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Deviance Paradigm: the Process of Becoming a Thai Masseuse*

Suleemarn Narumol

Introduction

Prostitution has a long history in Thai society. Its current course was changed by official laws, passed in 1960, which made the trade illegal. This made prostitution a much more complex phenomenon, one that has changed in accordance with the economy and society of the times. Massage parlours are a manifestation of that change, although they differ from other forms of adjustment in that the professional services that the masseuse renders—massage and sauna—are legal. However, the prostitution that is carried on in the guise of massage activities is illegal and held in contempt by society. Society in general, therefore, associates masseuses with prostitutes, and denies them social status accordingly. The ambivalence with which the masseuse is faced is due to the fact that, while her profession is legal under service establishment law, B.E. 2509, at the same time her activities as a prostitute violate suppression of prostitution law, B.E. 2503. This makes the control exerted by the authorities over such establishments, and the punishment meted out by them, lighter than that which is inflicted on other forms of prostitution.

Thus the legal structure permits prostitution to flourish under the guise of massage services. The massage parlour thus provides the masseuse with the environment, security, and rewards to sustain her in the profession.

* The article is part of an unpublished Master’s thesis, “Becoming a Masseuse: A Case Study of Masseuses in the Massage Parlour,” (1987) Thammasat University, under the direction of Professor Pongswat Swatdipong; it doesn’t include the process of socialization into the professional role in the massage parlour. The writer wishes to express her appreciation to Professor Chai-Anan Samudavanija, Dr. Lysa Hong and Dr. Pasuk Phongpaichit for their assistance.
The social opprobrium and punishment notwithstanding, women still continue to become—and remain—masseuses. Poverty alone cannot account for prostitution; as a reason it is simply inadequate; many other women suffering the same conditions of deprivation do not become prostitutes. Thus, any study of masseuses must include an investigation into the process whereby a woman becomes a masseuse; this is necessary in order to understand the many variables (multi-variations) involved in why some women withdraw from the profession, while others take it up as a career.

This study therefore intends to understand the life and world of the masseuse from her viewpoint, emphasizing the inter-relation between her and her environment; as well as the collective experiences masseuses share and the pattern of behavior that arises in the course of their lives.

In addition, the study will look at the stages involved in the process of becoming a masseuse; the key contingencies in each stage that push her and facilitate her entry into deviant behavior; her acceptance of her deviant role, and the maintenance of that role. In this way, a better understanding can be reached first as a despised member of society, and at the same time, as a member of the world of massage parlours which influences her way of life, self-conception and worldview.

In terms of methodology, the study employs qualitative research methods within the framework of symbolic interactionism, which considers that the social world is not defined by objective reality, but that reality is dependent on the definition that is ascribed to it by each society, a definition which is forever changing and being redefined. The study aims to examine the masseuse from her perspective, which includes her way of thinking, her beliefs and values and how they differ from those of society in general. In order to do this, we have to search for the symbolic meaning that prostitution has in her world. Entry into the data is at two levels:

(1) The data at the level of the institution of the massage parlour in order to understand the context and working environment of the masseuse. These data are obtained from the “madam”, “the client-cheerers”, “the clients”, and the masseuses themselves.

(2) The data at the individual level, which consist of individual, in-depth histories of masseuses from the time before they were prostitutes until a time when they have been in the profession for a while in order to analyse the various conditions and situations they have experienced in the course of their lives, their attitudes towards the profession, towards society and towards themselves. This study includes data on the masseuse in the surroundings of the massage parlour itself, in their living environment/place and in some cases, also in their place of origin. One of the techniques used involved participant-observation, including observation and in-depth interviews. Fieldwork was conducted for six months.
Theoretical Framework

There are presently two theoretical frameworks used to study deviant behavior i.e. the normative perspective and the relativistic perspective. The former perceives the phenomenon of social deviance as the violation of social norms which define what deviance is, based on the collective rules or expectations, with regard to behavior, of the majority of the group of society. The normative perspective therefore considers consensus as a central fact of organised social life. Consensus is manifested in social norms as collective rules governing behavior in the various aspects of social life, which constitutes its organisational pattern. Therefore behavior that deviates from the social norm is deviant behavior. A deviant is an individual who violates the social consensus. The focus is on the deviant individual and the direct correlation between the inherent causes and the factors arising from the social environment that tempt the person to behave differently from the rest of society.

