Book Reviews

Organization Studies
2020, Vol. 41(12) 1749–1755
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DOI: 10.1177/0170840619884036
www.egosnet.org/os

Izabela Ślęzak

Praca kobiet świadczących usługi seksualne w agencjach towarzyskich [The work of female sex workers in escort agencies]

Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2016. 379 pages.

Reviewed by: Mikołaj Pawlak, University of Warsaw, Poland

Organization scholars are interested in the new spheres where organizations expand their presence as a cultural form of collective action (Bromley & Meyer, 2015). Yet, there are social worlds (Strauss, 1978) in which organizations were always present but they did not gain much attention from researchers. The domain remaining in the shadows in many societies is sex work. Moreover, the organizational aspect of sex work is also under-researched. Paid sex as an interaction between a client and sex worker often requires an organizational context and involvement of third parties. Prostitution is an object of – usually strongly negative – moral valuations and therefore in many states it is either penalized or present in the gray area of social activities. For social sciences, it is usually framed as a social problem or aspect of criminal activities. For this reason, it is taken up as a topic of studies by sociologists of deviance or criminologists.

Izabela Ślęzak in her research monograph ‘The work of female sex workers in escort agencies’, written in Polish, applied the approach of grounded theory and decided to reconstruct the social definitions of prostitution used by sex workers and other participants of the sex industry, not the moral valuations of outsiders.¹ In order to achieve this aim, Ślęzak conducted a qualitative study of ‘escort agencies’ [agencja towarzyska] in the Polish city of Łódź, in which she, over the course of four years, has been observing four organizations and conducted interviews with 77 informants (56 of whom were sex workers). The theoretical framework of the study was the grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and the tradition of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). Ślęzak looks from a micro-perspective at the day-to-day organization, watches the interactions between members of the organizations, listens to the organizational stories and relations about the organizational context.

The book consists of nine chapters, the first three of which present the background: (i) the historical and legal context of prostitution; (ii) review of the literature on prostitution; (iii) and research design. The next six chapters outline the results of the study and each chapter is devoted to another aspect of the day-to-day organization: (iv) management of the escort agency; (v) interactions among sex workers; (vi) interactions between sex workers and clients in public zones of escort agencies; (vii) interactions between sex workers and clients in private zones of escort agencies; (viii) issues of security; and (ix) the process of getting involved in the work.

Transparency of the methodology applied is a very strong aspect of Ślęzak’s work. The 29 pages long chapter presents methodological assumptions of the grounded theory, techniques of observation and interviewing, and the possible limitations of her data. In the case of shadow social worlds,

researchers face the considerable challenge of obtaining access. Ślęzak openly described her initial problems with accessing the escort agencies. She eventually was able to conduct her observations, yet she was not allowed to enter the oppressively run organizations, where psychological and physical violence was used by bosses. She had to reconstruct the oppressive style of management thanks to the interviews with sex workers who had the experience of working in this type of organization.

Ślęzak does not present her motivations to study sex workers and she does not engage in the debate on the normative aspects of prostitution. This is her strategy to be different from the authors who perceive sex work as a deviant behaviour. She aims to present the social reality from the perspective of her informants and nothing more. On the one hand, this approach is radically different from the dominant moralist discourse on prostitution. Thanks to that, the lifeworld of sex workers is presented and it is easier for the reader to construe their agency. On the other hand, Ślęzak's book is not meant to change social reality. It is not an engaged book calling for either regularization of prostitution in Poland, or for its ban. It is a sterile book which makes it a powerful experience for an academic reader, yet it does not have the potential to be included in the public debate on prostitution.

The starting point for Ślęzak's analysis is that her informants define their involvement in prostitution as a 'situation of work'. The informants were feeling the tensions caused by the negative moral valuations of their job but still, according to Ślęzak, the most accurate way to meaningfully understand the social dynamics of escort agencies was to look at it as the situation of work. What are the main factors defining the situation of work in Polish escort agencies? On the macro level, it is the legal situation. Prostitution in Poland is not penalized, yet it is not regulated, but brothels, pimping and other forms of profiting from the prostitution of others are all penalized. It creates very ambiguous conditions for any organized form of prostitution, putting it on a thin line between legal and illegal activities. Escort agencies are located in the gray zone of the economy. Another macro-factor is the relation of the sex industry to the criminal world in Poland. Against the common perception created in the 1990s, when organized crime in Poland was at its peak, at present local gangs are weak and the sex industry operates independently from them. Yet, escort agencies are sites of illegal activities such as unlicensed alcohol and nicotine sales, distribution of drugs, and most importantly fiscal offences related to the informal employment of the majority of the sex workers. In the conditions described above after 1989 the organizational form of escort agencies emerged in Poland. Formally, escort agencies are not brothels, because running brothels in Poland is penalized, yet with regard to their common perception and everyday activities they are brothel-like organizations. Ślęzak researched only this form of prostitution, not street prostitution nor the sex services facilitated by internet platforms.

On the level of organization, the factors influencing the situation of work are the rules set by the managers of the escort agencies, called bosses and usually owning the organizations. Ślęzak spent many pages describing the styles of managing the escort agencies and how the sex workers adapted to them. In the escort agencies, the practice of daily wage payments is institutionalized, which is related to the dominant lack of formal contracts. Daily wages facilitate the large mobility of sex workers between the agencies and other forms of prostitution. In the eyes of managers, the constant flux of employees is their main concern. The mobility of workers between organizations allowed Ślęzak to draw inferences not only regarding the organizations she directly researched but also the ones described by her interviewees. An escort agency constantly hires new employees, and sex workers with experience in other agencies are able to negotiate informal rules adapting their situation to the conditions created by managers.

