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A Social-Cognitive Analysis of How Young Men Become Involved in Male Escorting

Michael D. Smith,

Department of Psychology, Susquehanna University

Christian Grov,

Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center of CUNY; and The Center for HIV-AIDS Educational Studies and Training

David W. Seal, and

Department of Global Community Health and Behavioral Sciences, Tulane University

Peter McCall

Department of Psychology, Susquehanna University

Abstract

This study employed a social-cognitive theoretical perspective to assess the interactions of behavioral, cognitive, and situational factors to understand better how young male sex workers (MSWs) entered the sex trade industry. As part of a larger project examining male escorts working for a single agency, MSWs ($n = 38$) were interviewed about their work and personal lives. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically. As predicted by a social-cognitive perspective, results supported reciprocal influences of behavior and environment, environment and cognition, and behavior and cognition. MSWs developed more self-efficacy around sex work behaviors and more positive outcome expectations with experience; moral conflict and lack of attraction to clients limited MSWs' self-efficacy. Key variables for sex work appeared to be cognitive in nature—mostly represented by a decreased commitment to normative social-sexual values, the specific nature of which may have varied by sexual orientation. Findings support the contention that social-cognitive theory can effectively model entry of young men into sex work. Social-cognitive theory provides a broad umbrella underneath which various explanations for male sex work can be gathered.

Few studies have ever discussed how young men become involved in prostitution and escorting. Yet, it seems that increasing numbers of young men may be choosing to enter the field as a way to earn money either on an incidental or regular basis. Even so, research has been sparse in explaining why men might choose sex work as a viable income-generating option. We chose to focus on the literature regarding male sex work exclusively, as there seem to be real differences between the experiences of men and women involved in the trade, especially around issues of gender and power. Given that we examined entry into sex work, we believed that these differences warranted a focus on the men's literature.

A Long History of Deviance Models

As Bimbi (2007) noted in his review, the studies that have examined entry into male prostitution have been based in *deviance models*. These views have dominated discourse about how individuals become male sex workers (MSWs) since the 1940s, with the chief debate in this literature representing competition between which types of dysfunction might lead to prostitution. As a group, deviance models represent theories that explained MSWs as coming into the business due to intrinsic or environmental pathologies. Older deviance theories explained entry into sex work by viewing men as psychologically damaged. Consistent with views of homosexuality from the mid-20th century, MSWs often were seen as coming from troubled homes characterized by divorce and insufficient parenting (Deisher, Eisner, & Sulzbacher, 1969). Mental health problems (Cates, 1989), delinquency and criminality (Reiss, 1961), and homosexuality (for a well-reasoned description of this hypothesis, see Scott, 2003) were seen as intrinsic character deficits that more or less led to prostitution as one natural outcome. More sociologically oriented deviance theories emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as social scientists gained more appreciation for the role that experience and environment played in behavior. Researchers began to discuss economic disadvantage (Allen 1980; Scott, 2003) and social exploitation (Caukins & Coombs, 1976) as proximal causes for entry into male prostitution.

A Transition

Such questions receded in the face of the HIV epidemic starting in the 1980s. Rather, research with MSWs became focused on risk behavior and the degree to which drug use and unprotected sex might lead to the spread of HIV and other infections (e.g., Morse, Simon, Osofsky, Balson, & Gaumer, 1991; Newman, Rhodes, & Weiss, 2004). Further, much of this work focused on men working in the street (known as “hustlers”), rather than “escorts” who work indoors through agencies or independent advertisements. Only in the last decade have researchers refocused their attention to men working indoors (e.g., agency-based escorts). In contrast to studies with street-based MSWs, research with indoor MSWs has consistently shown relatively low rates of HIV risk behavior between them and their clients (Bimbi & Parsons, 2005; Minichiello et al., 2000; Smith & Seal, 2007).

Research in recent years has also begun focusing on the entry of men into the male sexual services business from a rational decision-making perspective (Calhoun & Weaver, 1996; Uy, Parsons, Bimbi, Koken, & Halkitis, 2004), as well as exploring more normative, social, and emotional components of this line of work (Smith, Grov, & Seal, 2008). Researchers in the late 1980s (e.g., Matthews, 1987; see also Cates, 1989) examined decision-making influences and processes among MSWs, and started to explore the idea that prostitution represented an opportunity, and not necessarily a problem, from the perspective of some young men. More recently, the Internet and the role of communication technology trends in altering the landscape of male sex work have been examined (Parsons, Koken, & Bimbi, 2004). With the emergence of these trends in the literature, a model for explaining men’s entry into prostitution has started to emerge that does not solely rely on pathology- or deficit-based explanations.

