Edna Salamon

The homosexual escort agency: deviance disavowal

ABSTRACT

This article examines the management of deviance disavowal techniques by a commercial organization. Ball’s abortion clinic ethnography (1972:158–86) paved the way for an analysis of the neutralization of disreputable encounters. This study, based on research conducted in London, England during 1981, attempts to explore how stigmatizing sexual liaisons are routinely managed by an escort agency. The article is based on interviews conducted with one homosexual escort agency owner and twenty-eight male escorts and discusses the neutralization of moral approbrium through the organization of names, space and structure.

In this article I intend to examine a hitherto unexplored instance of the management of deviance disavowal techniques by a commercial organization. Ball’s abortion clinic ethnography (1972:158–86) paved the way for an analysis of the neutralization of disreputable encounters. I propose to further that work by exploring how stigmatizing sexual liaisons are routinely managed by an escort agency. Patronizing a homosexual escort agency may be seen as an attempt to pursue a homosexual liaison and yet do so surreptitiously. The man is allowed some access to the sexual activity he desires without directly cruising for a partner or identifying himself publicly as homosexual. The agency’s introduction enables the man to normalize his request and make it as little problematic as possible. The context renders it legitimate. The agency itself operates in a sphere which is not only tolerant of homosexual relationships but seeks legitimation through legitimate business.

Despite the affected laissez-faire attitude of society, the Wolfenden Report and the July 1967 Bill which legalized homosexual acts in private between consenting adult males, public reaction may be only marginally more accepting of homosexual liaisons than at the time of Oscar Wilde’s incarcération. As Plummer (1975:175) has stated...
Homosexuality in this culture is a stigma label. To be called a 'homosexual' is to be degraded, denounced, devalued or treated as different. It may well mean shame, ostracism, discrimination, exclusion or physical attack. It may simply mean that one becomes an 'interesting curiosity of permissiveness'. But always, in this culture, the cost of being known as homosexual must be high.

If public knowledge results in a 'dramatization of the evil' (Tannenbaum 1938), homosexuals may well be encouraged to ensure that their liaisons remain clandestine.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study originated in a type of serendipity. While researching 'kept women' for a doctoral dissertation at the London School of Economics, I came to observe the allegedly illicit activities of 'escort agencies'. Appointments were made with owner/operators of agencies which had a business address instead of merely a telephone number. The listings of such agencies were collected in London, England, from a sample of magazine supplements, telephone directories, and the occasional recommendation of club and hotel personnel. The staff of one agency consented to be interviewed and they became the primary source of this study.

In 1981 I arranged an interview with the owner of a London-based escort agency. When I arrived at his office, the manager had a fifty-ish year-old man in his office but handed me a form to fill out. Bemused, I read the form and saw it was an application for employment. It requested standard information such as name, address, age and, as well, the applicant's vital statistics — bust/chest, waist and hip measurements. It ended with a statement, to be signed by the applicant, that the individual recognizes that he or she would be contacted simply as an 'escort' and that the agency would not be responsible for the person's behaviour on a date. Since I was wrongly identified as a prospective employee, the manager apparently felt no need to close the door of his office despite the fact that a client was negotiating for an escort to visit him privately at his Hampstead home. The particular agency fee was between £30–£40 for the introduction and it was suggested that the escort was to receive considerably more if the client liked him, if the escort had spent money travelling a long distance, lost work time and so on. However, it was also made clear that if wining and dining were on the agenda, they would compensate somewhat for any inconveniences that had to be reimbursed. At this point the discussion halted and the manager returned to the outer office where I was seated.
When the manager learnt that I was not seeking employment (the agency handles 170 male escorts and 50 female escorts) and was reminded of our appointment he was, luckily, greatly amused. My topic of 'kept women' seemed to titillate him and since I was not perceived as threatening (a thesis housed in a university library is apparently less intimidating than an article in a Sunday paper) I was invited into his office to meet his client and discuss the operation of his agency. This article is based on a number of conversations with the owner/operator of the agency and 28 male escorts, some of whom the owner selected and referred to me, maintaining that they numbered amongst his 'best bookers' or most popular escorts; others, whom I fortuitously met.

Although the agency owner found my presence unproblematic, the client whom the manager introduced by name and profession (a psychiatrist), was less than pleased when the owner informed me that his was primarily a homosexual escort agency. While the client might be tolerant of my interest in kept women and escort agencies he did not wish to be identified as a homosexual. The doctor made a speedy exit saying that he had to go to an appointment. Until the agency owner stated bluntly that the main business of the agency was to furnish homosexual escorts, the psychiatrist did not appear to mind my presence. However, it appeared that the label homosexual was more threatening than identification as a man who paid for a 'date'. Although my presence disturbed the doctor, I was able to gain access to information on homosexual escort agencies that, to my knowledge, is not presented elsewhere. There are several books and/or studies of homosexual prostitution (Raven 1963; Humphreys 1970; Rechy 1978; Reiss 1961; Craft 1966; Ginsburg 1967; Harris 1974; Pittman 1971) but the role of the escort and the activities of the escort agency have remained somewhat opaque (Shaw 1977). The homosexual escort agency may be a relatively new type of enterprise which enables men to join the ranks of the world's oldest profession. An examination of its activities may illustrate how private sexual acts can escape labelling as public scandals. Accordingly, I shall link sexuality, appearance, visibility, and 'passing' (Goffman 1963) in a model of interaction.

