

This body which is not mine

The notion of the habit body, prostitution and (dis)embodiment



Feminist Theory
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<http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>
 vol. 10(1): 61–75.
 1464–7001
 DOI: 10.1177/1464700108100392
<http://fty.sagepub.com>

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Abstract This paper explores women's accounts of prostitution in terms of the lived experience of the body, drawing on life story narratives and arts images created by women in the sex industry. These narratives show that women's experiences of prostitution constitute a spectrum of (dis)embodiment that is inflected, not determined, by settings and contexts. Theoretical approaches to embodiment were sought that acknowledged tensions between violation and a sense of empowerment. Therefore, the ontology of selling sex, and associated experiences such as violence, drug use and self-harm are explored using feminist applications of Merleau-Ponty's notion of the 'habit body'. A key focus is how the body is constituted by embodied experiences of abuse (e.g. the work of Parkins and of Weiss), and how women negotiate ownership of the body within commercial sex transactions. This highlights the process of repositioning the body by selling sex, in accordance with the accumulated experiences of the habit body. Thus, to borrow from Wendy Parkins, women perceive that they are acting meaningfully through the body, even when reproducing dynamics of objectification and dissociation.

keywords *embodiment, habit body, prostitution*

Introduction

This paper explores women's accounts of prostitution in terms of the lived experience of the body. From life story narratives from women who entered prostitution from local authority care, and arts images created by a wide range of women in the sex industry, themes of estrangement and lack of ownership of the body emerge. Here this sense of (dis)embodiment is theoretically framed by feminist applications of Merleau-Ponty's (1962) notion of the 'habit body'. Tensions and contradictions are addressed where, following Bordo (1993) and Wesely (2002), women experience personal power in contexts of commodification and objectification.

Although parallels are drawn with narratives of sexual violence, the focus of discussion is not on violation per se, but on how women negotiate ownership of the body within commercial sex transactions. However,

these narratives demonstrate that women experience the ontology of selling sex as violating, even where they also feel that they are exercising agency. The paper discusses these tensions by examining women's lived experience in terms of 'the embodied conditions of social agency and social action' (Witz, 2000: 11). Developing understandings of how women view their actions in their reflective autobiographies of self and body highlight dynamics of choice, coercion and 'drift' into prostitution (O'Neill, 2001). This focus does not detract from the socio-economic disadvantage and desperation that underpins many women's routes into prostitution, and is indeed a feature of women's lives in this study, but demonstrates that psychosocial poverty, together with material deficits, is a significant precipitant. This unpicking also adds to knowledge on lived embodiment of violence and abuse (see Wesely et al., 2000).

Theorizing the body: practices and habits

The exploration of women's lived embodiment is framed by centuries of patriarchal thought that links women synonymously (and negatively) with the body, from Aristotelian posturing about feminine 'hysteria' caused by the floating womb to the Cartesian dualisms of male/female, mind/body, intellect/emotion, logic/irrationality, which have pervaded modern philosophy and educationalism (Bordo, 1993). Consequently, including the physical body in feminist analyses of power has been a problematic issue in recent scholarship, born out of a fear of reinforcing the association of 'female' with 'body' (Witz, 2000). Yet, as Bordo (1993), Arthurs and Grimshaw (1999) and Davis (1997) point out, feminist theorists have long recognized struggles for control over the body to be at the centre of women's lived experience. At the core of this is women's capacity to maintain sovereignty over the body that is embedded in socio-cultural norms – 'the female body is an object of (hetero)sexual desire in a patriarchal culture', reinforced at multiple levels, such as visual imagery in pornography, the prevalence of sexual violence and a male prerogative to define aesthetically 'desirable' female bodies (Wesely, 2002: 1182).

The dynamics between the body and the self in terms of connectedness and separateness, seeking to overcome binaries of masculine mental rationalism and feminine embodied baseness, and the ways in which senses of self and identity interact with actions of and on the body, are explored by multiple disciplines. One such approach by Shelley Budgeon (2003) frames women's embodied identity as events and processes. Here, the embodied self is located in the lived relations of women, 'involving particular experiences and engagements in certain practices which allow the body to make new, transformative connections' (2003: 48). In this way 'she moves from experiencing her body as object to a relation in which the body is lived in terms of what it can do' (Budgeon, 2003: 49).