Social-Cognitive Theory

Bandura (1978) proposed a model for human behavior in which actions, cognitions, and situations all mutually influence one another in a process termed *reciprocal determinism*. He posited that all three elements form a single system in which each factor plays a simultaneous mediating role for the other two. Thus, behavior can be understood as mediating between cognition (memory, decision-making, etc.) and the environment—particularly the social environment with all of its expectations, social norms, and scripts. Behavior would, therefore, be caused by the interaction of one's cognition and situation: Perceptions lead to expectations within a given set of circumstances, which then suggest potential adaptive behaviors.

Depending on one's learning history with these behaviors, self-efficacy expectations would then select a specific behavior to enact in the situation (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy beliefs are formed through operant conditioning; when adaptive behaviors are successful (rewarded) or fail (punished) people remember these outcomes and the level of skill at which they performed the behavior (Bandura, 1997). Perceptions of one's skill level and the likely outcomes from that set of actions in a certain situation form self-efficacy expectations. Behavior viewed as skilled enough to attain a positive outcome will be selected over other behaviors lacking such expectations. In this way, the behavior experienced as most successful will be matched with the environment in which it is needed. It advances a functionalist viewpoint which posits that a primary purpose of human behavior is to adapt and survive, and that the social environment plays a particularly key role in that process.

Current Focus

A social-cognitive analysis of male sex work could incorporate the possibility of deviant characteristics and situations, but not be constrained by these pathological irregularities. Thus, such an analysis would represent a broader view of how MSWs came to work in the field and provide for a more unbiased examination of that process by organizing elements of the decision behaviorally, cognitively, and situationally, rather than via preconceived determinations of pathology. We believe the data reported in this article support utilization of a social-cognitive approach to understanding the complex set of circumstances that result in men selling sex and companionship—men working indoors and not on the street where different situational and cognitive factors would likely operate.

Method

Participants

As part of a larger study, quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews were collected at a male escort agency located within a small, mid-Atlantic city in the United States (population 50,000). Data collection occurred over a 20-week period. During this time, 40 of 44 (90%) MSWs who worked for the agency participated in the study. In this manuscript, we report on data collected from 38 MSWs who provided complete data related to the analyses of interest. Data from two participants were lost due to audiotape malfunction. The agency

manager, a former MSW himself, also completed an interview. Study protocols and materials were approved by the first author's human subjects review committee.

Materials and Procedure

Potential participants were provided with information about the research project and study methodology by the agency manager. Those men interested in being interviewed were then contacted by an investigator, who answered questions, provided more information, and scheduled an interview session when applicable. All participants gave written informed consent before being interviewed. Data collection consisted of a semi-structured interview and two quantitative surveys about sexual behavior and mental health. Interviews were collected using a semi-structured, in-depth, qualitative format. Each covered a range of topics, including education, work history, substance use, mental and physical health, relationships, and social history. In an effort to capture social and occupational aspects of MSWs' lives, participants were asked a series of questions about their entry into sex work, job satisfaction, personal feelings about escorting, interactions with other agency escorts, and perceptions of the agency. MSW participants were compensated \$60 for their time.

All MSWs and the manager were aware of the investigators' role as researchers at the agency. The investigators did not interact with agency clients. Special attention was given to protecting confidentiality. Participants were instructed to not provide names or personal identifiers about themselves, other MSWs, or clients. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Any personal identifiers were deleted from the transcripts. Audiotapes were destroyed after the lead investigator verified transcription accuracy.

Analyses

Interviews were coded using the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcripts were initially examined to identify primary coding categories pertinent to the topics of interest and to identify the range of themes within each category. Identified themes were organized into a formal codebook, and all transcripts were content coded. The research team discussed new themes that emerged during coding, and modifications were made when deemed appropriate. Illustrative quotes relevant to the categories and specific themes were extracted from the transcripts to contextualize the coded results.

Two trained raters coded each transcript under the supervision of the first author. As a team, the primary investigator reviewed all transcripts with raters to ensure reliability, and any discrepancies were resolved at that point—discrepancies were discussed until consensus about the appropriate code was obtained (in essence, yielding a 1.1% concordance rate). Most of the discrepancies involved the omission or confusion of a specific code by one of the raters, rather than disagreement about a major category. Decision-making processes related to coding variables were documented to assure that interpretations were supported by the data (Hall & Stevens, 1991; Sandelowski, 1986). Nevertheless, our coding procedure precluded any assessment of interrater reliability.

Results

We first present information about participant demographics and characteristics before proceeding to the main body of this section. Here, we organize presentation of the data using the three main interactions of interest from a social-cognitive perspective: environment with behavior, environment with cognition, and behavior with cognition. Mapping this framework onto what the escorts told us highlights where social-cognitive analyses could be used to better understand how young men enter sex work.

