked indebtedness to knowledge of student participation in sex work (Roberts et al. 2000; Roberts, Bergström, and La Rooy 2007b). Undoubtedly other factors are also important, including the increasing commodification and commercialization of sex, the changing moral climate in western societies as well as personal vulnerability

factors such as drug and alcohol abuse or a history of sexual abuse. Jenkins (2006) has also suggested a range of preventative factors other than finances that mitigate against entry into the sex industry – including family support, boyfriends, body image, self-confidence, and a lack of knowledge of (how to enter) the sex industry. Jenkins' work highlights the importance of gathering the views of students themselves in order for a more complete understanding of their role(s) in various types of sex work. The current study therefore seeks to obtain evidence on the perceived acceptability of different types of sex work (including lap dancing, pole dancing, stripping, escorting, pornography), how easy students find it to understand student participation in sex work, how aware they are of student sex workers, why they think students participate in sex work, what the consequences of such participation are considered to be, and how likely they would be themselves to consider different types of sex work to pay for their education. This study includes both a qualitative approach to allow more in-depth analysis of responses and quantitative analyses to examine the relationships between different variables.

Method

Participants and design

An opportunity sample of 315 full-time and part-time undergraduate students was recruited from a university in the south of England. Recruitment occurred through a social science departmental participation pool and by approaching students in a variety of different social areas, including the Student's Union building, the library and a specific social room situated in one of the university buildings. Females comprised 67.3% of the sample ($n = 212$, mean age = 21.03 years, standard deviation [SD] = 2.92) and males 32.2% ($n = 101$, mean age = 21.30 years, SD = 3.14). Participants completed a brief semi-structured questionnaire (see below) providing demographic details, information on financial and employment circumstances and views on a range of issues pertaining to student participation in various types of sex work.

Questionnaire items

The questionnaire contained items on demographic characteristics (*age*, *gender*, *self-reported social class*, *year of study*), financial status (*whether in debt*, *amount in debt*), employment status (*whether in part–time work*, *number of hours worked*), and hours of study in a typical week. A section asked questions on respondents' awareness, understanding (measured on a four-point scale), acceptability (measured on a five-point scale) and knowledge of student participation in the sex industry, together with self-reported likelihood (measured on a five-point scale) to engage in a range of different types of sex work (*stripping*, *lap dancing*, *pole dancing*, *escorting/prostitution*, *Internet-based and non-Internet-based pornography*) to pay for their education. Participants completed the questionnaire anonymously, and had the right to withdraw from the study. Ethical approval was granted by the departmental ethics committee.

Analysis

Quantitative analysis

All analyses were conducted in SPSS version 14. General linear models were constructed to assess the contribution of gender and self-reported class to number of hours studied in a typical week, hours spent in part-time work, degree of understanding of student

participation in the sex industry, and amount of debt. Chi-square tests of association were conducted between gender and self-reported social class against categorical estimates of the proportion of students engaged in sex work (<5%, 5–10%, 11–20%, >20%), how understandable (*very difficult*, *difficult*, *easy*, *very easy*) and how acceptable (*very acceptable*, *acceptable*, *neither acceptable/unacceptable*, *acceptable*, *very acceptable*) student participation in the sex industry was. Correlations were computed between knowledge of specific student participation in the sex industry and social class, gender, age, acceptability and understandability of student participation and amount of debt. Likelihood to undertake sex work to pay for education (*definitely not*, *very unlikely*, *unlikely*, *likely*, *very likely*) was also correlated with these same variables. Multiple logistic and linear regression models were used to predict (respectively) knowledge of student participation in any type of sex work and expressed likelihood to participate in any type of sex work in order to pay for one's education. Predictor variables used were dependent on the results of prior correlational analyses.

Qualitative analysis

Thematic analyses (Banister et al. 1994) were undertaken of open-ended responses to several questions. These referred to what participants thought of student participation in the sex industry, why they thought students participated in the sex industry, how participation in the sex industry was thought to affect students and what the National Union of Students (NUS) and universities could do to support students working in the sex industry.