THE AGENCY: A TERTIARY INDUSTRY

The concept of 'impression management' (Goffman 1963) can be illustrated by the posturing of the agency itself. In the advertisement which prompted my contacting the agency there was no indication that the agency was one which catered primarily to homosexuals. When I remarked on this fact, the owner showed me several advertisements which his agency used. Depending on the periodical
or magazine in which the advertisement was placed, its content and
the name of the company itself differed. In some, the emphasis was
on 'gorgeous, sophisticated girls'; in others, it was on attractive
young men. Placed in a gay newspaper or magazine, the implicit
context discouraged the reader from believing that the male escort
was intended to be the companion of some lonely woman.
Nevertheless, the dual faces of the agency provide for 'passing'. The
homosexual community in London does not, by and large, seek
anonymity. As vehicles for perpetuating in-group identity, there exist
newspapers, clubs, bookshops and organizations which solicit the
interest of proclaimed or embryo homosexuals. Yet, the man who
desires homosexual companionship or activity may be afraid or
unwilling to enter into an establishment which has become
recognized as the distinct turf of homosexuals or as a frequented site
for homosexual acts of intercourse. In Humphrey's study (1970:82)
one homosexual comments

Sometimes when I come out of a tea-room, I look up to the sky
just to make sure that some plane isn't flying around up there
writing JOHN JONES IS A PERVERT.

Since the escort agency is not exclusively a homosexual agency, the
sexual proclivities of a man who enters it to arrange for a date are
not immediately known to others in the office or to those who see
him entering and exiting. Moreover, the agency is itself geographi-
cally segregated from any business which would suggest its link with
prostitution or homosexuality. Unlike firms in Soho which are
adjacent to blue movie cinemas, sex shops and massage parlours,
one does not have to enter the escort agency by passing through an
adult book store, or by walking past various agencies which seem
somewhat disreputable simply because of their location. Rather, the
agency is situated on the upper floor of a building which houses
various businesses on a main thoroughfare lined with commercial
business. Although the location was not deliberately chosen as a
technique of deviance disavowal, there would appear to be benefits
garnered from its situation. Thus, should a friend or acquaintance
spot one leaving or entering the building, one could easily
misrepresent the particular business he had conducted and state that
he had visited his lawyer or broker. If he is spotted leaving the
agency itself, he may still maintain that he had arranged a meeting
with a female escort. The inclusion of female escorts as employees
allows customers to pass as heterosexual. The discomfort shown by
the psychiatrist when the owner made explicit that the primary
purpose of his agency was to furnish homosexual escorts compared
with his prior complacency at being known as a man who simply
sought a 'date' suggests that clients valued the dual faces of the
agency.
The homosexual escort agency

The particular escort agency I visited ran a flat-share and flat-letting company under different names. The owner/operator was originally in business with his wife. The fact that he was married and homosexual had encouraged clients who rented flats to ask him where and how they could furnish their homes with an agreeable man or woman. In turn, he saw profit in branching out into the escort agency. The owner is now divorced but stated that his customers are ‘99.9 per cent married’ and ‘85 per cent homosexual or bisexual’. The owner suggested that for the conservative male or the socially visible, the escort agency allowed some freedom of selection without fear of rejection or social exposure. The homosexual date was seldom sought by an unmarried male. Indeed, the fact that the man was typically married suggested that his desire to pursue an overtly homosexual lifestyle was marginal. Whether he is homosexual or bisexual, marriage serves to integrate the man into ‘non-deviant’, heterosexual society. Apparently, marriage is still the most acceptable closet in which the homosexual can pass as heterosexual. In this setting, the role of agency is to allow the man access to the sexual activity he desires without demanding full membership in the homosexual sub-culture. The client is a special person. He is one who seeks to establish a homosexual relationship surreptitiously, patronizing the homosexual escort agency and operating as a ‘token member’ of the homosexual world.

Long Laws (1975:51) states

The Token is a member of an underrepresented group, who is operating on the turf of the dominant group, under license from it.

The criterion for the token member’s entrance into the homosexual community may simply be the patron’s willingness to pay the agency’s introduction fee. Paying a fee grants him a temporary membership within the homosexual sphere. His marginality may afford him the interactional freedom of a ‘stranger’ who does not feel obliged to behave in a circumscribed way. He may welcome the laxity of the group which extends him a visitor’s membership. Since he is a visitor, there is no manifest need to conform to the image of himself held by ‘significant others’. The stranger can construct an identity that is fraudulent or factual without others possessing sufficient information to challenge it. He can act as ‘himself’ or as a being totally unlike the self he generally presents to others and not be confronted by an audience which evaluates him on a basis of his past performances.

