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Sexualities 2012 15: 622
DOI: 10.1177/1363460712445984

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Walking the beat and doing business: Exploring spaces of male sex work and public sex

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Sexualities
15(5/6) 622–643
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DOI: 10.1177/1363460712445984
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Abstract

This article draws on two research projects to explore how spaces of public male sex work come into being through commercial and public sexual practices. Utilizing a blended methodology of ethnography, participant observation, interview materials, map making and photography, the article explores an area known for commercial and non-commercial sexual encounters between men in a city in the UK. It makes conceptual arguments about the material and discursive significance of walking in the making, and continued existence of 'red light district' spaces. Specifically, we will look at how men engaged in sex work (those described to be 'doing business') and other men seeking non-commercial sexual liaisons recognize the potential for sexual encounters in the space through environmental and embodied signifiers. We also discuss how patterns of walking and waiting mediated by this reading of the environment contribute to the emergence and persistence of a 'beat' space.

Keywords

City, cruising, male sex work, public sex, the beat, walking

Introduction

Cities have long been discussed by scholars as spaces of sexual opportunity. From the carefully managed streets of urban 'gay villages', to red light districts, the dark nooks and crannies of public parks at night, and the semi-private haunts of

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gentlemen's clubs, brothels and saunas; the city is replete with sexual possibility (Binnie, 2001; Brown, 2008; Nash and Bain, 2007; Turner, 2003). However these opportunities often coalesce or are even confined to specific districts, areas or even streets that possess a 'reputation' locally. How such places emerge, persist and become known for the activities that occur there has been an area of key concern for social scientists, especially over the last decade or so (Hart, 1995; Hubbard and Sanders, 2003). The empirical focus of this article is an area in a city in the UK.¹ The space the article will focus on consists of a nexus of roads, alleyways and towpaths that run along a stretch of canal just beyond the city centre and the local 'gay village'. This area has a specific reputation for public sexual encounters between men and a historical reputation as an area of prostitution. The space (at the time of writing) is mainly used by men seeking sex with other men, and by men looking to earn money from such encounters. The circumstances of the sexual encounters performed in the space are as various as the motivations and personal histories of those who seek them. Some using the space seek anonymity, others the thrill of transgressing social norms of privacy around sex. The boundaries between particular desires and resultant groupings of men are often blurred and renegotiated in the situations they negotiate with each other. As such these places involve a mixing of multiple trajectories of intention, sexual and economic desire. This article is particularly concerned with how the men using the space to earn money from the sale or exchange of sex move around the area, the patterns of these movements and how routes or 'beats' emerge.

Discussions around the perceived private nature of sex and sexualities pervade the social sciences (Friedl, 1994; Kulick et al., 1995). The normative notion that sexual encounters should be performed behind curtains, closed doors and within four walls is not only central to legal frameworks, but is important in the context of understanding societal readings of privacy imbued and embodied in sexual relations. It is therefore understandable that despite being characterized by a myriad of sexual (and economic) opportunities, the area remains largely 'unknown', as the potential for the encounters it offers is not immediately obvious to visitors and residents in the city. Unlike the previously mentioned cosmopolitan gay village (hereafter the 'village'), there are no signs showing how to get to there, what it is, or even that it exists. The existence and persistence of the space then as a male sexual site, we will argue, emerges through the ongoing repetition of movement and use of the area for sex, as well as the material and ephemeral traces and trails left behind by the men.

There has been recognition from scholars that sexual performances expressed and embodied through a multiplicity of gestures, actions and movements – including walking, modalities of dressing, looking, gazing and being in particular places at particular times – can be subtle indications that a person is seeking sex in the city, commercial or otherwise (Atkins, 2007; Hubbard, 2011; Humphreys, 1970; Whowell, 2010). Using this body of work as a foundation, this article seeks to explore how men engaged in sex work (those described to be 'doing business') and other men seeking non-commercial sexual liaisons recognize the potential for these

sexual experiences in the space. Specifically, we will discuss how patterns of walking and waiting mediated by this reading of the environment contribute to the emergence and persistence of a 'beat' We use the term 'beat' to refer to the pathways most walked and driven in cars by men looking to buy, sell or exchange sex. We will argue that beats are literally 'well trodden', and come into being through the repeated relational and physical marking of the path or road.