This is a useful starting point from which to explore how women embrace an embodied self based on objectification in prostitution, while perceiving this as powerful (Coy, 2008a). Contemporary consumer culture shapes the body as a vehicle of self expression (Featherstone, 1982) that

prioritizes individual behaviour rather than socio-cultural influences and constraints (Bordo, 1993). For this research, theoretical approaches to embodiment were sought that acknowledged tensions between violation and a sense of empowerment. The wider study on which this paper is based used the concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) to explore women's experiences of the local authority care system, where actions and decision-making are embodied through the practices of the body and their associated social meanings. Thus, engagement with the world is mediated through the body and embodiment is therefore both 'generative and practical' (Adkins, 2004: 14). Bourdieu suggests that:

'the body' does not represent what it performs, it does not memorise the past, it enacts the past, bringing it back to life. What is 'learned by the body' is not something one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is. (Bourdieu, 1984: 88)

This 'habitual knowingness of the body' (McRobbie, 2004: 103) is conceptually augmented by Merleau-Ponty's (1962) notion of the 'habit body', enabling a more detailed exploration of experiential knowledge of the body on embodied actions. Merleau-Ponty (1962) suggests that the primary way of learning about the world is through the body. All forms of knowledge of the world are therefore practical and embodied, developed via a 'corporeal schema' of the habit body, a constellation of techniques learned through experience that enable the individual to read experiences and situations and act accordingly (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Crucially for exploring women's narratives of prostitution, feminist theorists draw on Merleau-Ponty's work and illustrate how the 'habit body' is experienced as gendered. Wendy Parkins' (2000) analysis of the potential for feminist agency in Merleau-Ponty's work on embodiment offers an interpretative framework for understanding women's relationship with their bodies. She highlights the significance of habit as the means by which the body expresses action in situations:

Arising from our own history of personal acts in particular situations, habits develop which give us 'stable dispositional tendencies' which are not fixed and immutable – we can and do change – but rather give us resources for acting meaningfully in the world through the 'expressive space' that is our body. (Parkins, 2000: 60)

This perspective enables an examination of how women's personal histories of their bodies inform how the 'habit body' develops. Gail Weiss (1999: 46) uses aspects of Merleau-Ponty's work to explore the role of the body in women's everyday life and the 'bodily consequences of gendered social practices'. This is useful to an analysis of embodiment in prostitution, as she applies Merleau-Ponty's work to understanding the ways in which women seek to control the habit body. By looking at the positioning of the body it is possible to identify attempts to gain a sense of control over the body in line with the 'habit body' established by previous experiences (Weiss, 1999). As Bordo (1993: 16) explains: 'through routine, habitual activity, our bodies learn what is "inner" and "outer", which

gestures are forbidden and which are required, how violable or inviolable are the boundaries of the body'. It is vital to map how the habit body moves towards a feeling that selling sex offers a sense of control, in order to fully explore women's routes into and experiences of prostitution – a journey I have documented as moving from 'abused child', through 'sex object', 'survivor' and 'professional' (Coy, 2008b). How this journey of the habit body is articulated by women in their autobiographical narratives and arts images is discussed in this paper.

Methodology: exploring and (re)presenting disembodiment

Epistemologically, the study is based on a feminist participatory action approach and combines life story narratives with arts workshops, building on the work of Maggie O'Neill (2001) and enabling multiple (re)presentations of women's experiences of prostitution. Fourteen women with backgrounds of local authority care, aged between 17 and 33 years, participated in life story narrative interviews, accessed through my employment as an outreach worker in a specialized project for women in the sex industry. My analysis here is embedded in my close contact with hundreds of women and girls involved in the sex industry (Coy, 2006).

All the women in this study began selling sex on the streets when aged between 11 and 16 years, and were still involved in prostitution at the time of the research, although two women had moved to indoor settings. Their length of time selling sex varied from two years to 18 years. For most, their childhoods and adolescence were characterized by physical and sexual abuse, rejection and instability. A further 40 women participated in the arts workshops, with eight women creating the final 11 images, although some draw on ideas expressed by several women. The women who participated in the arts workshops had a wide range of experiences of the sex industry, including women involved in street prostitution and the accompanying subculture of homelessness, drug use and social exclusion; women engaged in indoor prostitution who framed this as economic entrepreneurship; and women who were peripherally involved in the street prostitution scene and sporadically exchanged sex for money but distinctly separated themselves from 'prostitutes' (see also Pearce et al., 2003). Only two women cited drug use as a reason to begin to sell sex, but all began to use illegal drugs – predominantly heroin and crack cocaine – after becoming involved in prostitution.