Participant Demographics

As can be seen in Table 1, the majority of the participants included in this set of analyses with 38 MSWs were White men in their early 20s (age: $M = 22.3$ years). About one-half of the men (47.4%) completed at least some college, with 13.2% holding a college or graduate degree. Two-thirds of MSWs worked full or part time at non-escorting jobs in addition to the hours they saw clients for the agency. One-third did not have another job, although some of these men were currently in college. One-half of the escorts interviewed for the study reported a history of legal involvement, with two-thirds of these men reporting running into trouble with the law as adults and one-third as minors. Heterosexual MSWs indicated that they had been arrested more (67%) than bisexual (44%) or gay (36%) escorts. Two of the men had spent time in jail as adults, one of whom had been convicted of a violent offense (assault). The other men committed non-violent offenses such as possession of illegal substances, non-payment of traffic tickets, or minor theft.

The agency charged \$160 per hour, and escorts kept \$110 of this amount. This hourly rate amount did not include often substantial tips and gifts (e.g., extra cash, clothing, and even computers, trips, or cars). The agency did not take a portion of gifts or tips so as to encourage better customer service from its escorts. Eighty percent of the sample self-identified as either gay or bisexual, with seven men indicating that they were heterosexual. Table 2 summarizes the qualitative findings by interactions among the three domains of the social-cognitive model. We begin with an analysis of environment and behavior, and then progress to each part of the model in turn.

Environment and Behavior: Interactions between Situation and Action

Possibilities and opportunities—One cannot enter sex work until one knows about (a) the possibility of doing so and (b) the means of entry. Thus, each escort working for the agency had to first become aware that men actually engaged in this type of work. Then they had to learn about how and where sex work could be undertaken. MSWs did so when their environment presented them with opportunities. Three-fourths of men in our sample spoke to this topic. The majority (55.1%) learned of the agency through friends who either worked for it themselves (37.9%) or knew of someone who did (17.2%). One participant expressed a common perception of the role that friends played in cluing them into the possibilities presented by sex work:

I worked at [a chain restaurant] for a year and my friend [female name] worked there with me. She knew [the agency manager]. . . . I had just quit that job and I was

looking for a place to live and [the friend I used to work with] was like, “Look, I know a place you can go, there might be some money and blah, blah, blah. But you can’t get addicted to the money.” She’s said it’s going to be hard, but she’s like do what you’re doing to get yourself out of the shit you’re in and then stop. And that’s what my original plans were really. I called [the manager] and began working. (P07: 22 years old, Caucasian, bisexual)

In learning about sex work from friends, potential escorts obtained information they viewed as a trustworthy source. The flow of information was multidirectional—an MSW’s behavior also influenced what the environment provided. MSWs often encouraged friends to clarify what was said about sex work by selectively employing questions, humor, and the appearance of interest. Similar to any conversation where information was exchanged, they could take advantage of the normal social interactions with their friends to augment knowledge and further discuss key topics. Through an active behavioral role in learning about sex work, MSWs exerted a powerful influence on friends’ willingness to provide specific insights and details.

MSWs in this group initially became aware of escorting through a chance encounter with the agency’s Web site or advertising (20.7%) or by interacting with agency staff in an online chat room (6.9%). In both situations, the future escort’s own behavior was vital to developing information about opportunities for sex work. The MSW needed to continue the interaction in order to learn about sex work. The interviews showed that escorts took initiative to continue searching the Web site or talking with someone from the agency online.

The remaining 13.2% of escorts speaking to this question (representing five men) chanced across the agency either through talking to a stranger or by coming across one of the agency’s business cards—both occurred while at a gay club or bar. At times, men working for the agency would go out together to local gay establishments to enjoy themselves. A secondary purpose for doing so, especially when with the manager, was to advertise for new clients and escorts. Thus, an escort or manager might tell someone he just met about the agency or some other aspect of sex work. They also handed out cards or left them on a table or at the bar. Some men were repelled by this conversation and discontinued their interaction with the “stranger” or put down the card. Other men, a minority, expressed interest and continued the interaction. Should this be the case, the manager would often invite him out to eat after closing time or back to the agency house for an after-hours party. He might also set up a phone call or visit with the prospective MSW if the man could not do anything on the same day they met.