In parts of the book presenting the socialization to prostitution and the occupational trajectories of sex workers, the important theoretical inspiration is Arlie R. Hochschild's (1983) sociology of emotions. For all the sex workers interviewed by Ślęzak first experiences in the sex industry were

extremely stressful. Nearly all of them had experienced some forms of violence, and the majority of them had very unstable personal situations. Ślęzak showed the influence of the organization of escort agencies on the personal experiences of sex workers. She also presented the trajectories of involvement in the sex industry as non-linear. Many sex workers had several episodes of leaving prostitution and then coming back. They choose between prostitution and other 'regular' employment depending on their economic situation. Gathering the information about the conditions of work, payments and security arrangements in other escort agencies is an ongoing theme for sex workers. Although sex workers are often exploited and face oppressive styles of management, they are active actors struggling to improve their position either in constant negotiations of the situation of work in the given organization or by shifting between organizations. Another important finding by Ślęzak is that the intra-organizational competition and conflicts with other sex workers are perceived by her interviewees as the most troubling influence on the situation at work. Therefore, large parts of the book are devoted to presenting the interactions among the sex workers and their informal arrangements about how to work in constant tension between cooperation and competition.

In the Polish literature, this book constitutes a step forward in many respects. Primarily, because it looks into prostitution as work and organization, not deviance nor crime. And this is something novel and fresh. For the international audience of organizational scholars, the book is also interesting because it is a study of organizations that need to adapt to a formal framework that does not always fit their purposes. Even if managers of the escort agency pay taxes, sign contracts with their employees and apply for a licence to sell alcohol, the nature of the services they provide still leaves them open to prosecution. This situation enmeshes the personnel of escort agencies in a situation of constant adaptation to ambiguous legal frameworks, and of renegotiation of declared organizational aims with the everyday practice of the organization. In this respect, the book is a very interesting case study of an organization which does not fit the institutional regulations but is capable of functioning in the ambiguous zone between formal and informal, legal and illegal, moral and immoral.

I would like to pick up just one line of critique. The book is an outcome of ethnographic study and a micro-perspective of interactionist symbolism is applied. In my view, this is why the author misses field-level processes, occurring within 'a collection of diverse, interdependent organizations that participate in a common meaning system' (Scott 2014, p. 106). Using the interactionist vocabulary, Ślęzak writes quite a lot about the social world of escort agencies and she highlights the strong mobility of sex workers who change organizations very often. Yet, she points to the bosses of escort agencies as having the prominent influence on the organizational framework of sex work. The management style of the boss which is mostly determined by his personality type (oppressive; based on familiarizing; distant professional; or friendly professional), in Ślęzak's interpretation, determines the work situation in organizations, which informal coalitions and negotiations of sex workers can only influence to a limited extent. The social role of the boss seems from this picture overly agentic. In the figure summarizing the processes creating and reproducing the work situation, the organizational frames built by the escort agency manager are presented as the broadest context. Yet, based on the organization theory in regard to field-level processes, I assume that there are also institutional pressures on all participants of the given field. Bosses also orient their practices towards other organizations in the field and have to conform to broader social norms. My line of critique is of an external character as it comes from the theoretical considerations formulated on the meso-level of the field, while the research was taken in the frame of micro-perspective of small groups and small organizations. I see it rather as a possible new perspective for future inquiries, not as a substantial shortcoming of the book.

The book is worth publishing in English. It received the EGOS Book Award in 2017 and, as an ethnography of organization, it reveals many aspects of everyday organizational life. The book

studies organizations perceived as deviant and located at the margins of social life but thanks to this it allows us to meaningfully understand what is treated as normal or routine in the mainstream of organizational life. For the international audience, I find Ślęzak's book much more interesting as a study of organizations than as a study of prostitution. It is quite ironic, that in a Polish context, the book received recognition because it presented the organizational life of escort agencies. At the same time, for the international audience, it might be interesting rather as a book focusing on organizations thanks to the very specific case.

To sum up, 'The work of female sex workers in escort agencies' is a fascinating book shedding new light on sex work and proving the power of an organizational approach to social reality. By applying the grounded theory approach Ślęzak presented the categories and social definitions used by the participants of the social world of escort agencies. In her approach, female sex workers, who often experience objectification, are treated as subjects whose experience and agency are shaped in the organizational context.

Note

1. This book was the co-winner of the EGOS book awards in 2017.

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Antonio A. Casilli

En attendant les robots. Enquête sur le travail du clic [Waiting for Robots: An inquiry into click work]

Paris: Seuil, 2019. 400 pages. ISBN 978-2-02-140188-2

Reviewed by: Hélène Picard, *Grenoble Ecole de Management/Univ Grenoble Alpes ComUE*

Waiting for Robots starts with the observation that most existing artificial intelligence (AI) technologies rely in fact heavily on human contributions. In particular, AI technologies require us to feed them large amounts of data, whether we actively produce content and distribute 'likes', or less activity so via our digital footprint. They may also require crowds of workers 'training' them to identify images, letters and situations so that the AI 'learns', and updates its code. In his book, Antonio Casilli invites us to consider the context and nature of these human contributions, offering an exploration of the multiple forms that 'digital labour' takes and how it reshapes work practices and subjectivities. Moreover, in this study Casilli gives particular consideration to the role of digital platforms in the organization, expansion and obscuring of click work, in providing for the needs of AI technologies: 'The dreams of intelligent robots are propelled by the profits of large digital oligopolies'¹ (p. 14).