The narratives were analysed using 'voice-centred relational ontology', which advocates reading and re-reading the women's narratives in order to locate women's sense of self and key events of their lives in their own terms of reference (Doucet and Mauthner, 1998). In the narratives and life stories, inclusion of women's corporeal reality was characterized by the paradoxical 'absent presence' of their bodies. Like a shadow in the dialogue, the body was rarely the subject of explicit reference. Yet bodily practices were referred to frequently, via discussion of the cycles of drug dependency and injuries associated with drug use, injuries from violence and abuse as children and as adults, pregnancy, abortion and childbirth, and dissociative

mechanisms women used to manage the commercial sex encounter. Following this, the participatory arts workshops were developed to enable women to (re)present their lived experience of selling sex, in terms of embodiment and self-identity. Recognizing that 'exploring the connection between embodiment and disembodiment through talk is difficult' (Holland et al., 1994: 109), the aim was to engage women in dialogue about how selling sex affected their sense of self and relationship with the body and to (re)present these thoughts and feelings in visual form (see O'Neill et al., 2002).

As a methodological tool, visual material supplements verbal data by revealing thought clusters not always consciously understood or even recognized (Newell-Walker, 2002). The images that the women created through collaborative work with the arts worker depicted their bodies (or parts of them) with a verbal commentary that was superimposed over the photographs using digital software packages, reflecting the meanings attached to the image (see also O'Neill et al., 2002). In this way, through the women turning their feelings into pictures and including text reflecting upon their emotions and experience, the arts workshops transcended the mere recording of knowledge of women's relationships with their bodies to actually create new knowledge (Pink, 2001).

One aspect of exploration was if, or how, women selling sex in different environments manage the self/body relationship with varying degrees of ownership of the body influenced by their experiences of the exchange. Street prostitution has empirically been demonstrated as harmful to women; research documents high levels of drug use, chronic ill health, experience of violence, homelessness and malnutrition that lead to general bodily deterioration (Epele, 2001; Jeal and Salisbury, 2007; O'Neill, 2001; Phoenix, 1999). Women selling on the streets also report more commercial sex transactions with a higher number of buyers than women in indoor premises (Jeal and Salisbury, 2007). Cumulatively, this suggests that women on the streets may have a qualitatively different lived embodiment. However, this delineation obscures the complexity of women's experiences. The settings in which women sell sex are not static – there is often mobility between sectors of the sex industry (Hoigard and Finstad, 1992). Of the women working indoors, all initially began selling sex on the streets, but at the time of participation most were exclusively involved in indoor prostitution. Of the women who were solely involved in street prostitution, there was some variation between older women who drifted between escort work, working from home and the street to top up their income, and younger women who were particularly chaotic in terms of drug use and accommodation and found themselves confined to the ghettos of street soliciting areas. These nuances are manifested in patterns of (dis)embodiment. Themes from narratives and images created by women selling sex indoors express shame, guilt and worthlessness while those of women selling sex on the streets demonstrate a more explicit lack of ownership of the body. Yet rather than manifestly different ontologies, women's experiences of prostitution constituted a continuum of violence (Kelly, 1988) and (dis)embodiment that was inflected, not determined, by settings and contexts.

The body in prostitution

While the ways in which cultural meanings are attached to women's bodies are well developed, how women live their bodies on a daily basis is under-theorized and under-explored (Davis, 1997). Prostitution is a notable exception as empirical studies have sought to identify how women manage selling access to the body, and investigate direct impacts of associated embodied experiences such as sexual violence and drug use (Epele, 2001; Farley et al., 1998). Of particular relevance to lived embodiment is the endemic 'common, frequent and pervasive' violence and risk of bodily trauma faced by women who sell sex (Williamson and Folaron, 2001: 467; Farley et al., 1998; Hoigard and Finstad, 1992; O'Connell Davidson, 1998; O'Neill, 2001; Phoenix, 1999).

The female body that is bought and sold in prostitution has also been subject to conceptual analysis. As Carole Pateman (1988) argues, prostitution is unique in the investment of the self that is required due to the dynamic between sexuality, the body and sense of self. In this approach, prostitution should not be reframed as employment like any other since it is ontologically damaging to the embodied self. O'Connell Davidson (1998) suggests that analyses of prostitution should focus upon the client's power of command over the body rather than the purposes to which it is put, as the power of command over the body is not merely physical but symbolic: that is, the body is bought for the purposes of specific functions. In the commercial sex transaction, ownership transfers from the woman to the buyer who assumes belonging of the body within the parameters of certain (contractual) boundaries.