Social facilitation—Once a prospective escort had learned of the opportunity to work for the agency, most men needed to utilize relationships with other escorts to actually begin seeing clients:

I was meeting up with my friend and we were in a bar and I was telling him about my financial problems because it was before I had found the job that I am currently working. I was like, “I need money really bad,” and he’s like, “Well I have some ideas. You might have some moral quarrels about it.” And I said, “You know me I don’t have any morals, just principles.” So I found out that [this friend] had been

escorting and I found out that my ex [boyfriend] had been doing it as well! I think those two factors made me feel a little bit more comfortable about doing it. (P35: 25 years old, Caucasian, gay)

The majority of MSWs (55%) indicated that conversation and camaraderie with people at the agency supported their transition from interested observer to employee.

The agency used three different means of social facilitation—methods that the manager and other escorts intentionally deployed in order to persuade qualified men to work for the agency and to help make the beginning of that experience as productive and easy as possible. Nineteen MSWs (50.0%) took advantage of more than one of these methods at a time. Personal relationships with the manager represented the most frequently reported source of social facilitation into sex work. Eighteen (47.4%) of the MSWs indicated that talking with their future employer provided key support and information they needed to make a decision to begin sex work. The manager's warm and engaging personality, concern for his staff, willingness to be flexible, consider escort needs when scheduling appointments, and ability to help new escorts learn the job all were cited by participants as meaningful aspects of how the manager facilitated entry into sex work for men new to the agency. Sixteen (42.1%) escorts used their relationships with working MSWs to ease their transition into the agency. Other escorts (28.9%) said they appreciated the sense of bonhomie and fun among the staff to sway their decision to work for the agency, whereas another group (23.7%) said that they very much "liked" the social environment among the escorts who worked there.

Incentives—Salient and rewarding aspects of the environment were a significant influence on behavior. Escorts actively engaged in behavior to acquire these perceived benefits. MSWs typically saw two to four clients per week for the agency, for which a young man could make a total of \$200 to \$400 before tips (which usually added another 25% to his wages). For most men in the study, this represented a significant increase in monthly income: "I thought, wow, I didn't know it was this lucrative! I was just blown away" (P20: 18 years old, Caucasian, gay). Further, it represented much more money per hour than they could otherwise earn. The large majority of MSWs (89.5%) indicated that income was the primary reason they started working for the agency—it was why they considered sex work to be a viable possibility. As one young man put it:

The idea of escorting kind of weirded me out, but I thought to myself, "Yeah, I think I'm going to be able to handle it." It's easy money. I made yesterday and today, in like a couple of hours, more than like working for a construction company for a couple of days. So I'm like, "Holy crap! It's easy money." I pretty much push myself to do it because it's such easy money. (P13: 21 years old, Asian, heterosexual)

Potential escorts saw sex work as a lucrative opportunity that could override their initial concerns around morality, safety, sexuality, and personal integrity about participating in prostitution, at least on a trial basis:

I had just quit my job and I needed some money. I figured it's an easy way to make money so I just did it a few times. I made probably \$400 on a weekend. But before that I thought about doing it but didn't really want to do it. Like I could never bring

myself to work it before then. I didn't want to do it but I just did it anyway so I could get money. (P11: 18 years old, Caucasian, gay)

The more money they earned, the more likely escorts were to increase work hours and express satisfaction with their decision to enter the occupation—a positive feedback loop that also ran in the opposite direction.

Other material incentives could also make beginning to escort worthwhile. Ten escorts (26.3%) said that they considered possible client gifts of clothing, electronics, and other items when making their initial decision to work. They thought of going on all-expenses-paid trips with their customers and being taken out to shows and fine restaurants. They heard stories from other escorts about receiving laptop computers and cars from clients, or of having a college tuition bill paid in full. Potential escorts saw the money and gifts from sex work as means to achieve important financial goals. They were powerful incentives for escorts at the agency, especially for those that did not have the means of generating that level of income and material attainment through other forms of labor.

Environment and Cognition: Interactions between Situation and Expectation

Local versus global norms—Potential escorts brought with them prevailing societal norms against prostitution and sex work. Men often viewed sex work with at least some of the stigma placed on it by U.S. cultures. They often reported that these anti-sex work values were early parts of the conversation with the manager and escorts at the agency. As one man said, “The first appointment I did I was grossed out. I never really pictured myself doing this” (P04: 21 years old, Caucasian, gay). Two pathways for negotiating a way through negative perceptions of sex work appeared to be normative. About two-thirds (65.8%) of the MSWs reported that they did not fully agree with societal norms when they first started sex work. Men in this group were more likely to express a positive attitude toward sex work. They also were more sexually open in their behavior and conversation. Their pre-employment mindset was more congruent with that of most other men in the agency. MSWs with more positive initial views of sex work held several different moral positions about its ethical nature:

- Escorting does more good than harm and is, therefore, acceptable.
- Sex work involves two consenting adults providing for each other's needs.
- Values are more permissive in gay culture and differ from those in the “straight world.” Prostitution allows clients to meet needs that would otherwise be unfulfilled.
- The ends (high income in a short time-period) justify the means.