Results

Demographic, study and work characteristics

Respondents were predominantly drawn from the first three years of the full-time undergraduate population ($n = 277$, 87.9%).[1] Over one-third of respondents ($n = 117$, 37.1%) described themselves as working class, over one-half as middle class ($n = 181$, 57.5%) and a small minority as upper class ($n = 10$, 3.2%). A majority ($n = 183$, 58.1%) were currently working part-time in addition to studying and spent on average 13.40 (SD = 7.20) hours per week at work and an average of 14.38 hours per week studying.

Financial status

Over three-quarters ($n = 246$, 78.1%) of respondents described themselves as currently in debt. These owed on average £10,588. For the overall sample, average debt was £7922.

Awareness of student participation in the sex industry

A majority ($n = 184$, 58.45%) professed to being aware that some students worked within the sex industry. When asked to estimate what proportion of students worked in the industry, there was considerable variability in the estimates given. The modal response was that under 5% did ($n = 130$, 41.3%), whilst over one-half the sample ($n = 176$, 55.9%) put the figure at over 5%.

Thematic analysis of participants' responses ($n = 134$) revealed that some ($n = 36$) viewed participation in sex work as a personal choice, deemed reasonable by most as long as they do not have to do it and it is safe (e.g. 'fair enough to them, I would never do

anything like that', 'it's up to them, as long as they are happy and not being forced'). Others, however, viewed it negatively ($n = 41$). Three main reasons underlay the negative views: that the sex industry is bad (e.g. 'I oppose the sex industry I think it's a tragedy anyone works in it', 'It disgusts me to think of it' and 'Immoral'), that those who choose to work in it have personal issues (e.g. '... don't care about their bodies' and '... are lazy and greedy'), and that situational factors – money or lack of support – push people into it (e.g. 'Being in desperate need of money, thinking that it's an "easy" way of making money', 'It's wrong to need to do this to fund studies', 'international students find it hard to get a good job'). Interestingly, danger or lack of safety was alluded to by only three respondents, while one comment differentiated between activities in the sex industry – with prostitution equated with 'lower standards', whereas 'dancing' was seen as 'ok' so long as the person doing it was 'confident'.

Attitudes to student participation in the sex industry

When asked how difficult student participation in the sex industry was to understand, a majority ($n = 158$, 50.1%) reported finding it easy or very easy, whilst under one-third ($n = 102$, 32.4%) reported finding it difficult or very difficult. Amongst those who reported finding it very easy to understand, 77.1% ($n = 27$) were aware of student sex work; whereas amongst those reporting it as very difficult, awareness was much lower (48.1%, $n = 13$). Females reported lower levels of understanding than males (51.2% vs. 84%, $p < 0.0005$).

Although these figures suggest relatively high awareness and understanding of student participation in the sex industry, it was considered unacceptable or very unacceptable by over one-half the sample ($n = 161$, 51.1%). A much smaller fraction indicated it was acceptable or very acceptable ($n = 38$, 12.0%) with over one–third undecided ($n = 114$, 36.2%). Females were more likely than males (56.6% vs. 40.4%, $p < 0.0005$) to find student participation in the sex industry unacceptable or very unacceptable.

Participation in sex work: reasons

Many participants ($n = 246$) stated why they thought students participated in sex work. Four main themes emerged: money, sexuality, despair and personal situation. Money was overwhelmingly given ($n = 228$; 93%) as the main reason – debt, bills, and student fees were mentioned by many ($n = 40$), as was working in the sex industry as a way to make easy/quick money ($n = 41$) (e.g. 'because loans only cover rent if lucky', 'everything is so expensive and sex is easy/very good money'). Sixteen participants expressed the view that some students work in the sex industry because they 'enjoy sex' or because of their 'overt sexuality'. Desperation and the lack of an alternative was mentioned by 15 and was related to the issue of money earned in sex work – 'because they tried selling sex in a time of desperation and like the idea of earning *x* amount per hour'. Students' personal situations ($n = 20$) were seen as influencing engagement in the sex industry and included 'low self esteem', 'family problems', 'peer pressure' and 'unfortunate circumstances, lack of guidance'.