Although the agency owner was straightforward in asserting that his company catered primarily to homosexuals he was quick to add that his was a legitimate concern which was not in any way ‘pimping’ off the escorts he employed. He stressed that his was a respectable business and that his agency provided clients with
escorts, not prostitutes. In this protestation may be seen a second example of impression management: the manager/owner attempted to present his business as respectable rather than disreputable. He pointed to the clause in the employment contract which distanced him from the activities of his escorts when they were on a date and prevented him from being accountable for their behaviour. In structuring interaction as a ‘business arrangement’, the escort agency operator and his clients are able to use the format of the business deal as a technique of denying deviance. The ethos of the business environment is not overly preoccupied with moral reform or ruled by the same code of conduct that inspires the moral vigilance committee. It is in this vein that Sutton et al. (1958, chapter 5) suggest some of the moral duties that should form the basis of the good manager’s professional ideology.

There are, in truth, moral responsibilities which it is your duty to assume. You, the manager of a business, are responsible to your stockholders, your employees, your customers, and the general public. You must balance their competing claims on the fruits of the enterprise, and determine fair wages, fair prices, fair dividends and prudent reserves.

Fidler (1981:122) terms this orientation the ‘balancing interests ethos’ and suggests:

With the ethos of balancing interests the soulful corporation has arrived; if the competing interests are somehow reconciled in the short term then all prosper in the longer term.

As an entrepreneur who simply provided a service for his clients and employment for his employees — who elected themselves and were not ‘coerced’ into becoming professional escorts — the owner refuted the idea that his conduct was fundamentally disreputable. He saw himself as simply ‘giving the public what it wants’. ‘As J. Paul Getty remarked’, he said, ‘the successful businessman is one who perceives one of society’s needs and fills it’.

THE BUSINESS DEAL: MINIMIZING UNEASE

The format of the ‘business arrangement’ additionally provided an expedient way of structuring interaction between the owner and a would-be patron of an escort. If the man was uncomfortable about being a ‘john’, he could assume the role of the practical businessman selecting a product, discriminating between a man, woman, blonde, brunette, black, white and so on. In treating negotiations for an escort simply as a deal, the owner of the agency depersonalizes the act so that the request for an escort proceeds like a business
transaction. The owner’s interest in the client’s sexual taste was nonjudgmentally expressed in the query ‘man or woman?’ Moreover, by disclaiming interest in what went on during the actual date, the man did not have to blatantly specify whether he desired a massage, companionship or sexual intercourse. The manager did not wish to be placed in a position that forced him to know that he was involved in the operation of a brothel. Such knowledge would expose him to the danger of criminal prosecution. Not knowing provided a safety valve whereby he could deny culpability for the behaviour of his escorts. His participation, however, lends support for the acts of both escort and patron. In common with all successful businesses, the service his agency provides is based on the premise that there is sufficient demand for the product he supplies for him to make a profit. As such, the man who seeks a male escort is reassured that he is not a ‘freak’ or an anomalous social oddball. As a ‘client’, interchangeable with numerous other clients, the man’s perception of himself as ‘deviant’ may be neutralized. If others support the man’s request for a male escort as reasonable and acceptable and welcome his patronage, the man receives encouragement and support to fulfil his sexual desires. Similarly, within their occupational setting, the escorts receive support for their behaviour. The intimate network provides encouragement for the individual despite his discreditable pursuits. The informal guarantee that ‘We’ll stand behind you’ (e.g. phoning to ascertain whether or not a ‘date’ went smoothly) serves not only to reaffirm the person’s acceptance as a valuable member of the social group and as an enviably successful ‘professional escort’, but also to suggest that perhaps his behaviour is not really quite as blameworthy as he had originally thought. If others condone his behaviour and commit similar acts, he may come to redefine hitherto deviant behaviour as ‘normal’. For example, on a bookshelf in one escort’s (who specialized in ‘S & M’) flat was a cat-o-nine-tails. When I asked the escort about it, he shrugged, smiled and blithely stated ‘it’s for play’. Whether or not the pun was intentional, the man did not define his behaviour as singularly deviant. If ‘everybody’s doing it’, and the whole world cannot be abnormal, neither can he be deviant.

In attempting to provide a service for his clients, the agency owner acted in a manner similar to that of solicitous sales clerk in a mail-order company, trying to assess the needs or desires of a client in purchasing a commodity. His particular firm had two catalogues, one of men and one of women employees. Like the mail-order catalogue, they allowed the customer to see more or less what he was ordering in advance of its arrival. He could see it discreetly. Generally, each photograph was a nude or semi-nude of the escort with the individual’s first name printed demurely over some anatomical feature of supposed interest. The photographs of the
female employees tended to be somewhat predictable, either nudes or photographs revealing an inordinate cleavage, while the photographs of the male escorts were often imaginative. For example, some men were garbed in black leather or para-military uniforms, others were photographed standing coyly against a door leading into a bedroom, yet others were clad in rather diaphanous negligees. However, the client was not simply left to waft through the pages: the owner attempted to channel his clients towards particular escorts as he evaluated their needs and likes or dislikes. While arranging for the psychiatrist's escort he dismissed some of the doctor's selections as unwise: 'too thin for you'; 'snobby'; 'unreliable'; etc., and asked 'Would you like a beautiful black boy'; 'How young would you like him?'; 'Do you give or take?' The customer chose his date with the guidance of the owner and with the implicit awareness that the owner had vouched for his particular escort. Thus, the act was undertaken with the suggestion that a good company stands behind its goods. If the owner did not wish to specify the way in which one escort was especially pleasing and the reasons why he or she was exceptionally popular, the escort was presented as a sound investment for the man to make. The owner stated