Their values did not need to be changed or softened, as much as validated by men in the agency. With this validation came increased likelihood to engage in sex work for a longer period of time.

In contrast, about one-third of escorts (34.2%) approached sex work with more traditional values that interpreted this activity as immoral and undesirable. Among these men, socially consistent “global” norms seemed to become modified over time through exposure to the

agency's own particular subculture—that is, the “local” norms established by the men affiliated with the escort agency, whether they be a client, escort, manager, or approving friend. As a result, escorts in this group often discussed an evolution that permitted them to continue engaging in a behavior that they had previously viewed as immoral, despite some misgivings.

Themes related to the evolution of attitudes toward sex work included self-justifications (“I do more good than bad as an escort”), time-limited participation (“I’ll only do this long enough to pay for college”), restricted sexual repertoire (“I won’t really have ‘sex’ with clients, but they can blow me [give me oral sex] or jack me off [masturbate me]”), and pursuit of incentives (“It’s wrong, but I really need the money right now”).

Observational learning—Escorts possessed ample opportunity to discover how to navigate the process of entering sex work once they were connected with the agency in some way. Those men who already knew an escort or otherwise had friends familiar to the agency possessed a natural platform for observational learning.

They had an indirect opportunity to observe the behavior and attitudes needed in an escort from live models, although not ones in the immediate situation itself and not while actively participating in sex work on their own. Despite these limitations, observing how friends acted and what they thought allowed men considering sex work to partially enter that world, learn more about what it might be like, and develop their cognitive expectations accordingly. Among people who did not know an escort or otherwise had friends familiar to the agency, most held stereotypic beliefs about sex work, often acquired through various forms of media, including pornographic films, Internet videos, and online blogs.

Once a person had decided to start sex work, the agency ensured that he had many conversations with the manager, as well as with other escorts, to provide education on how to behave and interact with clients. For example, new escorts would often be paired with more experienced escorts for calls when a client requested more than one MSW at a time. This allowed *in-vivo* observational learning by seeing how various attitudes and beliefs played out in real situations with actual clients. Collectively, through observational learning and conversation, new escorts were able to develop personal models for sex work in terms of language, actions, and normative behaviors and attitudes.

Behavior and Cognition: Interactions between Action and Expectation

Self-efficacy beliefs—Nearly all escorts who stayed on the job after seeing more than a few clients grew in their self-confidence—what social-cognitive theorists have termed *self-efficacy*. Demonstration of self-efficacy in this dataset took the form of MSWs stating increased confidence in their ability to perform their job functions as they gained experience (actual or vicarious) with clients. Work role obligations for escorts at the agency took two forms: physical and emotional labor. Self-efficacy developed in both areas.

Physical labor in sex work involved having sex and engaging in other erotic activities (e.g., bondage or domination) with clients. Fifteen escorts (39.5%) believed that they already brought sexual skills needed to be successful in this aspect of their work, whereas 10

(26.3%) thought they had enough of a “sex drive” to carry them through appointments with clients. Escorts who rated themselves as having good sexual skills also tended to believe that they possessed strong interpersonal skills in relating to clients socially and tended to enjoy sex more in general. These men also possessed higher self-efficacy beliefs when starting on the job, and most expected that sexual labor would result in positive outcomes with respect to their goals.

Analysis further suggested that, for the gay- and bisexually identified escorts, increased self-efficacy with social behavior with clients increased one’s self-efficacy and ability to have sex with these individuals. Gay and bisexual escorts tended to display increased self-efficacy and comfort with sexual behavior as they already knew what to do and how to do it based on previous life experience. What many gay and bisexual MSWs did not know how to do, however, was integrate social behavior and sexual behavior with paying customers—men who escorts might not normally have entertained as sexual partners. Thus, gay- and bisexually identified MSWs became more sexually confident as they gained self-efficacy with being able to converse with clients, understand client needs, and manage the social interactions before and after sex. Heterosexually identified escorts also had to learn how to negotiate these situations, but they also needed to learn how to have sex with other men. Nonetheless, as heterosexually identified MSWs gained in their ability to navigate the social situation of the client call, they too grew in their sexual self-efficacy with clients. Clients were said to be eager to “teach” heterosexually identified escorts how to have sex with men—a resource that heterosexual escorts could employ in the context of the interpersonal situation.