Institutional support

National Union of Students

Over one-half of the respondents ($n = 177$, 56.2%) thought the NUS could do more to support students participating in sex work. The majority of these ($n = 160$) made specific

suggestions. Five clear types of support were reported: prevention, health promotion, financial support, career support and research. The role of education in these was consistently expressed, notably in enhancing awareness of possible risks as a deterrence to taking up sex work ($n = 17$). Some respondents ($n = 51$) highlighted a possible role for the NUS in health promotion – providing safety and risk information, counselling and support groups. The issue of safety was cited by many: 'make the issue more widely acknowledged so health and security measures are widely available', 'more tests for diseases, more emotional support, more people to talk to', 'help them get out of (the) vicious circle of easy money, drugs'. Not surprisingly, many saw a role in providing financial support, such as increasing the availability of loans, providing debt counselling, financial advice and help with cheaper accommodation. A number ($n = 35$) thought that the NUS could be proactive in offering career support – in order to help students find 'respectable jobs' and 'give people more ideas on how to easily make money'. Finally, participants reported that the NUS should offer support to students by conducting research to ascertain the extent of the phenomenon: 'study the numbers so people know the real numbers' and 'find out the source of the problem'.

Universities

Many of the above themes were repeated when participants were asked what their own university could do to support students in the sex industry. Almost one-half responded to this item ($n = 155$, 49.2%) and, as before, cited prevention, health promotion, financial support, career support and research. Whereas students emphasized the value of educational support when contemplating what the NUS could do, here they were more inclined to consider emotional ($n = 51$) and financial support ($n = 41$) when considering what universities could offer. A smaller number ($n = 22$) saw a role for counselling – to be provided through 'one to one support from personal tutor or phone line support' as well as advice on getting 'health checks' and information on where to get further support: 'point them where to go and how to break the link'. Over one-half of those calling for greater financial support referred to scrapping the 'ridiculous high fees, which leaves students, especially international (ones) with no choice' and 'more scholarships'. Childcare, cheaper accommodation and food also featured in participants' answers as well as calls for 'greater flexibility in paying fees' and 'teaching financial management skills'. Closely associated with financial support was the call for universities to do more to help students find other part-time jobs ($n = 31$).

Knowledge of student participation in the sex industry

Table 1 presents the numbers of respondents who knew of other students participating in particular markets of the sex industry in order to pay for their education. The frequency with which different categories of sex work were chosen ranged from 5.4% for non-Internet-based pornography to 18.1% ($n = 57$) for pole/lap dancing. In all, over one-quarter of respondents (25.7%) indicated they knew of students involved in some type of sex work.

Knowledge of other students' participation was significantly related to gender ($p = 0.036$; proportionally more males knew of someone than females: $n = 37$, 36.6% vs. $n = 53$, 25.1%), and social class ($p = 0.018$): middle/upper-class respondents were more likely to know than working-class respondents (33% vs. 20.5%). Cross-tabulating knowledge of participation in specific types of sex work with the item concerning

Table 1. Knowledge of students participating in sex work to pay for education (by type of sex work).

	n	Percentage
Pole/lap dancing	57	18.1
Stripping	38	12.1
Escorting/prostitution	31	9.8
Internet pornography	23	7.3
Non-Internet pornography	17	5.4
Any type of sex work	81	25.7

awareness of student participation in the sex industry is instructive. Of 184 individuals responding in the affirmative to the question concerning awareness of student participation in sex work, 35.3% ($n = 65$) indicated that they actually knew of students in at least one market of the industry. Furthermore, of those who indicated they knew students working in at least one market, 80.2% ($n = 81$) had endorsed the earlier item relating to their knowledge of student participation in sex work. These two variables were associated (Cramer's $V = 0.27$, $p < 0.0005$), suggesting that respondents' knowledge of student participation must come from at least two sources – one of which is their specific personal knowledge (of their own or another's participation). Knowledge of specific student participation was correlated with social class ($r = 0.12$, $n = 308$, $p = 0.04$), as well as how acceptable ($r = -0.20$, $n = 312$, $p < 0.0005$) and understandable it was considered for students to work in the sex industry ($r = 0.20$, $n = 260$, $p = 0.001$).