The primary aim of this article therefore is to show the importance of walking in the search for sex in the city, and to consider the possibility that beats are inscribed in discursive and material ways in the streetscape, through movement around the areas, and the search for clients. The inherent difficulties of articulating these practices has required the development of a more sensuous way of allowing these places to emerge in representation and analysis. We will therefore begin this analysis with an annotated sensorially rich description of the area orientated around the narrative of a walk, before moving to add a more concrete empirical element to our argument in the form of a mapping exercise. These elements are in turn combined with more conventional uses of interview and ethnographic data from our two research projects (one still ongoing at the time of writing). In addition to being a convergence in our two respective fields of human geography and visual anthropology, we feel the diverse range of methods provides an empirically informed yet critically playful view of how beat spaces persist as significant areas of street sex. To conclude we will reflect on how the methods used by the men in the area are sufficient to resist some of the more cosmetic and physical alterations made by the City Council and others operating in a multi-agency partnership seeking to regulate the space and deter men from using it for sex.²

Walking the beat

Not only is walking central in terms of the conceptual analysis of our data, but it was also through walking that we came to know and learn about the area through field work. This section will therefore offer a more sensuous reading of the site, and introduces the important role the senses play in people's negotiation and understanding of the area via a walking narrative that moves along the canal from the city's village to the streets around the canal (Atkins, 2007; Casey, 2007; Crapanzano, 2004; Hall, 2009; Lee and Ingold, 2006). Both authors have spent countless hours wandering the streets around the canal, as outreach workers, researchers and residents of the city. Walking as a concept within the article therefore wanders variously between being an object of study, a described practice, a method of data collection and a lens for understanding the area itself. This process of physical movement is impossible to disassociate from the sensory reading of the world through which we move. Casey (2007) argues that this reading is led by the ephemeral glance (see also Turner, 2003), which, as opposed to the focused gaze that seeks to identify and symbolically dominate what it regards, is argued to 'flit' over the world taking in a great deal of detail and simultaneously interpreting meaning and assessing that which is relevant to the intentions of the person glancing.

It is this assessment, disregard and retention of detail that we wish to show in the following introduction to the area. In addition to the visual elements, other sensorial aspects of place (for example its smell and 'feel') have been argued to be central to how public sex is negotiated and experienced (Brown, 2008), and also how policing is performed spatially (Cook and Whowell, 2011). Brown (2008: 929) emphasizes the centrality of these sensorial elements of the cruising experience by suggesting that the 'fabric' of the space is as important as the actions performed. Thus the built environment, spaces of public sex and the wider red light landscape are marked materially through litter, graffiti and the visibility of others seeking sex as much as by the smell and feel of the space. Reflecting on an ethnography of various cruising sites in London, Brown (2008: 929) concludes:

[d]iscursive concepts such as sexual identities, legal codes or moral values play a part in shaping these relationships but no more than the ceramics of the urinal, the clothing that men wear, the grass and the ivy in a cemetery, the midges on the common at dusk, amyl nitrate, or the aroma of stale sweat and urine.

Like all walks, the following is limited by a particular perspective and route. We will divert into certain darkened corners, and linger at points of significance. Making some observations along the way informed by data collected in our respective research projects, we will show how the sexual possibilities of these places reveal themselves only to those able to recognize the significance of architecture, the actions of others and the traces of activity they leave behind. In more general terms however, the walking tour will also offer some important contextual information about the case study and 'sets the scene' through detailed information on the sexual histories and geographies of the area. The 'walking tour' is depicted in italics and observations in regular type. A fuller analysis of the area is presented in the next section.

We begin in the village, an internationally marketed area of LGBTQ³ night-time leisure, pleasure and consumption, nestled in the city's post-industrial landscape of gentrified mills. We walk along the raised promenade, which follows a row of bars and clubs, feeling the cold cobbles uneven against the bottom of our shoes as we go. The canal is a gloomy void that borders the street, barely noticeable from the venues, which at weekends, make for a collision of lights and sound. As we walk, the palpable vibrations of dance music emanate from the doorways and windows. We can hear the shrieks of hen parties, and the drone of multiple simultaneous and indiscernible conversations emanating from exiled colonies of smokers, and people moving between the bars. Just metres away from the edge of this scene there is a discreet opening that offers a route down to the canal towpath running below. The path drops away from the raised berm, and we are soon bordered by an ageing red brick wall on one side and the dark glassy water of the canal on the other. The sound of the street becomes immediately more distant and the smell of water, and damp stone surrounds us. The change in environment is marked; from the crowded hustle and bustle at the top of the street

to a feeling of isolation and seclusion. The sounds of traffic and voices are replaced by the consistent, growing and echoed rumble of water over the canal locks in the tunnel ahead. There is fluorescent lighting periodically above our heads (Figure 1). Signs posted on the walls state that we are being watched by CCTV cameras, and that anyone committing 'public acts of lewd, obscene or sexual behaviour' could be arrested and prosecuted (Figure 2). There is a road on the surface that runs parallel to this path.