At least one-half of the MSWs said that the development of greater expectations for social and sexual self-efficacy was necessary to continue with the job. Without such expectations, one might not believe himself capable of having sex with clients. This result could weaken the implied connection between one’s labor and the reward (i.e., income and other incentives) from that effort, reducing motivation to engage in the work. Successful escorts did develop increased sexual self-efficacy with time:

I guess I’ve built some confidence. It’s kind of like getting up on stage for the first time. You’re nervous and stuff but after a while you get used to it and your [sic] confident and start doing speeches and all that stuff you know? I guess that would be the best way to explain it. (P13: 21 years old, Asian, heterosexual)

Over time, many participants said they improved their sexual behavior or found ways to increase their motivation to have sex with clients.

Comfort level—Twenty-five (65.3%) escorts believed that their morals conformed fairly well to what was needed as a sex worker when they first started at the agency. The more escorts expressed concern about a client’s emotional well-being, the more likely they were to rate their morality as permitting sex work. This facilitated their entry into sex work. However, when the question was changed to ask about their initial comfort level with escorting, the majority of escorts (60.5%) indicated that they felt quite uncomfortable with the sexual and emotional aspects of sex work, a few (about 5%) expressed ambivalence, and

about one-third indicated a positive reaction (34.5%). Neither sexual orientation nor age differentiated escorts' comfort level when they first started to work.

Many escorts reported that sex work seriously conflicted with personal values they originally thought would be more accommodating. Once faced with the actuality of seeing the first few clients, many escorts found their thoughts and feelings were much more negative than initially predicted. They said they felt like they were doing something "dirty" or "wrong." One escort reflected: "I couldn't even get hard. It just felt dirty. I couldn't even get off because I couldn't get into it. Like when I first started, like there's like a wreck in here [pointing to his heart]. When you first start you feel like shit" (P02: 21 years old, Caucasian, bisexual). Reporting such discomfort may have helped escorts to manage the stigma and stress associated with sex work, decreasing the disconnection they may have initially felt between their behaviors and values. Nonetheless, most escorts learned to deal with these issues, although some men chose to stop working for the agency or to see fewer clients than they had originally anticipated in response to their affective reactions.

New escorts also had difficulty having sex with clients due to a lack of attraction and arousal. Most clients were not individuals to whom escorts would typically be physically attracted in their personal lives. Age and physical characteristics (e.g., weight or body type) mattered more for gay- and bisexually identified escorts, whereas gender was the key barrier for heterosexually identified MSWs. Many MSWs underestimated the impact of lower attraction and arousal when they had initially considered escorting, but found it to be a significant problem once seeing clients. The consequences of having sex with undesirable sexual partners produced cognitive reactions ranging from acceptance ("I gotta do what I gotta do") to disgust ("I can't have sex with a guy that fat and smelly"). These reactions then fed back into the escort's willingness to engage in further sexual activity at work or with specific types of clients. Men more willing to have sex with a wider variety of clients considered themselves to be more caring about a client's emotional well-being, and were more likely to report having a sex work-consistent morality.

With experience, most escorts' perceptions gradually changed in ways that made work easier, regardless of their initial reactions. MSWs developed a number of coping strategies to manage such work-related stresses, such as having sex with undesirable partners. Escorts would often dissociate when having sex with a client. As one escort noted, "I guess now I just put it at the back of my mind; I just don't think about it anymore" (P05: 23 years old, Caucasian, gay). In doing so, an escort could separate himself from an experience he found to be unpleasant. Further, MSWs would often employ cognitive coping strategies, such as self-talk. Escorts frequently reasoned with themselves that their high pay made less desirable aspects of the job more bearable. Last, escorts relied heavily on social support from other MSWs and the agency manager when managing work-related discomfort. MSWs frequently talked with each other about clients and their experiences with them. They shared stories, exchanged ideas for managing stresses and dislikes, and learned how to provide better customer service while engaging in less sexual behavior. The manager also attempted to match escorts with clients who shared the escort's sexual boundaries. For example, many escorts did not like to kiss clients or engage in anal sex for pay. When possible, the manager helped his employees by finding them clients who would be satisfied within such limits.

Through such coping methods, escorts gained a sense of mastery that, as noted earlier, allowed them to structure their work in a way that was more congruent with their own preferences and morals. Behavior and self-confidence interacted to allow men to create a more acceptable work situation and an increased comfort level with sex work. MSWs reported that the most comfortable work environments were those in which they exercised the most control over what occurred. They disliked clients who they perceived to be “bossy” or “inconsiderate,” although they also disliked clients who “do not know what they want.” This created a middle range where escorts knew which behaviors would lead to client satisfaction, yet allowed the MSW to adapt these behaviors to suit his own preferences.