A logistic regression model was constructed to predict knowledge of student participation in any type of sex work. This comprised: age, gender, social class, amount of debt owed, part-time job status, estimated percentage of students working in the sex industry, how understandable, and how acceptable participation in sex work is. This was highly significant (-2 log likelihood $= 75.34$, $p < 0.0005$) and fitted the data well (Hosmer and Lemeshow test $x^2(8) = 8.04$, $p = 0.43$). Overall, 83.5% of cases were correctly classified (50% positive predictive capacity and 90.2% negative predictive capacity). Pseudo R^2 measures suggested a model of moderate predictive capacity, ranging from 22.7% (Menard's R^2) to 33.3% (Nagelkerke's R^2). Several variables emerged as significant predictors: greater acceptability of student participation (Wald $x^2(1) = 5.23$, $p = 0.02$), higher social class (Wald $x^2(1) = 2.87$, $p = 0.09$), and higher estimates of the percentage of students working in the sex industry (Wald $x^2(1) = 12.57$, $p < 0.0005$) each predicted knowledge of student participation.

Likelihood of participation in the sex industry

Table 2 presents the numbers of respondents who indicated that they would be likely or very likely to participate in particular markets of the sex industry to pay for their education. The frequency with which different categories of sex work were chosen varied from 3.5% ($n = 11$) for Internet pornography to 11.1% ($n = 35$) for escorting/prostitution. In all, 16.5% ($n = 52$) of students indicated that they would be likely or very likely to participate in some kind of sex work.

We found that expressed likelihood to participate in the sex industry could be scaled. Scoring allows for a range of values – from seven (very unlikely for all types of sex work) to 35 (very likely for all types). This yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91. Mean score on the scale was 12.23 (SD = 6.25). This scale was significantly correlated with gender

Table 2. Reported likelihood (likely or very likely) of students participating in sex work to pay for education (by type of sex work).

	n	Percentage
Escorting/prostitution	35	11.1
Pole/lap dancing	23	7.3
Stripping	19	6.0
Lap dancing	19	6.0
Non-Internet pornography	15	4.8
Internet pornography	11	3.5
Any type of sex work	52	16.5

($r = -0.38, n = 312, p < 0.0005$; proportionally more males than females endorsed these items: $n = 41$, 40.6% vs. $n = 27$, 12.7%), age ($r = 0.11$, $n = 307$, $p = 0.059$), how acceptable ($r = -0.24$, $n = 312$, $p < 0.0005$) and how understandable it was ($r = 0.25$, $n = 259$, $p < 0.0005$), and with the level of debt ($r = 0.13$, $n = 273$, $p = 0.03$).

We constructed a general linear model to examine the predictability of expressed likelihood to engage in sex work. This comprised age, gender, amount of debt owed, and whether participation in the sex industry was understandable and was acceptable. Scatter plots suggested the possibility of a non-linear relationship of age with the dependent variable. On the basis of this, age was recategorized into three levels: below 21 years ($n = 221$), 22 years ($n = 31$) and 23 years and above ($n = 56$). The subsequent model was highly significant and accounted for 24.7% of the variance ($F_{6,217} = 13.19$, $p < 0.0005$). All predictors were significant: understanding participation ($p = 0.041$), accepting participation ($p < 0.0005$), amount of debt ($p = 0.017$), age group ($p = 0.045$) and gender ($p < 0.0005$).

Discussion

The current study points to a widespread awareness, understanding and, to a lesser extent, acceptance amongst the student population of sex work as a facet of contemporary student life that exists alongside high levels of debt and long working hours outside study. Students themselves attributed participation in the sex industry to several factors – chief of which, by some way, was their financial situation. Household bills and student fees loomed large and were counterbalanced by the logic of the presumed financial opportunities to make quick money from sex work. Other (mostly situational) factors – such as self-esteem, family problems, peer pressure and lack of guidance – were considered motivations by a smaller number. Students' own perspectives therefore are consistent with previous work that has highlighted financial circumstances as a driving force behind student involvement in sex work (Roberts et al. 2000; Roberts, Bergström, and La Rooy 2007b), whilst also lending some support to Jenkins's (2006) claim that other factors – such as family support, self confidence and the climate of personal morality in which contemporary undergraduate life unfolds – are also important.