Phoenix (1999) suggests that women who sell sex construct perceptions of the sale of their bodies as commodified bodies that are tiered in layers: full ownership and control, a feeling of ownership but no control, and finally, no ownership or control. Narratives of women who participated in this research suggest that this complex relationship between control and ownership of the body in prostitution is based on negotiating the experiential 'habit body' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Templates for (dis)embodiment in prostitution

Women's narratives show that the capacity to feel the body as functioning 'in terms of what it can do' is significant, as entry into prostitution is embedded in previous experiences of objectification and sexual abuse. So, prevalence of sexual abuse in the women's lives creates a template for the way that the women act with their bodies and demarcate boundaries of ownership and use, which are absorbed into the embodied sense of self. Early sexualization inculcates a sense that male abusers, supported by socio-cultural norms and motifs, can define meanings attached to women's bodies where women are valued primarily for their sexualized bodies (Bordo, 1993; Wesely, 2002). For instance, sexual abuse signifies to women that bodies can be appropriated by others for their sexual gratification, reinforcing both a sense of personal powerlessness, and (dis)embodiment,

and wider male entitlement of sexual access to women. These practices create a model of corporeal ontology that is a gendered and socially situated habit body (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), understanding of which forms the basis of embodied action. As Wendy described the legacies of her childhood sexual abuse:

You put a smile on my face, make me feel special [he said] . . . I hate my body . . . He liked my body and so I cover it up with jumpers and trousers . . . I deserved it. (Wendy, 19; accompanying text to an arts image)

This supports Gail Weiss' (1999) work on how embodiment develops from the way that others view the body, as women become aware of the sexual objectification of their bodies; through experiences of abuse, the habit body becomes such that they 'are forced to see themselves as objects' (Wesely, 2002: 1183). This process is not simply that invasions of the body are familiar processes to women with histories of abuse – although for some this was clearly significant – but that complex negotiations relating to the value and function of the body are generated by experiential templates of abuse.

Stacey's life story indicated how her habit body – her lived knowledge of her body – operated epistemologically to entrench her in selling sex. Her childhood was characterized by physical violence from her father and intermittent professional intervention. She describes consensual sexual initiation at 10 years, subsequent sexual violence by a range of perpetrators and multiple care placements. Throughout her adolescence Stacey directed manifestations of distress towards her body through self-harm and attempted suicide. At 15, she was befriended by two men who coerced her into selling sex on the streets:

It was scary at first, I didn't know what to do for the first week. I was scared not knowing what would happen to me, but after a couple of weeks I'd just got used to it. I know it were only a couple of weeks but I'd just got used to it. (Stacey, 25)

Stacey constructs a narrative in which the events of experiential significance are those that involve her body being contracted to others for their release and pleasure, or subject to violence, making this a familiar process to her. This creates a psychological landscape that normalizes physical and sexual use of her body through the appropriation by others – the development of a habit body. Thus her habit body is based on psychosocial processes of embodiment that reflect a lack of ownership and self-determination. Stacey described selling sex 'as what she knows best', and in doing so demonstrated how this was a meaningful expression of her (dis)embodied identity (Parkins, 2000).

Experiential templates of risk

In women's accounts, a strong sense of ownership of the body during commercial sex encounters appears to depend on experiential knowledge that determines how the body becomes understood as under or out of

women's control (Budgeon, 2003). Events that violate the women's boundaries of the body – rape and other forms of physical and sexual assault – remove women's perception of corporeal ownership. The temporality or permanence of this appears to be mitigated by women's already established habit bodies, their experiential templates of the body. For instance, Dee described being attacked by a customer whilst working indoors, where she sustained injuries that left her hospitalized for several months. She had deep scarring over most of her body. She returned to selling sex, but it was clear from her narrative that her sense of control over her body had changed:

One thing I have learnt through all of that time, is as much as you think you are, you are never in control. Never, you're never in control. Alright, say a man comes in and he's lovely, you know, you're giving him a great massage, condom's on, everything's fantastic, you're lying down on the bed, you could be missionary, you could be lying down frontward, anything. He could have, cos you always leave the room and leave him in there, he could have put a knife under that pillow, he could put that knife off, shove it to your throat, rip the condom off and tell you he's got AIDS. What are you gonna do? How are you in control? I mean, you could have the biggest, best mate in there, but you know that condom could already be off and he could already be inside and yeah you might be able to give him a beating or whatever, but the damage could already be done. You know, I mean, I learnt that with my attack. (Dee, 26)

Dee's adolescent lived embodiment was shaped by abuse from her foster father that she linked to her sexualized body and the power of older, predatory men to define her as a sexual object:

I was 15, basically I've the body I've got now, but younger and more oomph . . . He wasn't touching me, but he was sexually invading my space without touching me if you know what I mean. (Dee, 26)

These experiences suggest that women with habit bodies that are inflected by a lack of sovereignty afforded to the body feel estranged from their bodies. It is clear that the formative events of women's lives led to many of them developing what Maria Epele (2001: 165) has termed 'estrangement of bodily experiences'. For the women who participated in this study, distancing strategies were already integrated into their lived embodiment at the time that they entered prostitution.

Estrangement and dissociation

Dissociation from the body – leaving it emotionally when it is impossible to leave physically – is a well-documented reaction to trauma, particularly sexual abuse with the violations of both body and self, and it is understood as a psychological defence strategy (Scott, 2001). Significantly, the necessity of dissociation, the separation of self from body and the need to distance the thinking, feeling self from the physical body, was discussed at length by the women as a coping mechanism during commercial sex exchanges. Many women linked surviving sexual abuse in childhood with switching off from the body and later repeating these actions when

involved in prostitution. This enabled women to remain calm throughout each commercial sex encounter, and as such, processes of distancing from the body became an automatic response, fully integrated into the 'habit body'.

At first it made me feel degraded but now I just switch off. Pretend I'm not there. (Christina, 21)

So I weren't really thinking about it that much actually. Not once I done it. I was just too wasted. (Hannah, 21)

It makes me feel funny, cos I can go to work, and do my work as I do, and not feel anything, you know, cos I put it to the back of my head . . . My first punter, I drank a whole bottle of vodka. It's ridiculous really, the things you do to push it out. At one stage I was taking cocaine that bad, you wouldn't believe, just to get me through the night . . . I was just doing it every day to keep my mind off what I was doing. (Jackie, 19)

While these accounts describe archetypal modes of dissociation (the separation of self from body), Becky's expression of how she developed a dissociative coping mechanism differed from 'pretending not to be there'. Yet it was also based on acting differently than the self was feeling.

Punters always used to say to me, most prostitutes just lie there but you don't. You know what I mean? If I lay there, that's when I'd think I don't want to be doing this, I'd know then myself. (Becky, 17)

Blocking out the reality of the encounter for Becky requires a performance where she disembodied herself by presenting herself as actively deriving pleasure from the sexual interaction with each buyer. Her experience demonstrates that women in prostitution use multiple ways to manage commercial sex transactions, but these are nonetheless based on the constitutive force of a dissociative performance. In this context, Becky was still acting to minimize her own embodied subjectivity, through disengaging from her body and locating her sense of self as alienated from the body. A deeper exploration of all the women's narratives revealed a prevalence of dissociative bodily practices, suggesting that their psychosocial landscape at the time of their entry into selling sex was inflected by a sense of a lack of ownership of their bodies. Examples of these practices are discussed in the following section.

Estrangement from bodily experiences: drug use and self-harm

A key manifestation of the women's disenfranchisement from their bodies was their use of illegal street drugs. The association between street prostitution and drug use cannot be clearly delineated; while there is a strong correlation noted by many researchers between the use of heroin and crack cocaine and selling sex (Cusick et al., 2003; Epele, 2001; McKeganey and Barnard, 1996; Phoenix, 1999), for some women prostitution is a means to pay for a drug habit, for others drug use is a coping mechanism to cope with prostitution. However, the cycle of entrapment once women are engaged in both is explicit ('I do this work to earn the money to buy gear

and I take the gear to block out the work I'm doing' – Jessica, 17), and here it is analysed in terms of women's accounts of (dis)embodiment.