The pathways most used by the men tended to be alternative, concealed routes like this. As a result, those looking for sex or business were less likely to encounter those not seeking it, and subsequently saw less footfall and traffic from people who were genuinely making their way from A to B and not seeking a potential sexual encounter.

Proceeding along the path, there is a brief moment of darkness around a lock gate as we enter a small antechamber. A barrelled roof accommodates the shift in elevation as the towpath rounds the lock gate. The sound of the water over the gate fills the small enclosure. If you were just passing through you may not notice how the darkness of this location seeks to conceal the condoms that litter the towpath, or how the wall of the lock gate hides those standing here waiting for business or a partner whilst allowing them to see along the towpath in both directions (Figures 3 and 4).

Graffiti is visible on the walls, alongside streaks of fresh white paint indicating efforts by the City Council's street cleansing teams to conceal previous messages (Figure 5). If studied, these marks offer names, telephone numbers, meeting times and sexual requests. As we turn the corner the smell of urine floods the senses (Figure 6).



Figure 1. All photographs by and © Michael Atkins.



Figure 2.

Unlike the rest of the pathway this moment of darkness between two lit chambers provides a physical veiling of participants' bodies from observers (see also Borden et al., 2000; Humphreys, 1970). Again, used condoms and packets of lube⁴ that have been torn open cover the damp stone floor as the architecture of the site offers a suitable mix of privacy and exposure to others. In contrast, the chamber beyond is brightly lit and CCTV cameras hang overhead (Figure 7). Moving forward, the canal opens out into a large underground basin. A wooden bridge extends across the water (Figure 8). The old path around the basin is blocked off by a whitewashed breezeblock wall. Parts of the towpath are still visible in front of a painted mural that conceals how far the chamber goes back (Figures 9 and 10).

Research data⁵ suggests that many of those who used the area before the lights, CCTV and the mural were installed remember the space as open and dark. Before the extensive modifications in 2002 in preparation for a major sporting event, participants from both research projects reported that there could have been anything up to 30 or 40 men at one time using the space for sexual encounters. However even after the area was physically altered to deter men from using the

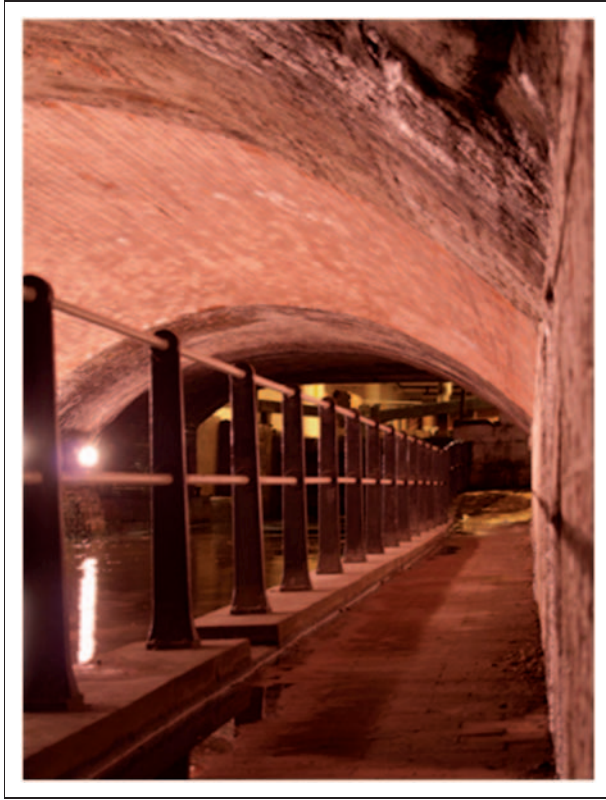


Figure 3.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.

space, activity still persisted (and still persists at the time of writing) in the spots that remain in darkness. Indeed, as we will discuss, the ‘closure’ of some space along this section of the canal has encouraged men to walk further along the canal to look for sexual opportunities.

Just beyond the chamber there is a small pathway that leads to the road. Its proximity to the seclusion of the tunnel, the flow of men passing through looking for sex and those pulling up in cars make it an ideal spot for men looking to earn money to wait. A complex of ‘water view’ apartments lines the canal-side and it is here, as the canal is



Figure 9.