Knowledge of participation in some type of sex work to pay for education was high (26%) and suggests a substantial increase on previously reported Figures (10%). This could signal increasing student activity in sex work – but could also be a response to growing media coverage, both in the local student press (for example, Day 2007) and nationally (for example, Milne 2006; Dolman 2008). The local student press has, for example, carried reports of male student sex workers (for example, Moon 2006) and both

knowledge and professed acceptability of student participation in the sex industry was greater amongst males. Such coverage might reflect and/or contribute to a less censorious moral environment in which students may be more open with one another about what they do to pay for their education.

The present work suggests almost one in seven students would be willing to engage in sex work and that many of these would be willing to be involved in escorting/prostitution – reported by over 11% of the sample. Almost one-quarter of the variance in expressed willingness to undertake sex work was explained by a model incorporating age, gender, amount of debt, understanding and acceptability of student participation. Applied solely to escorting, the same model explained over 18% of the variance. With more males reportedly willing to work in the sex industry, it would be a simple matter to interpret this as wishful thinking in accord with male socialization, which proclaims participation in any kind of sexual activity is a good thing. Whilst this probably plays some part, it should be remembered that a view expressed by many who completed this survey (both males and females) was that participation carried a range of negative effects. It is also possible that specific local effects are operating within the institution where the research was undertaken. In a revised model that included the interactions of these variables with gender, it was only the gender x acceptability term that was significant ($p < 0.005$; this added 5% to the explained variance) and entailed gender was no longer a significant main effect. This suggests that it is the greater acceptability of sex work which leads males to position themselves as more likely to participate. However, this is not to disregard the evidence of the growth of male sex-work markets in the United Kingdom, particularly in London. Gaffney and Beverley (2001) note that the contemporary male sex work markets where men sell sex to other men through informal and formal sex work networks, increasingly through the Internet, is attractive to men who identify as gay, bisexual or heterosexual. In addition, whilst little is known beyond anecdotal evidence about the informal economies where men sell sex to women (usually as escorts), this is a market that could also be attractive to young male students who seek out high-paying jobs for low hours.

How do we understand this rise in both the increased acceptability of sex work amongst the student population and the potential participation of students in various sex markets? Bernstein's (2007) paper 'Sex Work for the Middle Classes' provides some insightful explanations as to why men and women from privileged classes find themselves involved in sex work. Attributable to new technologies and modern methods of Internet communication, working in the sex industry is part of a much wider economic restructuring. In addition, there are new meanings and experiences connected to buying and selling sex: 'emotional consumption' (Egan 2005), 'emotional connectedness through "mutual" satisfaction, romance and friendship' (Sanders 2008a) and 'bounded authenticity' (Bernstein 2007) enable 'the girlfriend experience' to be marketed (Sanders 2005) and consumed (Sanders 2008b). These enhanced meanings purchased through commercial sex contribute to new forms of sexual and emotional labour, which provide both viable economic earning power for women and a desired commodity for men who seek to buy fantasies and bounded, contractual emotional and sexual experiences. The findings from this student survey need to be considered within the broader context of 'new and historically specific conditions of possibility' (Bernstein 2007, 485) that enable the sex industry to grow and become mainstreamed as a reaction to poorly paid jobs (even for graduates), unaffordable costs of urban living, high levels of mass consumption, and, now in the United Kingdom, rising student debt as normalized conditions.

