

## URBAN SEX INSTITUTIONS

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**INTRODUCTION** Contemporary urban society provides opportunities for sexual activity far removed from the emotional bonds and exclusiveness which characterize romantic relations. These activities are rigidly segregated along heterosexual-homosexual lines. Heterosexual couples can go to "swinging" centers to watch or join group sex, and men can visit "nude" bars where female "dancers" offer sexual services at the client's table. Similarly, only homosexual contacts are possible at public restrooms used by anonymous men for immediate fellatio and in "gay" bars which have a back room for sex. These sexual divisions permeate parallel activities. Prostitution is common in both populations and is constituted by similar modes of operation, by public solicitation, and by telephone. In these relations, there is virtually no overlap between heterosexual and homosexual institutions.

. Here we will compare a heterosexual and a homosexual facility which is widely distributed: massage parlors and gay baths. I will first describe typical parlors and baths as sex institutions, and second, I will delimit commonalities and differences between parlors and baths as commercial locales, as negotiated joint acts, and as contexts of impersonal sex.

**DESCRIPTIONS & DEFINITIONS**

. There are numerous definitions of parlors and baths. One author describes the massage parlor as a "hit-and-run brothel, combining the virtues of low overhead and high turnover" (Sheehy 1973 120). Other terms include model studio, rap parlor, body painting studio, and leisure spa. Often the establishment is not generically labeled, but goes by a proper name, such as Dating Room, Happy Place, Her Place, and more commonly, the Tender Touch. Gay baths are "licensed men's health clubs that provide settings for

impersonal homosexual sex (Weinberg & Williams 1975).

. Another author says gay baths are: "Turkish baths where the bathing is not as popular as the sex, orgy-style. Often baths endeavor to compete for the trade with novel decors, a bigger orgy room or other gimmicks to attract gay clientele" (Rodgers 1972 28). Slang synonyms include den, hygiene hall, skin room, the tubs, and whorehouse. The standard practice is for baths to advertise under the heading "club" in newspapers and guides for tourists. A listing of "Joe's Club - For Men Only" signifies the nature of the establishment. At times, guidebooks may explicitly recognize that the "club" is a gay bath (Hurwood 1973 156). While many gay baths incorporate the term "baths", others do not. For example, there is Dave's, The Barracks, and Man's Country.

. These parlors and baths fit Merton's paradigmatic description of "institutionalized evasions of institutionalized rules." "Evasions of institutionalized rules are themselves institutionalized when they are 1) patterned in a fairly well-defined types; 2) adopted by substantial numbers of people rather than being scattered subterfuges independently and privately arrived at; 3) organized in the form of a fairly elaborate social machinery made up of tacitly cooperating participants, including those who are socially charged with implementing the rules; 4) rarely punished and when they are, punished in largely symbolic forms that serve primarily to reaffirm the sanctity of the rules" (Merton 1971 834).

. First, parlors and baths are distinctively defined, and there are well-defined types of both parlors and baths. There are massage and masturbation parlors and those that feature a complete array of sexual services. There is also a distinction between a traditional massage parlor,

offering a masseuse in a private room, and the leisure spa, which is bigger and better equipped (Esperanto 1978). Leisure spas have showers, a sauna, and lockers.

. Baths can also be classed in several ways. There may be large differences in physical plant. Some baths include the minimum of an orgy room, cubicles, steam room, and showers, while others provide a wide array of related structures. These structures include television rooms, bars, weight rooms, theaters, sun rooms, indoor tracks, and disco-dance floors. There are alternative orgy room decors which range from one modeled after a subway bathroom to an actual full-size semi-tractor and trailer truck. Further, baths are divided according to clientele, by age, social class, and the time of maximum popularity.

. Second, parlors and baths are adopted by substantial numbers of people. During 1976, the New York City Office of Midtown Planning counted 64 parlors located from 30th to 60th Streets in Manhattan. Police estimate that there are 371 massage parlors in San Diego. And the presence of chains of gay baths hints at their prevalence. One nation-wide chain lists baths in 36 cities, and announces that it has over 300,000 members, or individual patrons who have visited their baths one or more times in the past year (The Advocate 1977).