Figure 10.

thrown open to a permanent and potentially varied spectatorship, that we come upon 'the Bridge'.

The lighting and modification of the area (the whitewashing of walls, installation of CCTV, signage and lighting) along the canal from the village has ironically pushed activity that was previously ongoing in these locations further into a residential redevelopment zone which straddles 'the bridge'. Significantly, this is the only bridge along the canal that is too low for lighting or surveillance ordinance to

be fitted, leaving it as one of the last islands of darkness along the previously abandoned canal side (Interview with CCTV Official, 2007).

The roadway once again intersects the canal here. There is usually someone, or several people standing here at the edge of the road, seeking business and waiting to be picked up.⁶ Sometimes clients can be seen loitering in this area too, on foot, on bikes or in cars. A small number of cars are parked up on the road or in the two large car parks either side of the canal behind us. A car will go by every few minutes, slowing as it passes by the stairway down to the canal. Much like the towpath this road has been usurped by a more direct route that cuts between the city's main arteries of traffic. There is therefore little reason to drive through here yet cars can be noticed going past again and again, driving a circuit between here and the entrance to the towpath. On foot, there are numerous options available to circle back to the village at several points along the towpath.

Walking the beat

The structuring of the last section as an ethnographic walking tour was more than a stylistic gesture. Walking around the city was central to the ethnographic fieldwork and outreach undertaken by the authors; indeed, access to parts of the canal towpath was only possible by foot. Although it is often visually, verbally and socially veiled, the men walked with a purpose, our research revealed that they were 'looking for something' when walking through the area. This might be a particular sexual activity, a particular kind of person, a specific individual or amount of money. Their journeys might involve walking in circuits, waiting, and on occasion ambiguous verbal wrangling. These activities needed to be conducted without arousing the suspicions of those not involved.

It has been argued by social scientists and cultural theorists that walking constitutes much more than treading over cobbles and damp concrete. As Wunderlich (2008: 128) suggests: 'walking is an elemental way of perceiving urban places. Whilst walking, one experiences and learns about places and develops feelings and thoughts for them.' Walking, often dismissed as a mundane daily activity, has been argued to be a useful methodological tool to try and better understand the ways in which people interpret, understand and attach meanings to places (Hall, 2009; Hubbard and O'Neill, 2010). Lee and Ingold (2006: 84) suggest that through walking, 'culture is literally trodden into the trails in the ground that people walk, and is contained in the routes that people share as they go about their daily lives'. In the context of the area around the canal, these routes were determined by the recognition of visual and sensory signifiers that suggested greater commercial and non-commercial sexual opportunities. In addition to this, walking enabled men to be seen by others, and in turn facilitated recognition of their involvement in commercial and non-commercial sexual possibilities. By covering ground walking, there was an increase in the simultaneous recognition, and the potential to be recognized as participant in the sexual possibilities offered by

the canal. Men walked in search of encounters rather than to reach specific points; although in some cases it is clear that particular spaces facilitated or enabled encounters to occur.

Yet this recognition was not straightforward. In comparison to the overtly public sexual stereotype of the female sex worker, men seeking business on the streets often blended in seamlessly with non-sex-working peers (Whowell, 2010). Those passing through the area not seeking a sexual encounter, would likely fail to notice the intentions of other men walking to get business. Only those also walking circuits or waiting in particular locations would recognize the repetitive cycles of walking around the area. This was recognized as a tacit sign that that person may be seeking sexual contact. An outreach worker commented on this:

To the outside gazer you look like a person who's walking their dog, you look like a person who's walking home from a night out. They don't see you moving the circuit, only people who are also moving the circuit, going around in circles, waiting in a particular spot are able to recognize you doing that and if you are doing that, generally you are probably going to be looking for sex. (Interview with Outreach Worker 5, 2008)

Those wishing to earn money were able to tell if someone was likely to be willing to 'do business with them', not only from previous experience of particular individuals but by where they were standing, where the potential client parked their car and how they looked at them. In turn their own repeated patterns of walking and waiting presented an ambiguous street presence that conveyed their own availability for business. The area is therefore marked out as a public sex environment and a space of street sex work, not only because of the obvious markers (litter, graffiti, signage) but also by the presence of those who sought sex, the way they walked and where they waited.