The meeting is kept totally confidential. If the man wants, I'll go with him to (a Bond Street restaurant) and introduce them myself. The boy doesn't even have to know the customer's surname if he doesn't wish to give it ... I'd say that 75 per cent of our customers are regulars and the rest tourists who want a girl for the evening. We have boys throughout England and Scotland, a few in Wales. (How do you find your escorts?) Some just come in off the street, others see our ad in the gay newspapers or the entertainment guides. We ask them to come in and send us a picture, a large recent one preferably. (What are the qualities of a good escort?) They're attractive of course and they don't ask a lot of questions. I'll have girls come in and a lot will be real scrubbers that I know no one will ever book anyway and they're the ones who will ask a million questions: 'What do I have to do?' 'How much do I get?' ... You accept their pictures but when no one asks for them anyhow you just take their pictures out of the book ... The professional knows how to dress. (How?) It doesn't matter if the client is just by himself but if you're out for dinner, you want the guy to be dressed conservatively but well ... We don't hire anyone who doesn't have a job and if they come in and say 'I'm a model' or an 'actress', we ask for their portfolio and their agent's name and where they've been employed. A lot are secretaries, shopgirls ... Danny (a particularly successful escort) works in a clothing store. This is why he knows how to dress so well ... They must have a telephone so we can reach them. If
they don’t they sometimes say ‘I’ll ring in’ but I can’t have the
‘phones busy all day . . . I call after a date and ask ‘Did
everything go alright?’ All I want is a ‘yes’ or ‘no’. I don’t want to
know what they did. It’s none of my business. On the form you
saw that the contract is only for a date. That’s why we get the fee
first (in cash, cheque (with a banker’s card), Barclay/Visa card or
American Express) and they pay the escort on their own. Once we
introduce them we don’t get involved. We tell our escorts that
they’re not supposed to get in touch with them again on their own
but I know this happens quite often . . . We protect both the man
and our escort. If anything goes wrong we’re here. So far it’s never
happened.

Although the owner denied that any of his escorts derived their sole
income from their work as escorts and was rather eloquent about his
refusal to employ ‘actresses’ who had never acted or ‘models’ who
had never modelled, this in fact, was not the case. Nevertheless, it
seemed important to the owner to establish his ‘escorts’ as
respectable, economically secure individuals who did not need to
‘prostitute’ themselves for material gain.

THE ESCORT AS PROFESSIONAL MASSEUR

A third way in which the escort agency and individual escorts were
able to deny that they were involved in a deviant activity was by
stressing the role of the ‘masseur’ as a specialized, professional role.
The owner stated that approximately 80 per cent of his escorts were
qualified to act as a masseur. While the masseur may be assumed to
be a sexual deviant by virtue of his profession (like the ‘stripper’ or
the ‘exotic dancer’ the role of the ‘masseur’ would appear somewhat
disreputable) it may be thought to offer a professional title with its
relative respectability. Additionally, if the escort does not wish to
represent himself as homosexual, the role of the masseur provides
him with a professional identity that neutralizes the deviancy
ascribed to physical intimacy with another man. Reiss (1961:102–19)
reported that, to retain a heterosexual self-image, adolescent male
prostitutes followed a strict code that separated their ‘work role’
from their identity as heterosexual. Thus, the adolescent male
prostitutes did not associate with homosexuals other than for
payment, refused to participate in specific types of sexual encour-
ters, confined their participation to the ‘male role’ in sexual
intercourse, and were indignant and hostile when in an ‘off-situation’
they were approached by homosexuals. Similarly, Rechy has
illustrated the reluctance of the male hustler to identify himself as
homosexual

323
'Hey, man, are you straight, bi, or gay?' she asks him bluntly. Jim only shrugs.
'Shit', she fills in for him, 'I think you're whatever you're fucking at the time, yeah?'

As a 'profession' the role of the homosexual masseur may be used to explain or justify homosexual participation without the escort claiming homosexuality as a sexual identity.

The role of the 'masseur' is further useful because it also allows either man, the escort and/or his patron, to engage in promiscuous sexual behaviour without publicly cruising for a partner. Gagnon and Simon (1973) have pointed to the tendency of male homosexuals to be promiscuous. The homosexual masseur may find that his job allows for a situation which he finds preferable to the establishment of a sustained sexual relationship with one particular man, or, allows him to augment such a relationship with isolated sexual encounters with men who are his customers or clients. Similarly, the role of the male masseur confers social benefit on his patron. Adultery tends to be disparaged but the stigma of the adulterer is redoubled when his liaison is homosexual. One may view extramarital sex as a sign of a 'modern attitude' towards marriage or as 'masculine virility' that cannot be satiated in the marital relationship (Salamon 1984). Thus, the heterosexual male may find that he augments rather than diminishes his reputation as a 'real man' among his fellows by engaging in extramarital sex. There seems to be a 'gentleman's conspiracy' that protects the man from other men betraying or berating him for engaging in extramarital sex. However, establishing a relationship with a homosexual partner may be more threatening to the man's status as non-deviant or to his peer acceptability. The danger of exposure is significant; identification as a secret homosexual may be more disruptive to one's image than identification as a philanderer. Thus, the man who contacts an agency and requests the services of a male masseur is allowed not only to employ what, in fact, may be a euphemistic misnomer for a prostitute, but as well, detach himself from the label 'homosexual'. Aside from the connivance of the agency representative who serves as the matchmaker, establishing contact with a masseur is a private act. The man can curtail the visibility of his homosexual interests, bypass the process of publicly cruising for a partner and circumvent the comments of those who 'would not understand' or be potentially critical of his behaviour. By representing his relationship or encounter with the masseur as a strictly professional association, he is allowed to define the nature of the situation in a way which is non-threatening or stigmatizing. Indeed, the obverse may be true. He may represent his selection of a male masseur as concomitant with
his role of a 'dutiful husband' who does not want unduly to upset his wife. He may stress that his loyalty to his wife and to his marriage has precipitated his selection of a male masseur — not his sexual inclinations.