. Third, combining Merton's third and fourth characteristics, neither parlors nor baths are the subject of constant police attention. Although there are occasional police raids, baths are typically undisturbed by control agents (Weinstein & Williams 1975). A possible reason for this is that baths remain a secret to the "straight" world, even though they may be located in apartment complexes catering to average citizens. For example, a baths facility is located in an apartment complex in a residential section of a San Diego beach area. But massage parlors

are the focus of media attention and citizen protests. There is a group called C.A.M.P. for Citizens Against Massage Parlors which directs complaints to legal authorities and information to the wives of patrons. Nevertheless, official challenges to massage parlors are largely symbolic. Often it is a particular parlor that is opposed and often the reason is not the nature of the facility, but that it is too close to a school or church.

#### COMMONALITIES & DIFFERENCES

. This section will focus on three factors concerning parlors and baths: 1) as commercial locales, 2) as negotiated joint acts, and 3) as contexts of impersonal sex.

. Commercial Locales. Massage parlors and gay baths are located on permanent sites and publicly known by commercial names. Unlike public places used for sexual exchanges or for arranging such contacts, parlors and baths have their own territories. Regular visitors know what to expect and assume that the site is permanent. Often, addresses are listed in the telephone directory. Parlors and baths are commercial establishments, privately owned and operated to generate financial profit. In parlors, male patrons pay for a massage administered by a female worker. The amount is recorded and tax withholdings are based on the worker's share of the initial fee. Generally, the patron must tip the masseuse if he wants more than a massage. The initial fee only guarantees some form of touching. In baths, patrons can rent a small room or cubicle, or at less expense, a locker. Here the initial fee pays for everything. Workers in baths are mere functionaries, selling drinks, providing towels, and collecting the price of admission. Sexual activities are reserved to the clients on their own initiative.

. Negotiated Joint Acts. In parlors and baths, someone touches another. In baths, certain touching is a mere non-verbal form of greeting. Parlor customers pay to be touched. In both instances,

touching may or may not lead to stimulation of genitalia, and may or may not be reciprocal. This is the most important feature of these sex institutions. Touching is only the first move in a complex and immediate encounter that evolves into a process of bargaining and diplomacy. Here touching is the beginning and a constant element of the negotiation for sex. The rules of the negotiation process are not extensive. The game framework developed by Lyman & Scott (1970 5) is helpful. A game model is based on a conception of man as a "goal seeking, voluntaristic, intentional actor." The parlor and baths negotiation process fits under the heading of a positive relationship game in which "the interactants undertake a line of action to achieve a greater intimacy" (Lyman & Scott 1970). These moves constitute a dialectic because each contains elements of the other, and seeks to evolve the appropriate sequential response.

. The negotiation process has 3 stages. For the introduction or first move, A touches B. This is the tentative exploration of the other. In a massage parlor, the masseuse begins the touching and discloses, perhaps in the sensuousness of motion, her desire to be propositioned. The client at the baths touches someone and discloses by remaining in the area, his desire to be propositioned. Next there is the invitation stage. B invites or propositions A. In a parlor, the patron tells the worker what he wants. In the baths, the usual practice is to touch the other in some erotic manner. Finally, there is the acceptance or rejection stage. Person A may agree to a sexual relation, or may end the encounter. The masseuse may disclaim doing such things, or the money offered may not be enough to persuade her. In the baths, A's touch may have been only a greeting, and he may not wish to respond to a sexual proposal.

. Negotiation is precarious. It can be halted by either person or

by external forces. Visitors to the baths may leave due to the unwanted intrusion of third parties. The time allotted for the massage may have passed, leaving the patron with the choice of paying for another massage or leaving without completing the negotiation and receiving no sexual stimulation.

. When negotiation is reduced to its essential elements, parlors and baths feature the meeting of two or more persons. These persons are members of the gathering in that they engage in a joint act, directly in each others' presence, directing attention and adjusting responses to each other. The term joint-act focuses on ongoing aspects rather than the more formal characteristics specified by the concept of primary group. But parlors and baths are involved activities similar to those of sexual partners in the primary group relationship.

. The primary group is a set of individuals in intimate face-to-face association who express their mutual identification by the word we (Cooley 1929 23). Generally, in parlors and baths, the presence of a we feeling simply cannot be known in advance. This basic point can be summarized. In parlors, the owner establishes the initial fee, and the worker receives a percentage. Customers pay before entering a massage room. The price depends on the type of massage. For a straight massage, the charge may be \$10. The female worker remains clothed and the patron cannot touch her. For \$30, in a service called a superswitch, the worker is nude and the patron can touch her. An alternative is for the worker and the patron to split the difference. The patron pays the minimum fee for a straight massage, but receives the superswitch. The masseuse gets \$10. added to her tip. The client saves, the girl profits, and the owner loses. Having cheated the owner, the conspirators may share a we feeling. The same process applies in other dyadic relations. The cab driver may delay starting the meter until the

middle of the trip, remarking that the company makes too much money. A waitress may omit certain items which she has served from the bill, saying that the food is too expensive. In both instances, the motive is to get a bigger tip, share advantage with the patron and bilk the employer. Both want an extra share, and camaraderie between worker and patron is likely to result.