At present there is simply no way to obtain an unbiased estimate of the extent of student participation in the sex industry until ethical clearance is obtained to ask the appropriate questions. We hope this will soon be possible. The present study, in highlighting the widespread acceptance of sex work and the expressed willingness of students to participate in it, provides, we believe, important arguments as to why research to answer this question is now urgently required. Despite the obvious caveats we attach to the present findings, we would argue that the data here point unequivocally to a new culture whereby students view engaging in sex work as a rationale response to their situation of financial hardship. The findings here provide the first steps toward constructing a psychosocial model of student sex work. The data, both qualitative and quantitative, suggest an important role for several social-cognitive variables – self-confidence, positive outcome expectations, normative (community) beliefs, situational and social constraints (e.g. finances) – in the decision to engage in sex work. We acknowledge that the model developed in this paper would benefit from the incorporation of variables which existing work has suggested may predict different types of sex work – for example, mental health or drinking problems or prior sexual abuse (Roberts, Bergström, and La Rooy 2007b). Although we concur with previous critiques regarding the limitations of social cognitive models – notably their neglect of subjective experience – and the role of affective influences in regulating behaviour (Conner and Sparks 2005) – for example, the role of pleasure (Ingham 2005), or the habitual nature of problem behaviours (Stroebe and Stroebe 1995; Ajzen 2001), not to mention the role of power relations in maintaining certain behaviours (Roberts, Towell, and Golding 2001) – we posit that such models can be useful provided a framework is present for understanding behaviour within its wider social and cultural context, although it is likely that the models have more heuristic than precise explanatory value. What can be said with more certainty, given that sexual behaviour is often resistant to change (Donovan and Ross 2000), is that the threefold 'pull' factors potentially present in student sex work – the experience of personal satisfaction, the accrual of financial rewards, and the ensuing financial and social survival that these permit (Agustin 2006) – mean that even were the economics of student life to change for the better, selling sexual labour in the sex markets may become a mainstream rather than alternative informal economy. Future research will hopefully address in some detail the career trajectories that students take both into and out of sex work (see Sanders 2007).

Findings from this study have implications for policy. Future education policy regarding student finances and quality of life issues should take seriously the relationship between student debt and supply routes into the sex industry. There is clearly a relationship developing between sex work, student financial survival strategies and debt. Appropriate responses are required from organizations that represent either students (e.g., the NUS) or those that have a duty of care and benefit from their presence (the universities). Respondents identified several avenues of support which they thought could be provided by these institutions for potential or actual student sex workers. For action to take place, both the NUS and universities must be prepared to acknowledge the issue to a much greater extent than they have to date by adopting a more open and accepting attitude both toward sex work and toward students who feel this is a necessary course of action for them.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all respondents who participated in the study.

Note

1. A further 29 individuals (9.2%) failed to provide data in answer to this item.

References

Agustin, L.M. 2006. *Sex at the margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*. London: Zeb Books.

Ajzen, I. 2001. Nature and operation of attitudes. *Annual Review of Psychology* 52: 27–58.

Attwood, F. 2006. Sexed up: Theorizing the sexualization of culture. *Sexualities* 9, no. 1: 7–94.

Banister, P., E. Burman, I. Parker, M. Taylor, M. Taylor, and C. Tindall. 1994. *Qualitative methods in psychology: A research guide*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Barrett, D. 1997. Students on the game. *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, July 18.

BBC. 2008. Amy: My body for bucks. BBC 3, Sunday April 20. http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00b0x35.

BBC News Online. 2007. Fees 'pushing up student debts'. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6945975.stm (accessed August 14, 2007).

Bernstein, E. 2007. Sex work for the middle classes. *Sexualities* 10, no. 4: 473–88.

Bott, E. 2006. Pole position: Migrant British women producing 'selves' through lap dancing work. *Feminist Review* 83, no. 1: 23–41.

Brents, B., and K. Hausbeck. 2007. Marketing sex: U.S legal brothels and late capitalist consumption. *Sexualities* 10, no. 4: 425–39.

Brinkworth, L. 2007. Students who sell sex. *Cosmopolitan*, July, 60–2.

Chapman, M. 2001. Red light finds its way onto campus. *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, November 5 (1486).

Conner, M., and P. Sparks. 2005. The theory of planned behaviour and health behaviour. In *Predicting health behaviour: research and practice with social cognition models*, ed. M. Connor and P. Norman. 2nd ed., 170–222. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Day, E. 2007. Escorting: Is it all it is cracked up to be? *The River* 17: 18–19.