The other framework is the relativistic perspective which is used in this study. This perspective emphasizes the social audience and the process of defining deviation, and the result of the interaction between the social audience and the so-called deviant. This perspective differs from the normative approach in that it focuses on the central reality of social life-- namely that since modern society is fraught with complexity, there is more diversity than consensus. Social organisation based on consensus is not realistic. On the contrary, people and groups have conflicting and competing interests. Therefore, socially organised behavior is the product of self-interested bargaining between opposing parties or of the coercion of some people by others who are more powerful.

In addition, the relativistic perspective holds that social organisation is dynamic and in a constant state of flux. This perspective does not reject the importance of social norms; it maintains, however, that they only constitute a guide to behavior in various situations that arise. Social relationships are not strictly governed by fixed social norms, but are formed and changed by means of dynamic interaction. Therefore social norms cannot differentiate between the deviant from the non-deviant for behaviorial patterns do not arise from collective and definite social norms.

According to Becker,

A society has many groups, each with its own set of rules, and people belong to many groups simultaneously. A person may break the rules of one group by the very act of abiding by the rules of another group. Is he, then, deviant?  

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It can be seen that within society at large, there are many groups each with its own social norms which are created by means of dynamic interaction in various situations. Thus, it is difficult to say in advance what is proper behavior and what is not. Therefore, who is deviant depends on the constitution of the social audience. The relativistic sociologist pays more attention to the social audience than to the reasons for deviance. The process of deviance is the process of defining what constitutes deviance as understood by the social audience, the interaction between the latter and the deviant and between the deviant and society.

**The Process of Defining Deviance**

Becker's theory of deviance is that:

...social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying these rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an "offender". The deviant is one to whom that level has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label.

Therefore deviance is the result of the response of others to the behavior of the individual. Behavior which violates social rules is not sufficient to make a person a deviant, but is dependent on the reaction of the social audience towards that individual. Kitsuse explained the influence of the social audience on the interactional process,

Deviance may be conceived as a process by which the members of a group, community, or society

(1) interpret behavior as deviant,
(2) define persons who so behave as a certain kind of deviant, and
(3) accord them the treatment considered appropriate to such deviants.²

Kitsuse explained deviance in terms of the definition it is accorded by the social audience, which is relative, and is a process with three chronological stages: the definition, labeling and treatment of the deviant.

Becker also shows the influence of the social audience on the definition of deviance:

Behavior | Obedient Behavior | Rule-breaking behavior
--- | --- | ---
perceived as deviant | Falsely accused | Pure deviant
not perceived as deviant | Conforming | Secret deviant

TABLE 1: Types of deviant behavior
Adapted from Becker³

From the table, it can be seen that societal reaction is the creator of deviance, more so than inherent deviance itself. One instance of this is the case of the falsely accused (table 1) who was arrested and treated by the police as if he were a criminal. This is called the process of criminalization violating the law, but is not punished, because the social audience has no reaction to it. So who is a deviant is dependent on the reaction and severity of the punishment meted out by the social audience. However, the level of definition and reaction differs according to the social audience. Normally, importance is attached to the formal societal reaction on the part of the relevant authorities, such as the police, the psychiatrist, and the social worker. However, the informal societal reaction also has its importance.⁴

The Masseuse and Violation of the Gender System

If conformity to the gender system is the norm, then the conformist is "a good girl". By the same token, the deviant, or "bad girl" is the one who violates the gender system. The severity of the condemnation varies with the type of wrong-doing. The masseuse, as a person who violates the gender system, is labeled a "bad girl". The profession involves servicing clients through providing baths. This in itself does not receive the condemnation of society. But prostitution is latent in the masseuse's professional role, and it is this that society condemns. The masseuse therefore is the latent prostitute. The prostitution of the masseuse thus refers to "the willingness to indulge in intercourse or other activities for the gratification of others, which constitutes promiscuity for barter, regardless of whether the persons involved are of the same or different sexes."

The wrong-doing on the part of the masseuse is in violation of the norms governing maternity; it also contravenes the sexual norm, through having multiple male sex partners outside the institution of marriage. Besides this, children born out of wedlock are not accepted by society. Hence the masseuse has to decide not to have children and must face the likelihood of abortion.