Finding partners or clients in the area involved a great deal of trial, error and exploration, predicated on the knowledge of the spatial characteristics of a 'good spot': a location likely to be used by others for the same purpose. However it also relied on the repeated performance and recognition of particular choreographies, such as specific patterns and correlations of dressing, walking and looking (Whowell, 2010). Ingold's (2007) conceptualization of wayfinding is useful for understanding this process. Ingold refers to wayfinding as the commingling of movement and perception by which we come to know our environment. Ingold (2007) argues that 'knowing as you go', recognizing desired details of an environment and following the movements, trails and instructions of others, is the primary way by which humans and non-humans find their way through the world (Lee and Ingold, 2006; see also Casey, 2007). Seeking sex and business inevitably involved aspects of both of these practices. Those involved relied on their knowledge of locations to walk and wait in spaces that were likely to yield sexual success. However knowledge of the local area was accumulated and continuously readjusted by a process of wandering, mediated by the frequency of sexual success

and knowledge imparted by others, in words of advice, body language, observed movements, or the things left behind for example condoms, lube and graffiti. The use of wandering was integral for establishing more efficient routes of successful movements; finding new paths and new spaces that were able to accommodate sex and solicitation. In the occurrence of cruising and business, this process, instead of ensuring a more efficient, or more pleasant route to a particular geographical location, ensured that participants had the greatest opportunity to perceive, encounter and determine the intent of those they wished to meet, become intimate with or earn money from. Such repeated use allows people to literally inscribe their practice along pathways through repeated presence, the things they are witnessed to do by others, and what they leave behind (Lee and Ingold, 2006). As Turner (2003: 52) suggests 'it is [t]he combination of an understanding of a specific place with an understanding of a specific urban practice [that] allows for – in fact, enables – cruising to take place'; or as Brown (2008) argues, drawing on Taussig (1992) it is a 'set of embodied, sensate, semi-automatic knowledges' which contribute to the ephemeral yet persistent existence of public sex environments.

Mapping the beat

Being able to empirically demonstrate the collective knowledge about how men move around sexual sites, and also how this was central to making money was particularly challenging. As outreach workers and researchers we knew the routes ourselves, but it was difficult to show how that knowledge had been accumulated either by us or by those we worked with. Despite the centrality of walking to the sexual encounter, it was an intermediary practice that was difficult to record and reflect upon. Walking the beat was often unremarkable, unmemorable and not really spoken about in any great depth, even between ourselves when working on our respective research projects. However, it is possible to argue that it is the tacit nature of walking that makes the observation of patterns of walking useful for seeing how 'immediate sensations' and 'impromptu actions' come to shape a shared perception of the places in which activity occurs (Augoyard, 2007: 19). Drawing on Ingold's 2007 book *Lines*, we therefore sought to reimagine people's movements as lines and trajectories that overlapped and become tangled with one another, leaving traces and trails behind for others to follow and becoming a known and successful route.

In order to record this process Mike created a map using pins and string. After walking a particular route, a piece of string was threaded around pins placed along the lines of a hand-drawn map of the area tracing the route taken (see Figures 11 and 12). Most of these recorded walks were the product of accompanying men as they walked around the area seeking out various experiences and opportunities. Some were pre-arranged walking tours of the routes men felt they used most.⁷ The routes mapped also reflected the outreach routes taken by the outreach team that both authors were part of both on foot and by car. Different coloured string was used for each participant. Places where people



Figure 11.

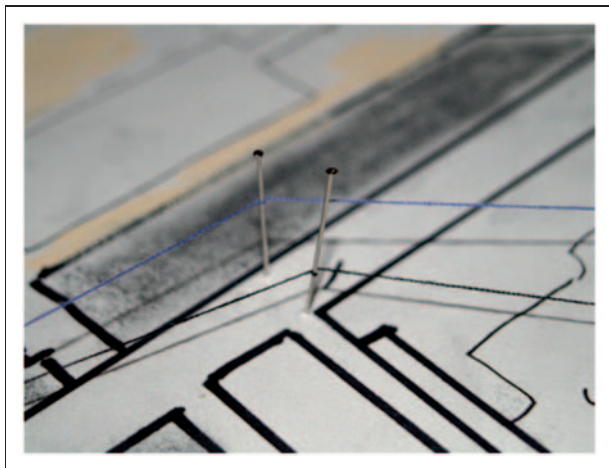


Figure 12.

waited and where sexual encounters were negotiated were marked with blue and red dots respectively.