An example of how the representation of a relationship as a professional association can dispel imputations of sexual deviance was suggested in the comments of a former manager of an internationally known cosmetic and hairdressing salon. He recounted how early in his career a well-known movie actor hired him to dye his hair and promised to 'keep' him as his personal cosmetician. Of course the man's statement may have been untrue but on numerous occasions I was informed that homosexual liaisons were misrepresented by the man's partner serving, at least officially, as his hairdresser, valet, masseur, social secretary or personal aide. This suggests that a socially unacceptable relationship can be presented in a manner which allows it to 'pass' as non-deviant. That is, if the hairdresser was somewhat effeminate in his appearance and his mannerisms, it need not reflect on his patron. The man who wished to employ him could simply state that the hairdresser, masseur, etc., despite his sexual preference, was a desirable employee. A man may mute, rather than call attention to, the hairdresser's homosexuality. If the hairdresser is a preferred employee because of whose sexual preference for men, the employer could deny that this aspect of their association was of special importance. Attention is focused on the hairdresser as a professional whose skill rather than his homosexuality makes him desirable. Similarly, the man who patronizes a homosexual masseur may justify his association with a contrived show of tolerance and magnanimity for 'that kind of people'. If he misrepresents the aspect of the association which is important to its continuation, the definition of the relationship as being other than sexual allows the man to escape labelling as homosexual. There is a sufficient ambiguity to permit symbolic manoeuvring.

Representing his association with the homosexual masseur as strictly a business association, the patron is allowed to continue or discontinue his relationship with the man after the initial encounter. That is, if he judges the masseur favourably he may present his weekly session simply as a meeting with a pseudo-physiotherapist whose techniques give muscle relief and relaxation from tension. If the patron judges the masseur unfavourably he can ask the owner to suggest someone else and state simply that the man was not satisfactory in his role or not to his personal liking. If the conversation between the patron and the escort agency owner is hedged in euphemisms and accomplished through implicit rather than explicit statements, the patron need not blatantly state why the masseur was liked or disliked. Moreover, the patron can indulge his
desires for sexual variety for there is no injunction to remain loyal to one's masseur and comparative shopping is promoted by the catalogue of escorts, the majority of whom hold the equivalent distinction of being 'qualified' in the art of massage. If the patron is uncomfortable about indulging his desires for promiscuous homosexual relationships, the role of the masseur allows the patron to reject or ask specifically for a particular escort with reference to a desire that is other than sexual.

For the escort, identifying oneself to a client as a masseur may be an acceptable way of presenting a situation in which one or both individuals wish interaction to proceed to sex for payment. First, it may be that intimate body contact can lead to conversational frankness. That is, while giving a massage, the social script of interaction allows for either the patron or the masseur to offer or place a request for specific types of massage, the reversal of role positions with the customer massaging the masseur or varied 'extras'. Since the marginality of the masseur may be assumed, that is, a 'masseur' giving 'assisted showers' may be assumed to be a prostitute, the patron may apprehend that there is a license to act as a 'john' without self-censure or fear of rebuff. Second, if one form of intimacy can lead to another, requesting the services of a travelling masseur from an agency may be less threatening than arranging for a 'date' with an escort. A 'date' has a social script which is more elaborate than that necessitated by an 'appointment' with a masseur. In the latter case, the man can dispense with the ritual etiquette of dating, curtail the possibility of others seeing him partnered by his escort during the 'wining and dining' stage of the dating ritual, and simply strip off without offending his masseur. Since there is no obligation on the part of the patron to employ the masseur on future occasions, he can seek instantaneous intimacy with the knowledge that however the masseur judges him, he can remove himself from the situation without his network of significant others being any the wiser. Establishing a relationship with a 'stranger' who remains outside one's normal group may grant a freedom to say and do anything. After all, relations will not be very consequential. One can ensure that the stranger and significant others will never meet again.