Regardless of the choice she has made, the masseuse appears to violate all social norms. Society thus has to resort to rules to control their behavior. The stereotype\(^5\) of the masseuse is that of the "bad girl" who is the cause of the decline in morals, and of a variety of social problems; she is seen as a carrier of veneral diseases, and the massage parlour as a breeding ground for criminals. Thus, the wrong-doing of the masseuse is serious, especially from the viewpoint of the "good girl". The negative societal reaction draws a clear line between the "good" and "bad girl".

It can be seen that there is a double standard used in evaluating the behavior of men and women. While prostitution is condemned by society, at the same time, it perpetuates the service since it considers that men have the right to seek sexual gratification freely outside marriage, based on the myth that the sexual urges of men are more compelling than those of women. The women thus fulfill their sexual desires, and have the social function of perpetuating the ideology of sexual inequality. And when their function as "a necessary evil" is performed in a capitalist society, the status of women, which is already low, is further devalued when they become a commodity that can be purchased.

It can be seen that the gender system is important in determining the creation and maintenance of the masseuse as a social phenomenon. Even though prostitution has a social function, it still receives social disapproval. The bad girl always becomes the deviant; the difference lies in the severity of the punishment, which, in turn, depends upon the particular social audience. This has an effect on the life and feelings of the masseuse, and the way she perceives herself. Behavior that is deemed deviant has an impact upon her in terms of her acceptance of her deviant role and her assumption of a deviant identity.

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\(^5\) Walter Lippmann [referred to in Edwin E. Schur, \textit{Labeling Deviant Behavior}, 1971] describes "stereotype" as follows: "We do not first see, then define; we define first and then see...We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And these preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception. They mark out certain objects as familiar, and the somewhat strange as sharply alien."
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Large society</th>
<th>Subculture</th>
<th>Third Stage</th>
<th>Professional Stage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First Stage</strong></td>
<td><strong>Second Stage</strong></td>
<td><strong>Third Stage</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Entry Point</td>
<td>Transitional Stage</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Social-Psycho-contingencies</td>
<td>Process of socialisation and adjustment into subculture</td>
<td>Decision to become masseuse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Zig-zag pattern**
- delays the crystalisation
- or the acceptance of the deviant identity

**Identifies herself with the subculture and accepts her deviant identity**

**TABLE 2 : Sequential model of the process of developing a deviant identity**
The Process of Becoming Masseuse

In order to become a prostitute a woman has to undergo a process of socialisation, and since this is a deviant career, there is also a process of rationalisation. We need then to understand this process from the context of the sub-culture into which a woman is drawn; how she enters the trade in the first place and how she comes to accept it as a career.

The study finds three stages to this process.

1. Entry point
2. Transitional stage
3. Professional stage

1. Entry point

The study finds that all the girls face some crisis in the period just before they enter the trade. However, although the causes vary, the crisis alone is not the deciding factor. But it leads them from one thing to the other in a continuous series of contingencies which eventually push them into the world of the prostitution. In the following section, we shall describe the contingencies which lead the women in the study to take to prostitution in a massage parlour, specially chosen for the study.

1.1 The crisis

The causes of the crisis can vary.

1.1.1 Conditions of poverty within the family, as in the case of Toi.

Toi is a native of Payao (a district in northern Thailand). Her family had some land but lost it through their inability to pay off the mortgage. As a result, the family became tenant farmers and wage labourers, but the earnings they received were never enough to feed the family of seven. They were in debt and had to pay off the interest on loans they had borrowed for farming. The parents then agreed to let Toi's sister become a prostitute in Bangkok. She was controlled by a pimp. This sister lost her job as a prostitute call girl soon afterwards because she was not pretty enough. She later went to work in a textile factory, and stopped sending money back home. Thus, when an agent came to ask the parents to take Toi to Bangkok to work, in return for an advance of 20,000 baht, her parents agreed. These were the circumstances which made Toi decide to leave home to help the family.

1.1.2 Crisis relating to family problems.

Family problems were found to be important among masseuses. This type of problem may be one of the primary reasons why not-so-poor girls are pushed into the sex trade. Family problems can lead to a condition of extreme stress, which in turn causes the woman to flee in order to escape from it. Two types of family problems
can be distinguished. One is related to violence within the family and lack of security. Cases of wife-beating and violence directed against the daughter by the father are common. The other problem is the broken-home situation. The woman may have been abandoned by her husband, and as a result she has to fend for herself and her children.

