

# The World's Two Oldest Professions: Prostitution and Psychotherapy

2 Jun, 2013

We psychoanalytic psychotherapists cannot deny the striking similarities that exist between our services and those peddled by prostitutes – despite the vulgar and even revolting nature of such a comparison. Both centralize the purveyance and sale of a specific type of bounded human relationship. Can you think of another profession that holds an *interpersonal relationship* so at its center?

Relational psychoanalytic therapists create professional relationships that are as intimate as possible, albeit it in an asymmetrical fashion. They wisely understand that they cannot possibly “objectively” view what is occurring in their patients. Phrases such as “therapeutic couple” or “therapeutic dyad” properly account for what they term “psychotherapy.” Such psychotherapists more accurately offer sets of *transformational encounters* that, in essence, consist of forms of interpersonal influence intended to relieve distress and improve the quality of the lives of their patients.

In both of the oldest professions, relational themes unrelated to the commodity being sold typically arise. Prostitutes' customers may fall in love, seek maternal attention, or push for broader interpersonal relationships. Ironically, contemporary psychotherapists manage similar interpersonal themes technically unrelated to the service being sold. Sexual feelings comprise a nearly ubiquitous component of depth psychotherapists' professional relationships – from both sides of the couch. The entire concept of *transference* rests on the premise that patients will enact their infantile, interpersonal themes within the psychotherapeutic relationship. Thus, as examples, patients may seek maternal attention, expect paternal rejection, or hope for an omnipotent emotional presence from their therapists.

Both professions require their practitioners to maintain certain borders, to create a *crucible* for the interpersonal transaction. Most prostitutes avoid kissing, for example, viewing it as a more intimate act than more overtly sexual acts. They utilize accouterments, such as Victoria Secret outfits or seductive lighting. They serve *customers*. Psychotherapists serve *clients* (a term all too close to customers) or *patients* but also have their own accessories – comfortable offices, boxes of tissues, and private exit doors.

Confirming its' ancient origins, Valerie Jenness, in a 1990 article published in *Social Problems*, documents that “prostitution has existed in every society for which there are written records.” In 18<sup>th</sup> century BC, prostitution was practiced in Mesopotamia. The Sumerians and the Babylonians utilized “sacred prostitution” characterized by women offering sex to foreigners as a sign of hospitality.

Professions similar to modern psychotherapy have a comparable ancient history. Shamanism, a field roughly similar to modern psychotherapy, existed as early as the Neolithic period. The word shaman specifically means “one who knows” – surprisingly prophetic of Lacan's comment that patients view their psychoanalysts as “subjects presumed to know.” For more than 150,000 years, tribes of hunter-gatherers

relied on shamans not only for religious practices, but also for guidance, for relief of mental suffering, and for answers to questions about life.

Once civilization emerged some 5,000 years ago, high priests from a variety of religious-type institutions usurped services once offered by shamans. Christianity dominated the Western world beginning around 300AD; thus, clerics provided much of what psychotherapists now offer, also for a price. Although the fee-for-service model was centuries away, penitents offered the Church contributions, volunteer services, or other forms of remuneration.

When the enlightenment arrived, the provision of assistance for vulnerable humans – from treating diseases (medicine) to moderating disputes (law) – splintered off into separate professions. Psychiatry existed only since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Reluctantly, and unwillingly, it delivered its' bastard – clinical psychology – when traumatized soldiers from World War II overwhelmed its' ability to provide treatment. Therefore, psychotherapy as practiced by non-MDs has an even shorter history, only around 60 years. Unlike the ancient origins of *prostitution*, the profession now called *psychotherapy* has only existed for some 100 years. And yet the type of professional services offered by psychotherapists also has equally prehistoric origins.

Why should we cringe at comparing psychotherapists to prostitutes? Both offer services in an intensely personal matter, similar to the way early tradesmen delivered their services, i.e. farriers applied their expertise to accommodate the needs of equines and their owners. In the end, farriers, shamans, and prostitutes offer extremely private and personal, yet bounded services. However, a crucial difference exists between these domains. Farriers and shamans choose or are born to their vocations, whereas psychotherapists, unlike prostitutes, willingly choose their profession. The latter fact renders the comparison a remarkably uncomfortable one. I believe psychodynamic psychotherapists need not hide from, or feel ashamed of, the intensely intimate nature of their work.