The use of drugs such as heroin that create a physical dependency transforms the body from a site where, initially, pleasure can be provided and controlled by the self, to 'a new kind of bodily subjection' where the body becomes an 'alien' entity that 'clamours to be comforted' (Epele, 2001: 167, 170). Processes of objectification and fragmentation characterize patterns of using drugs and selling sex, where parts of the body are compartmentalized for each purpose (Epele, 2001). The body that is exchanged for drugs therefore becomes a currency that depends on women surrendering the body to sex buyers and to heroin/crack cocaine throughout their daily ontology in prostitution. In order to 'spend' this currency, women must first of all disconnect it from their sense of self and allow it to be re-appropriated (Epele, 2001). Claims of body ownership are subsumed by cycles of craving and withdrawal, and an embodied sense of self is eroded. Gemma, in producing text for an arts image comprising concentric outlines of her body, stated: 'drugs [are] eating away at my body and soul, making me less'. Hannah also described the estrangement process explicitly:

it did what I wanted it to do. Made me feel like I didn't have to deal with the shit what was going on. . . . It still does do that but it's no good. . . . I hate my body, hate everything about it. Like, it doesn't belong to me anymore, it's not special anymore, not since everybody got their fingers on it. (Hannah, 21)

Hannah's use of heroin, and later crack cocaine, began as attempts to manage destructive experiences – the removal of her baby from her care. Initially, then, drug use was a strategy to resist the powerlessness she felt, but it led to an increased powerlessness and loss of control, particularly over the body that she described as 'not special anymore, not since everybody got their fingers on it'. As Hannah's drug habits followed her entry into selling sex, the need to finance drug use was not a precipitating motivation and her relationship with her body is crucial to understanding why selling sex represented an emotional and psychological survival strategy (Phoenix, 1999). By looking at how her body became dissociated from her through the corporeal experiences of sexual abuse and drug use, it is apparent that Hannah's habit body was based upon an iterative lack of ownership. Hannah's entry into prostitution reflected her disembodiment on these terms, and suggests that the process of repositioning the body by selling sex enabled her to feel that she was acting in accordance with the accumulated experiences of her habit body and thus, to borrow from Wendy Parkins (2000), she was acting meaningfully through her body. The way in which she expressed her 'hatred' of her body highlights a certain scarcity that results from using drugs and selling sex, a scarcity of both pleasure and bodily ownership (Epele, 2001).

Another embodied practice that was strongly linked to involvement in prostitution in the narratives was self-harm. This is recognized as gendered, operating on individual, social and cultural levels, and has been usefully framed as a practice that serves to 'embody a narrative of women's experiences of violation' (Shaw, 2002: 191). Several of the women reported

self-harm, ranging from cutting to repeated (but not life-threatening) overdoses and attempted asphyxiation by hanging. For most, self-harm was indirectly compounded by the hostile objectification of their bodies through destructive behaviours such as unsafe drug use and concomitant bodily deterioration (Epele, 2001). Self-harm was therefore a strong theme of the women's relationship with their bodies. Women explicitly linked the lived experience of abuse with self-harm, and in doing so suggested that this serves to 'replicate what has been done to them by objectifying their own bodies' (Shaw, 2002: 207–8).

Inner torture is a KILLER ... Mentally ... Physically ... Emotionally ...
Sexually ... Eating away bit by bit day by day ... Self harm is no way. (Maria,
24; poetry from an arts image)

Sheila Jeffreys (2000) suggests that the function of self-harm as a coping mechanism for women experiencing abuse has become obscured by the 'self help' discourse that identifies cutting as a form of agency, and thus denies the emotional vulnerability that is created by abuse. In turn, Jeffreys' approach has been critiqued for presenting a monolithic model of power by Riley (2002: 543) who proposes instead that self-harm provides an 'avenue of resistance' that is destructive and restricted but embedded in more complex power negotiations. Riley argues that if we listen to the meanings that women attach to their experiences, it becomes clear that women use their bodies to reflect a crisis between the experiences of the psychosocial self and the physical self. In both the oral narratives and arts images of this research, women identified their self-harm as a process that enabled them to cope with a daily sense of worthlessness and violation, whilst locating the practice of self-harm within a framework of deviancy and otherness (Riley, 2002). In this context, the processes and functions of self-harm parallel the way that the women who participated in the life story interviews conceptualized their involvement in prostitution; as an embodied practice that enabled women to feel that they were exercising power in constrained circumstances, even when the practice itself constituted pain and abuse, that in turn reflected the objectification that they experienced from others (Shaw, 2002).