Although not able to provide a clear and precise image of movements around the area, certain paths and routes became more pronounced in the repetitive lines of string representing individual journeys. When viewed from above the lines of the map along these routes appeared thicker, an appreciation of the individual strings that constituted them becoming lost. The journeys represented through the enmeshed pieces of string illustrated the routes most walked by those involved in sexual solicitation. Indeed through this marking, we can tentatively argue that, through repeated use, beat spaces developed particular identities or meanings to the people using them. By examining these routes in this way we were able to establish interesting characteristics of the way people walked and the way they intersected with the routes we walked as outreach workers seeking to meet men to deliver services. The routes taken by men tended to be circular and could thus be easily repeated without an obvious change in direction. Although they sometimes involved detours to look for specific individuals or to check out somewhere new, most routes ran between the same key locations, for example certain bars in the village or the moments of intersection we described in our narrated 'walk' through the area. Notably men sought business in some of the bars in the village, and the village was easily accessible via some of the key beat routes as mapped. On the map these points emerged as tangles of multiple string trajectories, littered with dots made by a felt tip pen that was used to record the number of encounters observed (Figure 13). These locations were often where men would linger, knowing that, if not already waiting, a potential partner or client would be along shortly. These points can be correlated with locations where there were visible signs of activity. However the routes would also change in accordance with shifts in

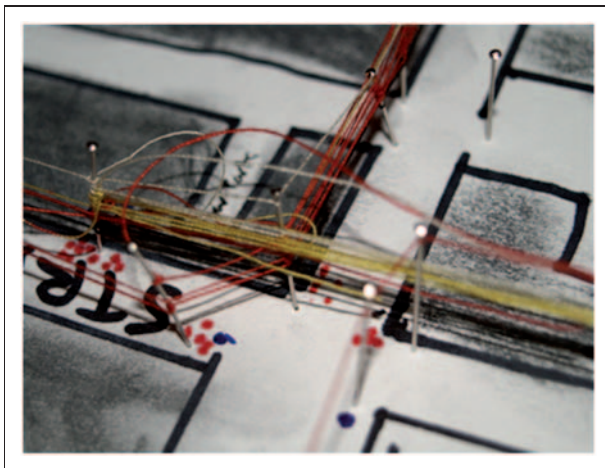


Figure 13.

these busy spots. When a particular location was subject to intensified police attention or one of those using the space had to avoid a part of the canal because of drug debts or problems with the police, the route they traced would alter to accommodate the necessary shifts in opportunity. Likewise when a 'new spot' was found routes were modified to incorporate 'checking it out'.

Finding what you are looking for

The use of different coloured string for different participants allowed some important distinctions between the repeated walking patterns of men cruising and those looking to earn from sexual contact to be made with others. We are able to make use of interview material with men who sell sex in the area to tease out the significance of these routes. When in the village, men wishing to earn money from sexual encounters would move between bars, quickly looking in for clients they knew. This was often timed by particular 'working' men, to make contact with specific clients whose movements they had learned to predict, as one man reflected:

We sometimes sort of like stay in one area for a little bit to see if anyone's [clients] driving round and if they're not, we'll go into certain pubs and if they're not in there then we'll just go around, mooching around, seeing what's what (Interview with Sex Work Project Participant 2, 2008).

Those seeking business would go to particular intersections with roadways, or bar entrances depending on the time of day. In the following quotation, road intersections and subtle indications of the intent to buy sex are central to the seeking of business:

[In the village] Smith Street⁸ is for getting drunk, and then if you go along Richardson Street that's for picking up rent boys, and then sometimes outside the outreach project as well, they drive down back alleys and wait there and then flash you when you walk past. (Interview with Sex Work Project Participant 4, 2007).

In addition to the significance of the car headlights, the notion that certain streets are central to the sexual exchange is explicitly expressed by the men, reinforcing our arguments that repeated recognition of sexual and economic possibility becomes interwoven with the reading of specific streets, corners and bridges. Walking between these spots enabled men to maintain a fairly ambiguous presence on the street (Whowell, 2010) but also facilitated 'bumping into' clients they knew in the village. Men looking for business for example tended to walk around three separate beats. The first circled the village, the second circled the canal and the third incorporated both. Indeed, one man once described the first and third of these as the 'big beat' and the 'little beat' respectively.⁹