1.1.3 Situation of stress arising from an inability to fulfill the family’s expectations, or from disappointing the family.

This group of women do not come from broken homes. They come from families which have high expectations of them—expectations which they cannot fulfill. This leads to a situation of stress from which the women want to escape. A very common situation is a breach of accepted sexual norms, such as engaging in pre-marital sex especially if it results in unwanted pregnancy. The other common problem is drug addiction. Such behavior is contrary to the family’s expectations. The guilty feelings that result cause the women to think badly of themselves, to feel ashamed.

1.2 Incentives / motivations

The motivation which occurs after the crises already described is a desire to be able to stand on one’s own two feet and to be able to earn money. Money is important because it gives them security and makes them self-reliant. This incentive compels the women to fight, to earn a living to support themselves and their families. It is an important factor in the transition from the initial crisis situation to the point of entry into the world of the sex trade.

1.3 Contact with the deviant sub-culture and the opportunities to take up prostitution

Apart from the various contingencies already described, there are other important circumstances which lead a woman into prostitution. These are:

1.3.1 Contact/or association with those who are already in the trade, which becomes a bridge linking an ordinary woman under stress to a world society rejects.

1.3.2 The above circumstances will lead the women into the process of socialisation into the world of the sex trade, the financial returns providing the incentives for the transition. Because of the remuneration, the women change their views of the world and come to accept prostitution as a career. In other words, they accept it because they appreciate, and get satisfaction from, the financial rewards this occupation offers compared to alternative employment opportunities open to women with a low level of education and lacking the necessary job skills.

It is also important that those involved in the sex trade (massage parlour owners, mamasans, supervisors and colleagues) all help facilitate the process of learning and socialisation. They help the women to lessen the difficulties and stress, by giving them moral support during the painful transition process. Furthermore, these people
provide an amenable working environment during this period, and ease the women into their new role with as little stress as possible. They cheer the women along and furnish them with a new set of social values which are different from those they had held before.

1.3.3 As the women come to see prostitution as a positive contribution to their lives, they can then appreciate the idea of sex for sale, and sex for fun, in lieu of sex for love.

The study has shown that women who once associated sex with love both in the context of marriage and in terms of mutual satisfaction, but who are faced with some type of stressful situation, and decide to solve their problems on their own, can find themselves vulnerable to the lures of the sex trade. But they need to establish contact with those already involved in the trade; this is an important bridge. Once the bridge has been established, the women still have to go through a further process of socialisation in order to appreciate the idea of sex for sale in lieu of sex for love. In this process financial reward plays an important role.

2. The Transitional Stage: learning the new culture of the world of sex trade

This transitional stage is highly crucial as it constitutes the turning point in which the woman either becomes a professional masseuse/prostitute, or withdraws from the trade.

The most important pattern found in this stage is that role ambivalence or confusion. All the girls in the case study are in a state of confusion. They are torn between their role in the world of the sex trade, in which they are seen as bad women in the eyes of society, and their role as good women to be cherished. They doubt their identity as well as their social status. On the one hand, they would like to be good women, but their status as a masseuse is not accepted by society at large. Beginners usually experience this state of confusion as they still cling to the standards and the social values they have been brought up with. Even though they go through an intense process of socialisation within their new world, it takes time to appreciate the new system of values. There are a number of indicators pointing to the state of confusion that many women find themselves in regarding their status.

(a) There is a zig-zag pattern of entry and exit. In other words, the woman often takes up the trade, drops out for a while, then goes back to it later. Even after becoming a prostitute in a massage parlour, the woman still finds it difficult to adhere to her new world completely. They still find it difficult to adapt to the two worlds without conflict arising in their minds. One important indicator of the zig-zag pattern of entry
and exit is the frequent visits to their home town, and the long periods for which they stay in their home (home comes to represent "normal" society). The other indicator is the tendency to seek refuge as a kept woman, either on a temporary or a more permanent basis. If the woman finds a man who is willing to keep her permanently, then she will quit the trade. If the relationship is temporary, she will return to the parlour again afterwards. It was also found that the girls change residence frequently, as a result of difficulties in adjusting to their new job.

(b) There are attempts to solve or avoid thinking about the problems of confused identity and the ensuing conflict by smoking, drinking, taking drugs, taking anti-depressants or by seeking refuge in 'fun' activities.