For the man who is intent on 'passing' as heterosexual, there is always the opportunity to dichotomize his life in terms of 'straight' and 'gay' activities. The division may be unequally balanced in that the man has a greater vested interest in maintaining affiliation with the straight world. He may not wish to endanger his job, marriage, relations with 'straight' friends and so on, and fear that a homosexual label would permeate his status and become a label through which other, non-deviant role labels would be funnelled. For this reason, the ephemeral nature of the encounter with a masseur or
an escort may be preferred. Moreover, there are obvious problems and difficulties intrinsic to the establishment of intimacy with any other — be it a man, woman, heterosexual, homosexual, dog or cat. For the homosexual man, the existence of gay clubs helps reduce the possible dangers of the street pick-up. In approaching a man on the street, the man is provided with only minimal clues which can suggest how the other will react to being propositioned. Within the gay club, the homosexual who wishes to make contact with another may apprehend that others in the club share his sexual orientation and are relatively unlikely to react violently if propositioned. Similarly, for the man who is married and homosexual, the escort agency provides a setting in which the dangers of making contact with others may be reduced. First, in establishing contact with an escort through an agency, the number of people party to the act is purposively reduced. Unlike entering a gay club, entering an escort agency does not necessitate confrontation with a large audience of potential witnesses to the man's behaviour. The patron can simply phone in his request and pay for his appointment with an escort or a masseur on a credit card number. Alternatively he may visit the agency, select the escort from the catalogues there, yet minimize the number of others who know of his act.

Second, in pursuing a series of anonymous sexual encounters an individual runs the obvious risk of contracting a venereal disease. If the man's wife discovers that she has VD and has had only her husband as a sexual partner, at least part of her husband's secret life will be exposed. The gender of her husband's partner will not necessarily be obvious; his extramarital activities will be. The man who contacts a 'professional escort' from a 'reputable firm' may believe that professional courtesy will encourage vigilance against the transmission of social disease. The patron may expect the professional to observe a standard of personal cleanliness and hygiene ignored by the enthusiastic amateur. If the man has a casual sexual encounter with some other man in the lavatory of a train station he cannot reasonably expect the other to warn him of the symptoms of venereal disease or to be totally forthcoming with him on the topic of his physical health. However, the escort may be assumed to observe standards of cleanliness superior to that of the ordinary 'stranger'. Whether or not this is the case, the patron may believe it to be factual.

Third, the man may purposefully discourage the development of a prolonged relationship with any one particular man and prefer 'cruising' through the catalogue. A protracted affair could mean the escort's learning too much about him or his world. With sustained contact there exists the possibility that the other will come to know more about him than he wishes to have known. Further, other people might begin to identify the man and his escort as a 'couple'.
If the man wishes to remain anonymous he may prefer the truncated nature of the encounter with an escort, establishing instead, a ‘relationship’ with the agency owner.

Goffman (1963:75) has stated

Wise persons are the marginal men before whom the individual with a fault need feel no shame nor exert self-control, knowing that in spite of his failing he will be seen as an ordinary other.

By establishing a ‘relationship’ with the agency owner, the code of conduct which the patron must follow to be judged as admirable and honourable is relatively simple. His ability to pay the agency cost and exhibit behaviour while on a date which does not lead to the escort’s reporting him as bizarre or as a problematic patron may be sufficient to ensure their welcoming him on subsequent occasions. Similarly, sufficient monetary reimbursement to the escort may allow the man to escape labelling as a ‘freak’ or troublesome even when and if his conduct has been unruly. For the escort, what is unacceptable for £50 may be perfectly acceptable for £100 and retroactively defined in positive or neutral tones. The agency owner may himself remain unaware of the patron’s behaviour on a date so that knowledge itself is incomplete amongst those who are ‘wise’. Indeed, the agency owner was concerned with retaining a certain ignorance.5 In paying the agency separately from the escort, there is a division of knowledge and potentially, a professional courtesy of silence which is extended in anticipation of future patronage.

PROFESSIONALISM: MAINTAINING SOCIAL DISTANCE

The business tactic of ‘professional courtesy’ permits a social familiarity between owner and client, owner and escort and escort and client which is circumscribed and abbreviated. It need not signal the development of a ‘relationship’ in the conventional sense. Rather, to draw an analogy, the operational structure of the agency date is qualitatively similar in intent to the mechanics of the production line assembly. Any individual date itself is constituted along a blueprint formula of the mass production step. It has a simple organization. Any patron, in this conceptual scheme, occupies the position of the hub at the centre of the wheel. His position is essential and his desires and needs salient. His ability to pay will determine the quality of the product he receives. The agency owner did not envisage himself providing a philanthropic service for impoverished men who may have had a curiosity about homosexual sex or were homosexual but who lacked the ability to pay for the agency’s service. The patron’s desire for homosexual sex or companionship was essential but not sufficient. If the product is
to be assembled, the agency owner had to perceive the product as marketable and the procedure economically viable. Secondly, the escorts may be presented as the spokes of the wheel. Whatever their private sexuality, their feelings towards being 'escorts' or response to any particular man, their professional role made the theoretical path they followed interchangeable with those of the other escorts employed by the agency. While a missing spoke will interrupt the smooth running of the wheel each individual spoke is replaceable. The agency owner talked of certain escorts being more popular than others, or being more frequently booked by his clients, but seemed unperturbed by the prospect of losing or having to fire any particular escort. Like a defective spoke, the escort who failed to attract many patrons, who became too old, too spotty or too 'snobby' to be of service and who seemed to jeopardize the smooth functioning of the system (failing to meet a client at a specified time, getting drunk on a date and embarrassing a client and so on) could always be dispensed with or replaced. Similarly, the agency owner could dissuade a patron from selecting an escort who had fallen out of favour by a role violation which labelled him potentially defective or ineffective. For example, one escort had attempted to 'cheat' the agency out of their 'introduction fee' by suggesting to a client that on future occasions, the patron contact him directly. The patron, a 'regular' with the agency, reported this back to the owner, who in turn has steered clients away from this escort. Like the foreman, the agency owner attempted to ensure that the production line functions efficiently.