The interviews were able to expand the temporal dimension of these patterns of movements. Rush hour was noted to be particularly busy, as men willing to pay for

sex made their way home from work and took the opportunity to make a brief detour into the village to see who was hanging around and what might be on offer. This was also the case after the pubs closed when people would be making their way home after a night out, when those seeking sex would likely be perceived as to be 'just making their way home'. When the village was quiet or it was difficult to be there because of the police presence, troublesome drug dealers, friends or girlfriends, there was 'always the canal'¹⁰ where business or partners could be sought. The map revealed that the route walked when looking for business differed from the route walked by men seeking non-commercial sexual encounters. Men seeking business were more likely to stick close to the waterway, they avoided the darker underground locations where men openly engaged in sex acts. In comparison those men whose primary motivations were sexual contact tended to follow the canal, seeking out and waiting in the moments of darkness for someone to approach. Near 'the bridge' and the covered part of the canal men would tend to wait above the road bridge tunnel or just beyond it in an enclosed space on the towpath next to a car park. Although both those selling sex and those seeking commercial and non-commercial sexual contact would often wait at points which afforded greater access to the road, visibility and opportunities for escape, the working men's avoidance of some spaces became apparent on the string map as it reveals something of the specific social dynamics required in the commercial sexual encounter. Crucially, the working men had to be able to speak to earn money, and speaking was generally not tolerated in the places where sex actually occurred. Thus most men met clients away from some of the darker more 'tucked away' spaces, however, after agreeing on a service and a price, the men revealed they might take the client to a space normatively used only for cruising for the actual transaction to take place.

One sex-working participant explained why he always avoided the darker tunnels: 'I don't go down the canal unless I'm looking who's about! It's too dodgy down there'.¹¹ Another talked of how, when down there, he often could not get guys to do business: 'yeah this bloke just told me he wanted it for free! He already had his cock out down there!'¹² In the darker areas around the locks, talking was often perceived as inappropriate by the many men who cruised there; it was considered to be 'disrupting the action' (Atkins, 2007; Humphreys, 1970; McLelland, 2002). Standing in places just off the cruising beat afforded the men more opportunity to talk and negotiate their desire to earn from a particular encounter. By walking a different way men would choose to avoid one set of sexual possibilities and open themselves to another. The particularities of walking and waiting served as a highly nuanced way of communicating intent in an arena where willingness and unwillingness to participate in certain activities was difficult to articulate explicitly. Taking the road also had another more opportunistic advantage. Some men willing to pay would drive between the canal and the village looking to see which men selling sex were out that day. 'The bridge' was particularly known as a place where men wishing to pay for sex would park up and wait for business. Those who

had been earning money round the canal for some time had worked out the route that these men would drive around. Just as in the village, the route of men looking to earn crossed with critical road and towpath routes used by others looking for sex, walking along the road maximized the potential of meeting clients. The record of the route on the map, was an inscription of the walker's intentions. It revealed how routes were shaped by the perception of potential success, chosen and repeated according to what the walker was looking for.

Conclusions and reflections

Before we began doing the fieldwork for our respective research projects and also throughout the fieldwork period, multi-agency teams supported by the Council have sought to deter those seeking to use the area for sex. Alterations were made to the environment not only to prevent sex and solicitation from taking place but with an additional aim of disrupting known beats, circuits, areas of activity and flows of people. Despite these alterations, coupled with visible police patrols of the area, sexual activity – both men seeking business and others seeking partners – is ongoing in the area. The modifications made to the area, which aim to open up and shape public spaces to deter non-normative and criminal behaviours (in this instance sex in public or solicitation), rest on the assumption that if the beat can be disrupted people will cease to participate in sexual activities. To an extent, this has been the case. However as we described in the walking tour, many of the men using the area have moved further up the canal to 'the bridge', the only bridge the Council are unable to attach CCTV ordinance too. It is possible that one of the reasons why, in this case, the alterations to the space have been somewhat ineffective is that such cosmetic alterations to the area cannot account for the way this particular sexual site has emerged and how persisted. Moreover, the 'good spots' as described in the article are not fixed points sewn into the fabric of the city street; much more than this, they are part of a larger and ever shifting practice that men employ when seeking sexual encounters in public places.

The mixing of methodologies and of respective research projects has enabled data streams to act in conversation with one another, much like the gleaning of information by different actors to build a picture around a particular client group in outreach work. The value of this article however not only lies in its attempt to map and 'pin down' the subculture and movements of the men, but in the context of the case study, the data offered has the potential to provide insights useful in co-ordinating outreach efforts or creating more effective, sympathetic perspectives around how this type of activity can be effectively responded too and responsibly managed by local regulators. Indeed, one of the key insights provided by our analysis was the exploration of the subtle differences in the wayfinding determinations of men who were seeking to earn money from sexual encounters in the area (Ingold, 2007). These men have often been identified as a group that have specific needs in housing, sexual health, substance misuse management and many are also entangled in the Criminal Justice System. Determining the level of support needed

by men involved in sex work is important in the context of service delivery. Understanding the specifics of route formation and the sensorially orientated choices of sex-working men that our mixed method approach reveals, enables outreach providers to determine the locations where outreach provision might be targeted. Such data can be translated into very direct outreach directives, regarding times of day, appropriate locations of contact, in addition to providing details of what to be 'looking out' for to deliver effective services.