(c) At this transitional stage, the women feel alienated. They become confused between the two roles discussed earlier, and they do not know what kind of values they should adopt as their own. They suffer a great deal of anxiety; they lose self-confidence and begin to think negatively of themselves. They are trapped in a state of "self-loss". In addition, they develop an enormous guilt complex from turning into a "bad woman". They still find it difficult to justify their present status as a career prostitute. This is a state of alienation in a normless situation.

(d) A deciding factor, which eventually causes the women to accept their deviant identity, is the financial rewards they receive from the job. Such financial rewards are a positive attribute of the occupation, although they do come easily. For a time the women still have to face up to--learn to cope with--several negative aspects of the sex trade. For example, there are the negative attitudes of the clients and other people in the trade; also there are failed attempts at bargaining with clients for a suitable fee. Finally, the person most important to the masseuse (significant others or the reference group) can influence the masseuse and can cause conflicts in their mind, especially in cases where this particular person holds a different set of values.

In short this transitional stage and the many processes involved therein can delay the crystalisation--or acceptance--of her new identity. A very common trait found in this stage is that they tend to lie about themselves, in an attempt to keep their deviant identity a secret.

3. Acceptance of their new identity as masseuse/prostitute

This does not mean that she accepts being a masseuse as a profession or a job only. It is not simply a role they are playing; rather it implies complete acceptance of the new culture--the world of the sex trade--together with its beliefs and social values. It is this acceptance and the complete transformation of their beliefs which signifies the crystallisation of the new identity as a masseuse-cum-prostitute. Once the woman
comes to terms with herself with regard to her "deviant identity", and considers herself a part of this "deviant world", the new beliefs and social values will determine her world view, and her way of life. She will no longer wrestle with problems arising from a sense of double identity. She becomes totally engrossed in her new identity.

At this stage the women enter into the state of what Lemert called the 'secondary deviant'. Thus a professional masseuse is a woman who has accepted the norms and reality of the deviant world of the sex trade.

An important finding with regard to this stage is that the women change their view of sex as an occasional means of earning some money, and begin to look upon sex as a vocation, a job to be done on a regular basis as a means of earning a living. The act of copulation is merely a service to be performed professionally, without any emotional involvement. This vocation becomes so much a part of the women that they no longer feel alienated.

It was also found that the women's attitude towards men tended to be negative, as a result of the torment they had experienced at the hands of men in general, as well as at the hands of their clients, and even their lovers.

Their reference group often belongs to the same deviant world, and they influence the thinking and behaviour of the masseuses to a very great extent. The women will look to the reference group as a role model, against which to measure themselves; they regard it as the leader in terms of opinion and use it as a judge of themselves. They also use the reference group as a base for making a wide range of decisions. The reference group forms a sub-cultural milieu within which the women feel at ease. This, together with the financial rewards from the job and the successful role models they try to emulate, gives the women the confidence to withstand the sneers of the world outside. As a peer group which faces the same kind of fate, the reference group gives the women security and support.

Thus the women begin to accept their deviant identity. This identity becomes a label that explains to the women who they are. It is not easy for a person to accept a definite identity of this nature. But once a woman accepts the fact that she exhibits

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6 Edwin M. Lemert, Human Deviance, Social Problems and Social Control. (2d. ed). (New Jersey : Prentice-Hall, 1967), pp. 40-41. Lemert has distinguished "primary deviation" which is polygenetic, arising as it does from a variety of social, cultural, psychological, and physiological factors, from secondary deviation. It refers to the socially defined responses people make to the fact of their deviance. Secondary deviance has implications with regard to the status and psychic structure of an individual.

certain social traits, then she possesses a certain identity. In addition, the society also enforces this identity by branding them as deviant. With all these processes and forces at work, the women eventually assume the identity of a masseuse. No matter what social context the women find themselves in, they will always see themselves as possessing the identity of a masseuse.

The paper delineates, in broad outlines, the different stages involved in the process of becoming a masseuse. In actuality, demarcations of this nature may be blurred and are certainly more complicated. Each case study has its own details and peculiarities, although the broad outline is roughly the same. More in-depth research, based on these case studies, can still be conducted in order to appreciate the complexities involved in each individual case with regard to the process of transformation.