Dolman, K. 2008. Selling sex to study. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/education/student/article3396280.ece (accessed February 19, 2008).

Donovan, B.D., and M.W. Ross. 2000. Preventing HIV: Determinants of sexual behaviour. *The Lancet* 355, no. 9218: 1897–901.

Duvall Smith, A. 2006. Thousands of students 'join sex trade to fund degrees'. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/europe/thousands-of-students-join-sex-trade-to-fund-degrees-422287.html (accessed October 31, 2006).

Egan, D. 2005. Emotional consumption: Mapping love and masochism in an exotic dance club. *Body and Society* 11, no. 4: 87–108.

Gaffney, J., and K. Beverley. 2001. Contextualising the construction and social organisation of the commercial male sex industry in London at the beginning of the twenty-first century. *Feminist Review* 67, spring: 133–41.

Hawkes, G. 2004. *Sex and pleasure in western culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Home Office. 2008. Tackling the demand for prostitution: A review. http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/tackling-demand?view=Binary (accessed February 20, 2009).

Illouz, E. 1997. *Consuming the romantic utopia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ingham, R. 2005. Teenage pregnancy policy on England, sexuality research and social policy. *Journal of National Sexuality Resource Centre* 2, no. 3: 56–67.

Jenkins, S. 2006. Students and the sex industry: Is financial hardship turning students into sex workers? Unpublished diss., Keele University.

Lantz, S. 2004. Sex work and study: The new demands facing young people and their implications for health and well being. *Traffic* 3: 31–50.

McNair, B. 2002. *Striptease culture: Sex, media and the democratization of desire*. London: Routledge.

Milne, J. 2006. Female students turn to prostitution to pay fees. *The Sunday Times*. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/education/student/news/article665019.ece (accessed October 8, 2006).

Moffat, P.G., and S.A. Peters. 2004. Pricing personal services: An empirical study of earnings in the UK prostitution industry. *Scottish Journal of Political Economy* 51: 675–90.

Moon, A. 2006. I became a rent boy: The dark side of education. *The River* 10: 17.

O'Neill, M. 1997. Prostitute women now. In *Rethinking prostitution: Purchasing sex in the 1990's*, ed. G. Scambler and A. Scambler, 3–28. London: Routledge.
Roberts, R., S. Bergström, and D. La Rooy. 2007a. Commentary: UK students and sex work: Current knowledge and research issues. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* 17: 141–6.
Roberts, R., S. Bergström, and D. La Rooy. 2007b. Sex work and students: An exploratory study. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 31, no. 4: 323–34.
Roberts, R., J. Golding, T. Towell, S. Reid, S. Woodford, A. Vetere, and I. Weinreb. 2000. Mental and physical health in students: The role of economic circumstances. *British Journal of Health Psychology* 5, no. 3: 289–97.
Roberts, R., A. Towell, and J. Golding. 2001. *Foundations of health psychology*. Houndmills: Palgrave.
Sanders, T. 2005. *Sex work: A risky business*. Uffculme, Devon: Willan Publishing.
Sanders, T. 2007. Becoming an ex-sex worker: Making transitions out of a deviant career. *Feminist Criminology* 2, no. 1: 74–95.
Sanders, T. 2008a. Male sexual scripts: Intimacy, sexuality and pleasure in the purchase of commercial sex. *Sociology* 42, no. 3: 400–17.
Sanders, T. 2008b. *Paying for pleasure: Men who buy sex*. Cullompton, Devon: Willan.
Scoular, J., J. Pitcher, R. Campbell, P. Hubbard, and M. O'Neill. 2007. What's anti-social about sex work? The changing representation of prostitution's incivility. *Community Safety Journal* 6, no. 1: 11–17.
Sedgman, J. 2004. Sex work more attractive option for students. *The World Today*, April 2.
Stroebe, W., and M.S. Stroebe. 1995. *Social psychology and health*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
Weitzer, R., ed. 2000. *Sex for sale: Prostitution, pornography and the sex industry*. London: Routledge.
Whitaker, M. 2001. Actuality at school. BBC Radio 4, June 24.