To conclude then, based on the data presented in this article it is possible to argue that the boundaries of the red light landscape in this case have been drawn and redrawn through ongoing and adaptive movements, lingering and communication between the men using the space. Such activity is often unarticulated and sometimes unremembered by participants. Yet the negotiation of such sexual activity is prevalent and persistent in specific (public) localities. In this article we have argued that walking offers one way of understanding the potential opportunities available in the red light landscape. The continued repetition of looking, walking and standing in place, enables men involved in sex work (client and worker) and non-commercial sexual encounters to recognize each other. Although we can see that men walk between navigable points that they know, the routes that they use develop through a continuous, ever correcting sensuous wayfinding, (Ingold, 2007, see also Casey, 2007) through which the availability of opportunity is based on observations and communications with others and the traces left mark out the pathways and beat spaces. De Certeau (1984) discusses how acts of resistance may be contained within the very discursive practices that aim to repress them. This evasion is visible in the case presented here and is practised through the men's choices of routes, selective exclusion of voice, veils of socially acceptable activity and such like. These 'sub-cultural patterns' have developed beneath the surface of what is analysable as 'real' and in many ways easily measureable in empirical terms. The mapping exercise and associated discussion presented in this article represents a call for further understanding of how liminal and ephemeral spaces such as the red light district or the public sex environment emerge, persist and dissipate and how other ephemeral and fleeting social practices can be understood through a more material analysis.

Funding

Mike's ongoing PhD research project is funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council.

Notes

1. The name of the city has been deliberately withheld. Rather than an effort to make the location unidentifiable, this obscuring of the city's identity has been done to add an additional element of ambiguity to the locations we discuss in the article, in addition to obscuring the specifics of the locality to those who are not already aware of them. This ambiguity is in keeping with the character and ephemerality of the activities the article discusses. 'The city',

- as it is referred to in the article, is in the UK and is reputed for its industrial heritage, subsequent de-industrialization, and resultant urban regeneration.
2. Methodologically, Mike has been doing work in the area since 2007. First as part of ethnographic research for an MA, which was followed by a period of outreach, working with men who sold sex in the area. This role ceased upon undertaking more fieldwork into the interplay between the various commercial and non-commercial sexual encounters that occur through the site. This ongoing research has variously included informal interviews, conversations, mapping work, virtual ethnography, life histories and shared journeys with over 80 informants during 18 months of immersive fieldwork. Mary conducted research over an 18-month period, and completed approximately 600 hours of participant observation as a volunteer with two local male sex-work projects. In addition to this she completed 28 qualitative semi-structured interviews with 31 key stakeholders in the city. Stakeholders included City Council members and workers, the police, men who do business, outreach workers, business people and other local experts.
 3. LGBTQ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer.
 4. The term lube here refers to sexual lubricant used to aid sexual activity.
 5. Data in this context refers to research interviews conducted by Mary with outreach workers and local officials who discussed the use of the area prior to 2002, and many conversations had by Mike with multiple participants who all discussed the use of the area in this context.
 6. Both authors, observed this whilst on fieldwork, doing outreach on weekday evenings from January 2006 to July 2008. Clients were observed to pick up men, and men were observed soliciting for business.
 7. Walking in this way is not unusual in fieldwork involving participant observation. Walking alongside participants, offers the person researching the opportunity to share the sensory experience of a place from the perspective of the participant. The closeness and trust can facilitate an understanding between those walking, and has the potential to allow important ethnographic insights to emerge (see also Lee and Ingold, 2006). Of course recording patterns of movement in this way involves a number of ethical considerations. No identifying information of those whom Mike walked with was ever recorded; in addition, notes containing reflections from particular walks during this period were coded and encrypted.
 8. All street names are pseudonyms.
 9. Although the locations were sometimes known by different names to different people, there was often a great deal of consensus regarding the naming of particular spots. People referred to walking around 'the canal' or going to 'the bridge' and heading down to 'the village'. These nominal tags held enough of a resonance with those who shared a knowledge of the area to denote a particular purpose at a specific location, yet enough ambiguity to not implicate them in complicity to those who were not involved.
 10. Mike: field notes 12 July 2009.
 11. Mike: conversation with A1. Field notes 101/14, 14 January 2010.
 12. Mike: conversation with A35. Field notes 104/29, 29 April 2010.

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