Discussion

We have argued that our data are consistent with a social-cognitive perspective of male sex work. Instead of only emphasizing character or environment deficiencies as the proximal routes into escorting, our data suggest that, at least for most people, more normative forces may be operating. Social-cognitive theory explains functioning as the simultaneous interaction among external (environmental), internal (cognitive), and behavioral factors such that each area mediates both of the others. Thus, from one viewpoint, we can explain the decision to enter escorting (cognitive domain) as being “caused” by the interaction of opportunities in the environment with one’s own behavior over time. Behavior operates on the environment by influencing the experience of incentives, disincentives, and even of various situations themselves. The environment provides context and information for behavior in that it is the stage on which behavior takes place. Together, these two processes influence decision making by providing the raw material for perception, offering choices among various behaviors and contingencies.

Sex work becomes an option when expectations generated by previous behavior–environment interactions match current circumstances, as long as these also mesh with other cognitive structures such as self-concept, morality, and self-efficacy. Our data suggest that the synchronization of these factors is central for a decision to enter sex work. If there is too little perceived incentive on the environmental side, then the individual will not expect sex work behavior to be worth potential downsides, such as the risk of exposure or violation of one’s previous self-image. It would negatively impact one’s outcome expectancy—perceived payoff from a decision given a specific behavior. Similarly, self-efficacy is negatively impacted when confidence decreases in being able to successfully perform behavior. As we have seen, this occurs as a result of moral conflict or a lack of attraction to potential clients. An MSW might also experience decreased self-efficacy should he be unsuccessful in negotiating the social–sexual relationship with his clients. Repeated failure at these tasks would create negative expectations about his ability to perform on the job. A young man would believe himself to be less capable of performing sex work under those conditions and, therefore, would be likely to choose to terminate this behavior, despite opportunities for gain.

Our data support the interpretation of bi-directional linkages among cognition, behavior, and situation as required by a social-cognitive perspective. Further, the escort interviews provided evidence for the operation of self-efficacy and outcome expectations—key

elements of the cognitive portion of this model. The data also suggested that moral, motivational, and relational factors impacted MSWs' decisions to begin sex work, as well as to stay employed in that occupation over time. These factors represented interactions of the three core elements in the social-cognitive model, perhaps located in the reciprocal functioning of these areas, rather than within a single discrete domain.

For a young man to consider sex work, he must first recognize the opportunity to do so. Yet, this was not a sufficient condition for entry into sex work. Many individuals possess such information without ever seriously considering prostitution let alone initiating sex work. It is further unlikely that men in dire financial circumstances first consider sex work as a viable option to earn extra income. Although the data strongly point to income as a primary motivator for sex work, the downsides of the job were substantial. For most men, the downsides to sex work overrode the need for money. Thus, although the environmental contingencies (i.e., money for sex and companionship) must be present, they do not appear to be a necessary factor.

This leaves the cognitive domain as the source of potentially key variables for initiating male escort work. We propose that decreased commitment to psychosexual norms represented one important cognition relative to such a decision. Given knowledge of the opportunity to enter sex work and familiarity with sexual behavior needed for the job, we suggest that one must be able to overcome social stigma, concerns regarding self-concept, and lack of attraction to paying partners in order to begin working as an MSW. However, many escorts indicated the idea of selling sex was personally offensive and inconsistent with their morality and identity, and said that they would never want other people to know about their work. Should one hold these beliefs too strongly, we believe that even a lucrative job like escorting could not supersede such constraints. In contrast, holding such beliefs less strongly could allow the extrinsic pull of a good income to override concerns regarding morality and identity. Decreased commitment to traditional norms was one way that this process occurred among many of the escorts with whom we spoke.

Our data also suggested that sexual orientation may have mediated the effect of decreased commitment to traditional norms. Most escorts working for the agency identified themselves as gay or bisexual. Research suggests that sex work may be more accepted and less stigmatized in the gay community (Koken, Bimbi, Parsons, & Halkitis, 2004), thus lowering the psychological and social costs of escorting relative to potential benefits. Furthermore, many gay and bisexual men possess decreased commitment to prevailing hetero-normative sexual and gender norms (Lippa, 2002; Lippa & Tan, 2001; Skidmore, Linsenmeier, & Bailey, 2006), perhaps also making it somewhat easier to bend the rules around the acceptability of sex work. Even so, some MSWs may have managed the stigma associated with sex work by associating the trade with masculine norms, such as entrepreneurship and work (Browne & Minichiello, 1996).

The more one conformed to an overt heterosexual identity, the more previous legal involvement appeared in their histories. Commitment to community standards, especially among the heterosexual escorts, may have already been weakened by other life experiences, again making it relatively easier for them to begin work as escorts. Although previous

research has emphasized the role of delinquency and criminality in male sex work (see Scott, 2003), we believe these models exclude other mediating factors (e.g., sexual orientation) that also may decrease commitment to community standards in the area of sex and law. For example, in our sample, one-half of the MSWs did not have prior legal involvement.