In terms of the development of habit bodies, self-harm is an illustrative device of how women can (re)present objectification through embodied practices, while deploying these practices to reclaim some embodied authority. The tensions of this disjunction between violation and control were also a theme of women's narratives.

Experienced as power: tensions and contradictions

The ways in which women experience their embodiment in selling sex – some as feeling powerful by using their bodies for profit, some as feeling violated and estranged from their bodies, represent 'contradictory feelings of powerlessness and empowerment' (Wesely, 2002: 1185). Two women in this study specifically identified selling sex as enhancing their confidence. Both were engaged in street prostitution and chaotic drug use and had

histories of sexual abuse, although their ages at the time of abuse, their relationship with the perpetrator and the details of their abuse varied. They linked self-worth to an ability to attract men (as sex buyers) and satisfying them with their bodies:

When I was a teenager I was conscientious of my body, hated sex, was frightened of sex, even before all that shit with my mum's boyfriend. Cos of him though I hated men, they frightened me, and I was really down on all men. But with punters, I felt 10 feet high . . . I don't know what it was, but I used to go to work with all my stuff in my bag, all stockings and suspenders and make up, go out with not a scrap on my face, and get to work and get ready and go out feeling 10 feet high, like I was some kind of sex god that all these men wanted and I could just flaunt it. (JC, 33)

JC's narrative suggests that she was actively aware of the 'possibilities of resituating myself within my existing situation' (Weiss, 1999: 59). In this frame of reference, the body was not just a source of negative experiences, but could be restored to make valuable, enterprising choices. The powerlessness that women report from abuse, neglect and personal/social disadvantage could be reconfigured so that women felt they were in control of the actions of their bodies, and that these could be further positively and productively reclaimed. Where women described exercising pride in their embodied skills of commercial sex exchange, they illustrated the psychosocial move from viewing the body as an object to something it could do (Budgeon, 2003). The women who participated in this study clearly demonstrated a resilience that resisted straightforward notions of passive compliance, and demonstrated agency, by taking courses of action that maximized the resources available to them. This discourse of empowerment is often cited within frameworks of prostitution as employment as evidence that women can use constructions of sexualization and femininity for financial gain (Sanders, 2006).

However, there is a need to critically interrogate the Western contemporary climate of sexualization as a facilitator of this repositioning of the body. The mainstreaming of the sex industry as a form of entertainment and exercise (lap and pole dancing) requires that women's experiences of prostitution are contextualized in a landscape of sexualized socio-cultural mores, specifically the 'practices which train the female body in docility and obedience to cultural norms while being *experienced* in terms of power and control' (Bordo, 1993: 27, emphasis in original). Iconic sexual images of women in advertising and popular culture have also shifted in emphasis, increasingly depicting women as actively embracing and celebrating sex object status (Gill, 2008). Embedded in this socio-cultural context, selling sex represents an opportunity to reposition the body image as useful and valued, without challenging the ways in which the women define themselves by their sexualized bodies and are reduced to their bodies.

Parallel to this is the notion that where women experience power from using their bodies as currency in commercial sex, men as buyers are therefore the exploited party. This was referred to by some women in this

research and by men who pay for sex in a recent UK study (Coy et al., 2007). The focus of this paper provides a mechanism to challenge this notion by exploring women's sense of (dis)embodiment, and by problematizing the discourse of empowerment at a psychosocial and structural level. Where women's relationship with, and sense of ownership of, their body is disrupted by selling sex, there are significant barriers for gender equality and ending violence against women agendas.

Conclusion

Exploring women's ownership of their body is an essential element of the landscape of prostitution since the ontology of selling sex requires allowing strangers access to the 'power of command' over the body (O'Connell Davidson, 1998). In the women's narratives, the body was rarely the subject of explicit reference, yet bodily practices were referred to frequently. Drawing on feminist applications of the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962), a sense of agency in relation to the body was constituted by embodied experiences that formed a 'habit body' (Parkins, 2000; Weiss, 1999). Women therefore experienced their body as gendered and socially situated and learn about its possibilities as a body that 'becomes'. The narratives and visual (re)presentation of women's experiences also suggested that early abuse and dissociative schema of the habit body were fundamental to the normalization of the use of bodies in prostitution. Selling sex, and embracing a feeling of controlling the body by deciding on its commercial and profitable use, was a strategy of the habit body where women were constructed as sex objects, but was, as their accounts demonstrated, a deleterious path in terms of retaining a sense of ownership of the body.

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