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Public Sex

Katharine Parker

The idea that sexual encounters between consenting adults should be performed in private spaces forms the foundations of the legal frameworks which govern sexual practices in many countries. It also reflects broader societal and normative understandings regarding the division between public and private space. This spatial division is commonly constructed around distinct views of appropriate comportment and is often conceptualised as a distinct binary in which one may be understood only in opposition to the other. However, sexual practices which enter the public sphere appear to show that boundaries between public and private are, in reality, more blurred and indistinct. Those engaging in public sexual practices may, for example, find greater privacy in public by locating a space that is safer, more isolated or more concealed than their own domestic space. Due to this complexity in establishing boundaries between public and private space, public sex becomes a difficult concept to define but it is often assumed to be sex that occurs outdoors, although this is not always the case as examples of public sex can include sex within the confines of a public convenience or within a vehicle.

Approaches to the regulation of public sexual practices have reinforced social understandings that sex is a private act. These norms rest upon complex moral geographies which reflect necessarily exclusionary views about the range of behaviours that should be permitted or visible in public space. As Hubbard and Colosi (2015: 786) note, 'the sight of the naked body is widely accepted to cause disgust when encountered in public' and as such, public sex has been legally framed in Western societies as an offence against public decency. Public decency laws create distinctions between the legality of sexual activity in the public and private spheres and serve as a formal mechanism for protecting and maintaining assumed moral boundaries and values. For example, in the UK the common law provides an offence of outraging public decency while, in many States of the US, conduct of a lewd or indecent nature is criminalised when it occurs in a public space. The requirements of such laws tend to emphasise disgust in the nature of the act and imply that there is a minimum standard of decency against which the act can be judged. Significantly, whilst the notion of disgust plays a central role, the remit of these offences often does not necessitate that a witness of the act actually be disgusted by it, merely that the witness *could* have been disgusted. In cases of public sex, it is often the visibility of the act that forms the basis of deviance; law, therefore, intervenes in such cases in order to preserve a sense of public and shared morality.

Although legal frameworks governing public sex are often ambiguous and are inconsistently applied and enforced, public sexual practices continue to preoccupy those who create and enforce the law. This means that the spaces in which public sex usually occurs are often, by necessity, liminal and spatially confined so that those engaging in sexual acts can avoid the regulatory gaze. In this respect, public sex can be conceptualised as a type of sexual encounter that is pursued just below the thresholds of public visibility but that is also located in physically accessible spaces. Historically, academic research on public sexual practices has tended to focus somewhat narrowly on spaces in which male same-sex intimacies occur, however, more recent research has highlighted that the spaces utilised as sites of public sex are in fact very diverse. Indeed, often the only common feature of these sites is that they adapt the temporal

uses of public environments such as public parks, car parks, footpaths, and public conveniences.

The motivations, experiences, and histories of those engaging in public sex and the types of sexual practices that are pursued are arguably as diverse as the spaces in which public sex occurs. For instance, whilst there is a rich body of literature documenting the sexual encounters of those who buy and sell sex in public spaces, contemporary studies of public sex have reflected upon the predominantly heterosexual practice of 'dogging' which typically involves couples or single people driving to a secluded spot and performing sexual acts in view of others. Whilst the practice of dogging typically involves elements of spectatorship, not all who engage in public sex have a desire to be observed, and even when observation is desirable, this is often limited to those who are also engaging in public sexual practices. This is perhaps demonstrated most saliently within studies of anonymous public sexual encounters between men. Studies in this vein have pointed to the ways in which men seeking same-sex sexual practices within the public sphere are able to utilise the features and rhythms of the landscape in order to remain concealed from those who are not also seeking sex. By engaging in an often-silent process of walking and gazing, commonly referred to as cruising, men wishing to engage in public sex with other men are able to discreetly signal their interest in sexual encounters whilst remaining inconspicuous to those who may disrupt sexual activity.

Whilst all forms of public sex carry the risk of detection, for some, the threat of their public sexual encounters being exposed presents a significant concern, for others it may create excitement. It is worth noting, however, that notions of risk or threat, such as the risk of violence perpetrated by those who may inadvertently interrupt the sexual acts, are often intricately bound with the experience of thrill and pleasure. In this respect, it is entirely possible for an individual engaging in public sexual practices to be motivated not just by sexual desire, but also by a desire to explore the boundaries between safety and danger. Indeed, as those who engage in public sex transgress normative societal assumptions regarding where sex does and does not belong, and what should and should not be visible within public space, the concepts of risk and desire become entwined.

References

Hubbard, P. and Colosi, R. (2015) Respectability, Morality and Disgust in the Night-Time Economy: Exploring Reactions to 'Lap-Dance' Clubs in England and Wales, *The Sociological Review*, 63(4), pp. 782-800.

Watch

Dogging Tales (2012) TV Documentary, directed by Leo Maguire. UK: Channel 4 TV.

Author bio

Katharine Parker is a Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences at York St John University. Her research focuses upon the construction and intersections of gender, sexuality, and identity in contemporary society.