The interrelations between owner/escort/patron can be described as a 'mechanistic community', relations are structured between client, owner and escort for expediency but there is minimal 'team spirit', social indebtedness between persons or consciousness of the agency as an organization which requires or necessitates 'loyalty'. The professional ethos of the escort agency seemed to be based on a facile camaraderie which allowed the expression of polite platitudes between owner and client, owner and escort yet, paradoxically, encouraged the maintenance of social distance. The owner is content to maintain an ostrich-like philosophical stance which distanced him from the behaviour of both patron and escort. He spoke with disfavour of those escorts who asked too many questions or were overly loquacious in reporting their dates. Similarly, although the pictures of the escorts are presented in the style of a family album, the majority of the escorts are unknown to each other; there were no company picnics or Christmas parties which sought to promote a 'we-group' feeling. Moreover, the owner's expectation that escorts would attempt to meet with clients privately, depriving him of his commission, reveals his own expectation that his agency commanded little loyalty from his escorts and that, first and foremost, self-
promotion and gain were desired. The nexus connecting escort to agency owner was the profit-motive, not the perception of a similar sexual orientation. Homosexuality, in and of itself, did not form the basis of the mechanistic community. Rather, the agency owner and his escorts were drawn together by the prospect of perceived reward for mutual co-operation. It was not necessary for there to be substantial affection between owner, escort and patron — merely alignment.

If any esprit de corps existed between owner and escort, it seemed to be based on their shared reaction to the client as a 'punter'. Both the escorts I interviewed and the escort agency owner seemed prone to invoke the standard con's argument in accounting for participation in a deviant occupation. A 'punter' was someone who was simply 'asking' to be taken advantage of and deserved to be exploited. Failing to profit from the naivety of a man who thought himself something of a rogue, fashionably decadent or 'open to new experiences' in establishing relations with a homosexual escort was thought to be simply foolish and cause for mortification. Thus, the 'professional code' of conduct between the escort and the escort agency owner seemed ruled by a cryptic cynicism which can be expressed as 'Those who do not know the world get taken advantage of by it'. Both the escort and the owner were aware that their relationship was not founded on altruism, recruiting for the Gay Liberation Movement or for the Society For The Expression Of Sexual Freedom. Rather, they extended 'professional courtesy' to the man, though labelling him a 'punter', in the pursuit of gain.

THE ESCORT AND THE 'PUNTER': INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS

Earlier in this article I suggested that the patron may be granted a token membership in the homosexual world contingent upon his ability to pay the agency's introduction fee. However, while 'professional courtesy' may allow the patron the 'illusion of inclusion', labelling the man as a 'punter' suggests that he remains fundamentally an outsider. Moreover, it was common that the role of 'escort' was juxtaposed with the role of 'hustler' (Rechy 1978) or male prostitute. While waiting for 'dates', it was not unusual for an escort to solicit paying customers. Authors have noted the prostitute's disparagement of the john (Prus and Irini 1981; Rechy 1978; Reiss 1961). Similarly, the escorts are allowed to employ a rationalization for behaviour that is based on the perceived inferiority of the punter; the 'punter' is a 'marginal man' (Park 1928). As an inferior type of person, the punter can be demeaned or exploited and treated with less ceremony than a member of the in-group.
Within the 'secret society' (Hughes 1958) of the homosexual escort service and its patrons, all men are not created equal. If the professional escort is a 'marginal man' himself, within the confines of the agency and its operation, he may negotiate from a position of strength. The escort, if not the patron, is aware of the game rules for interaction with a 'punter'. The patron, as a 'stranger', has only an ectoplasmic presence within the community. Like a ghost, he appears and disappears. Unless he becomes known as a disruptive or violent ghost, he is tolerated as an innocuous, disembodied spirit. However, if the patron is a 'token member' of the community he is, simultaneously, its token pariah. Indeed, Simmel, in his discussion of the 'stranger' states that 'strangers are not really conceived of as individuals, but as strangers of a particular type: the element of distance is no less general in regard to them than the element of nearness' (Simmel 1950). As an inferior type of person, the punter can be exploited and treated with less ceremony than a member of the in-group. 'Ethnocentrism' may create one standard for behaviour with one's own and another for behaviour with outsiders. The labelling of the patron as a 'punter' creates a certain laxity in 'honourable conduct' which is thought excusable and permissible in that a member of the we-group is not involved. If the patron is identified as a 'punter' and an 'outsider', the standards of honourable conduct may be less stringent than normally observed.