. In baths, customer density is important. If there are only a few persons present, they may begin talking when otherwise, such actions would be prohibited. Isolation may yield other innovations. Sexual activity in unconventional places such as the television room may occur. On a busy night, all cubicles may be rented, and other private areas, including space in the orgy room may be unavailable. Orgy room sex implies that others may watch or join. Compatible couples cannot continue uninterrupted by intruding partners, and they may have to leave to get privacy. The shared frustration may create a we feeling.

. Contexts of Impersonal Sex. Impersonal sex has been defined as "sexual activity without any personal involvement whatsoever between sexual partners" (Weinberg & Williams 1975). The same authorities acknowledge that this description exaggerates the impersonality in parlors and baths. A more serious problem is the implicit assumption that sex with commitment is personal sex, and that personal sex and sex with commitment are the necessary consequences of standard romantic encounters. The nature of relations is seen as a form with a pre-determined content. But as shocked defendants in divorce proceedings tell us, long term sexual partners may hardly know one another and may misjudge the other's commitment. The personal nature of sex is best defined as a continually changing dimension constituted by participants during a specific time and at a particular place. The personal-impersonal qualities may vary

within a sex act sufficiently that any classification is arbitrary.

. Despite past usage, there is no relatively complete and precise answer to the question: "What is impersonal sex?" It is better to avoid the question and to develop an alternative characteristic of sexual contexts. One may consider the manner in which sexual participation is constrained by motivational or external factors. Sexual activity between romantically involved or legally joined persons are externally unregulated. They depend on motivational factors such as moods and interests. Sexual activity in commercial locales is primarily limited by external factors such as the availability of potential partners and the client's financial resources. The nature of external constraints is vastly different in parlors and baths.

. To begin, the reality of a massage parlor as a sexual context is often precarious. In gay baths the availability of sex is presumed. Even in the most suspected parlors, only the potential for sex exists. We are dealing with an emergent phenomenon for normality lies in the possibility that some things will happen sometimes but not necessarily. Certain establishments may be fraudulent. They may exist to trick sex-seeking men into paying for massage by a sexual come-on, and then fail to deliver (Hong et al. 1975). Further, the masseuse that is selected or assigned may list the patron as undesirable or find the tip insufficient to justify sexual service (Armstrong 1978). In gay baths, everyone can expect some sex, although "older or overweight patrons may spend much time cruising with little success" (Weinberg & Williams 1975). Assuming the crowd is large and the lighting is poor, even a grotesque looking person can expect some sexual contact. The term steam-daddy refers to a "middle aged homosexual spending most of his time in the cloudy steamroom of the baths" (Rodgers 1972 28).

. Sex in a massage parlor is

between a customer and a worker. The masseuse is dispensing scarce services. The customer must be on guard not to disturb the balance of a successfully negotiated joint act. If he does, the services may be withheld. In baths, rejected propositions are not important because other partners are readily available. And a rejection does not translate into a loss of money as it does in parlors where signs clearly announce: "no refunds."

. Massage parlors impose other external constraints not shared with baths. In parlors, initial fees pay for a limited amount of the masseuse's time. Occasionally, a timer is set and an alarm rings when the purchased period is completed. But in baths, the usual practice is to allow customers either 12 or 24 hour periods for the price of admission, although there are exceptions. Particularly elaborate baths during peak periods may limit the patron's stay to 2 hours. Another factor is the horizon for potential future contacts between partners. Massage parlor owners discourage outside contacts between their workers and patrons. No such restrictions exist for those who meet at the baths, and there is an unlimited horizon for future contacts.

#### CONCLUSION

. Massage parlors and gay baths are sex institutions. Their key features are similar. Both are constituted by negotiated joint acts. But the classification of parlors and baths as contexts of impersonal sex is rejected. Instead, these sex institutions are best understood as sexual contexts differently restricted by external factors. Parlors impose tight restrictions while baths are relatively open and permissive.

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