Although our conclusions are grounded within our own data, they may not generalize beyond the group of men we interviewed, given our small sample size and the lack of ethnic diversity among study participants. Our findings may not generalize to men working in larger urban centers as the agency from which our sample was recruited resided within a smaller city and most men came from the immediate area. Further, our study was limited by the inclusion of only one escort agency, although being able to interview nearly every MSW at the agency strengthened confidence in our findings as they pertain to this agency. We do not know the degree to which practices and relationships specific to this social setting may be unique versus those influences found more generally among groups of MSWs working together. Some self-selection bias may have occurred given that escorts who developed self-efficacy (and, therefore, remained on the job) were more likely to have been interviewed than men who did not develop the skills and attitudes needed to remain with the agency. Given these issues, caution should be used when taking our results out of their original context and placing them into a larger cultural context. Future research is needed to replicate our findings and to test the conclusions that we have reached based on these data.

Despite such limitations, our examination of entry into male sex work using the perspective of social-cognitive theory offers an alternative to past approaches that have sought to label either individuals or societies instead of explaining how they might interact on the level of an individual decision maker. Our position does not exclude a deviance model as it does seem that anti-social histories may play a role for some predominantly heterosexual MSWs. Likewise, we do not disagree that some sex workers are exploited by a male-dominated sexual culture that objectifies and then commercializes intimate behavior, nor do we deny the horrific reality of sexual trafficking and slavery.

Instead, our data suggest that such pathways into sex work represent several possibilities out of a broad universe of available gateways. Although many of the men interviewed for this study may be thought of as having a relatively “comfortable” pathway into sex work, it must be acknowledged that not all sex workers, and certainly not many female sex workers, would share this avenue for entry into the profession. We argue that the social-cognitive perspective permits a diverse enough range of options to permit these more pathological explanations to coexist alongside descriptions emphasizing normative thought processes, behaviors, and environments—in other words, voluntary and rational entry into sex work. Men working for the agency became more satisfied and empowered in their sex work over time, and most chose to enter the job because their values and self-perceptions were consistent with an opportunity to earn what appeared to them as a significant amount of money. Future research should better elucidate these various pathways instead of arguing which “one” of them is correct. It is likely that a variety of such entry points exist, and it would be illustrative to document and examine them all. Furthermore, this study did not attempt to examine more characterological elements of the decision-making process. Such variables as personality

traits (e.g., openness) might be especially relevant in determining which environments and which behaviors would be favored in different circumstances. We believe that by employing a common social-cognitive framework for this research effort, social scientists will be able to explain the diversity of male sex work using a consistent language and analytic scheme. Such a framework would permit examination of sex work from a more neutral, stigma-free perspective.

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Table 1

Demographic Information on the Sample (N = 38)

Characteristic	Number (%)
Age ($M = 22.30$, $SD = 3.41$ years)	
18–21	16 (42.1)
22–25	18 (47.4)
26–35	4 (10.5)
Education level	
Some high school	6 (15.8)
High school diploma	14 (36.8)
Current college student	5 (13.2)
Some college	4 (10.5)
Two-year degree or certificate	4 (10.5)
College degree (4 years)	3 (7.9)
Graduate degree	2 (5.3)
Ethnicity	
African American	0 (0.0)
Asian-Pacific Islander	20 (52.6)
Caucasian	29 (76.2)
Hispanic-Latino	4 (10.5)
Mixed	2 (5.3)
Other	1 (2.7)
Legal involvement	
As a juvenile	6 (15.8)
As an adult	13 (34.2)
No involvement	19 (50.0)
Non-escorting employment	
None	14 (36.8)
Part time	8 (21.1)
Full time	16 (42.1)
Sexual orientation	
Bisexual	11 (29.0)
Heterosexual	7 (18.4)
Gay	2 (5.3)

Table 2

Categories of Findings Organized According to a Social-Cognitive Perspective

Category	Description
Environment and behavior	
● Possibilities & opportunities	Learning about the existence of male sex work & how to get involved in it
● Social facilitation	Influences of relationships upon starting to work as an escort
● Incentives	Financial, social, and emotional gains or losses resulting from participation in sex work
Environment and cognition	
● Local versus global norms	Norms in the immediate social environment versus those in the larger community or society
● Observational learning	Influences upon one's expectations & beliefs from watching others engage in behavior
Behavior and cognition	
● Self-efficacy beliefs	Develop over time given experiences with escorting
● Comfort level	Degree of dissonance or congruence among behaviors, values, and expectations