Latently, the agency's policy of paying the escort a minimal sum of £5 for his attendance on any patron helped to ritualize identification of the patron as a 'punter'. Unless an escort was happy with minimal reimbursement for his services, the onus was on him to cajole large 'tips' from his date. In doing so, the potentially exploited escort became the exploiter. Self-interest helped to create a pluralistic and relativistic morality. While the escorts could potentially be sanctioned for 'cheating' the agency out of their introduction fee by meeting clients privately, their behaviour on a date was left unmonitored. If the escort agency owner refused to recognize that his agency's payment scheme indirectly encouraged 'prostitution' or to publicly speculate on the behaviour of his escorts while they were on a date, there was a tacit recognition that a 'punter' could be treated lightly and with little cause for self-recrimination. Indeed, by extracting a large fee for the 'introduction' his fee provided, the agency owner set the standard of conduct for interaction with a 'punter'. The 'punter' was regarded with a haughty arrogance as someone who was gullible and 'fair game'. Although some escorts desired to become the 'toy boy' or supported lover of a wealthy man most escorts privately ridiculed men who felt themselves esteemed or valued as the result of the agency's or their own show of 'professional courtesy'. The 'punter' was a 'faggot'; a 'silly queen'; and his appearance and intelligence were ridiculed.
One bisexual escort, summarizing his history, stated

I was born an only child in Holland, middle class family and was spoiled rotten. I went to a private Catholic school and was a straight ‘A’ student . . . I was sexually aware at age 11 and did the usual as all kids do, masturbate with buddies and general fooling around. Being from a strict Catholic home my allowance was small and in early high school I took a paper route to make more money. This is how it all started.

I found out soon enough on the paper route that they were sex starved ladies and gentlemen. When I collected my paper money there was always a bonus and I caught on quick. From then on I charged on the spot for every sex encounter. Being young, somewhat naive, I learned everything, blowjobs, screwing, S & M etc. you name it, I learned it. Mind you, I was 14 years old, horny and willing. I made about 1,000 guilders a month (approximately £150.00). So my parents would not know, most of the money went into a private savings account. I gave up my paper route but continued with my private house calls. At age 16 I graduated and had about 3,000.00 in the bank, which seemed a lot at the time. I went to the University of Nijmegan and soon found out where I could make money. The day I graduated, I packed and moved. I checked the paper and — male escorts wanted. I applied and got the job. I’ve worked for 2 years. I now live happily supported by a man 28 years older than me. Nice flat, elegant neighbourhood — sex starved man but lots of money. Of course, I am no dummy, and went back to school. I hate to brag, but I am very advanced and got him to pay for my school fees at the L.S.E. I accepted this older man’s persistance although sex is limited as my sex drive is very low — with him. (Do you have any plans in the event he leaves you?) As you can see, I’m somewhat of a gypsy. If he moves on it’s likely that I would too. If he dies — I hope that he leaves me his car.

By disassociating themselves from the patron through labelling him a ‘punter’, the mechanicistic community becomes stratified into groups of ‘insiders’ (the owner and his escorts) and ‘outsiders’ (‘punters’).

Hughes (1958:9–10) has stated

All societies of any great size have in-groups and out-groups; in fact, one of the best ways of describing a society is to consider it a network of smaller and larger in-groups and out-groups. And an in-group is one only because there are out-groups . . . The very injunction that love my neighbour as myself starts with me; if I don’t love myself and my nearest, the phrase has a very sour meaning . . . We generally feel a greater obligation to in-groups,
hence less obligation to out-groups... The greater their social distance from us, the more we leave in the hands of others a sort of mandate by default to deal with them on our behalf.

Unless a patron complained to the agency owner that he had received unfair treatment or had been robbed by his escort, the escort was left to enact his role in the way he himself saw fit.

CONCLUSION

The primary concern of this article was the neutralization of moral opprobrium through the organization of names, space and structures. In his article 'Good People and Dirty Work' (1958), Hughes is concerned about how good people can co-exist with unpleasant facets of the world by the wilful courting of ignorance. Similarly, the escort agency manager's posture towards the activities of his staff and patrons reveals his unwillingness to recognize or assume responsibility for their behaviour despite the fact that his agency provides for the meeting of escort and patron. I suggested that labelling the patron a 'punter' allows the escort agency owner and escort to retain a positive self-image despite their disreputable behaviour. If the 'punter' is a second-class citizen, he can be demeaned or exploited with little cause for self-recrimination. One need not be overly concerned with the well-being of a stranger. Furthermore, the activities of the agency and its escorts may escape social sanction even when and if their treatment of a patron is callous or exploitative. Given the social stigma attached to homosexuality, it is relatively unlikely that the patron will bring his complaint to the attention of the Better Business Bureau, the police or the public by writing a letter to the Editor of the Times.

Edna D. Salaman
Department of Sociology
University of Alberta

NOTES

1. This admittedly brings the representativeness of the sample of escorts into question. However, although the escorts were preselected by the owner, interviews with the men did not take place in the owner's presence and, at least theoretically, the escorts were free to elaborate upon or conceal (in accordance with their private sentiments) what they privately felt their job entailed.


may similarly encourage the homosexual to normalize his behaviour. He states:

Walking into a gay bar is a momentous act in the life history of a homosexual, because in many cases it is the first time he publicly identifies himself as a homosexual. Of equal importance is the fact that it brings him to the realization that there are many other young men like himself and, thus, that he is a member of a community and not the isolate he had previously felt himself to be.


8. Hoffman (op. cit., p. 155) notes the emphasis placed on sub-culture.


REFERENCES


Tannenbaum, F. 1938. *Crime and the Community*.  

