

***CACHERISMO* IN A SAN JOSE BROTHEL - ASPECTS OF MALE
SEX WORK IN COSTA RICA**

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CACHERISMO IN A SAN JOSE BROTHEL - ASPECTS OF MALE**SEX WORK IN COSTA RICA**

Jacobo Schifter and Peter Aggleton¹

Male prostitution has a history as long as female prostitution, and there is evidence of male Sumerians and Greeks selling sex to other men (Dover, 1978). However, female prostitution has received more attention from researchers; so much so that as an institution, prostitution is often viewed as a female occupation. In patriarchal societies, where service labour is largely undertaken by women, men who provide services to other men are often seen as doing female tasks (Carrier, 1985). Indeed, one of the characteristics most associated with femininity in Costa Rica is that of sexually servicing the man (Kashak and Sharrat, 1985). This is one reason why it is important to analyse the nature of male sex work, particularly that undertaken by men who see themselves as >men= and who beyond the sex work context are largely heterosexual. This chapter focuses upon a group of such men working in a *casa* or brothel in San José, the capital city of Costa Rica. The aim is to offer insight into the self understandings and social practices of such men, and the kinds of sexual culture that emerge in these conditions.

The focus here is on one form of male sex work, as practised in the mid 1990s in a specific setting. It should not be assumed that all male sex work in Costa Rica, or indeed even the majority of it, takes this form. A variety of different kinds of male sex work currently coexist within the country, and there is some fluidity between them. They include street based work, work in public parks, the agosto 25, 2002

provision of sexual services through formal and informal networks and agencies, and the transgendered sex work undertaken by *travestis* who cater for a primarily heterosexual male clientele. Also important is the provision of sexual services by men to local women and to female tourists. None of these forms of sex work will be the focus in this chapter. Instead, we report on findings from recent fieldwork conducted as a prelude to a sexual health promotion intervention among young men working in *acasa* in an outlying neighbourhood of San José.

METHODOLOGY

A total of twenty five young men aged from 15 to 17 were interviewed.² All worked in the same *casa* and most only went there at night to look for clients. Two interviewers, both members of the Latin American Institute for Prevention and Health Education (ILPES), conducted the interviews over a three-month period between January and March 1997. Each interview lasted about one hour and was conducted in private. Each participant was paid 5,000 colones (about \$20) for their time. An open-question interview schedule was used. Questions focused on sexual initiation, self definition, sexual orientation, love, drug use, prostitution, family rules, and relationships with men and women. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded so as to anonymise interviewees and the location. Analysis took place using a specialist data base developed by ILPES.

Access was gained through the owner of the *casa* as part of work leading to the development of an HIV prevention and sexual health promotion project based in the brothel. In view of the fact that pandering is a serious crime in Costa Rica and that many of the young men interviewed were under 18

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years of age (the legal age for sexual consent), total confidentiality was promised and the names of interviewees have been changed.

Both interviewers were gay men, one of whom was a friend of the owner of the *casa*. The other was introduced as a gay researcher interested in writing an article on male sex work. The only condition requested by the owner was that interviews should be held in private. The fact that interviews were carried out by gay men should be taken into account when examining the responses. Had the interviewers been heterosexual men or women, it is possible that the respondents might have provided rather different answers to some of the questions asked.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFIT

Research on male sex work in England and elsewhere, has established that money is the main reason why some predominantly heterosexual men sell sex to other men (West, 1993). This was the dominant explanation given by the majority of the young men interviewed, although as we will see later, other factors can influence the decision to become involved in sex work. A charge of between 2,000 colones (US\$10) and 5,000 colones (US\$20) was made per act of sexual intercourse (depending on whether or not penetration occurs). Since the number of clients can vary between two and eight per day, the monthly income delivered by this kind of work varies from 80,000 to over half a million colones. Most possibly earn around 150.000 colones a month, which is a salary significantly higher than that of a university professor. Because most young men have not received much formal education, a clerical job such as that they might be likely to obtain, would provide only a quarter or a tenth of this.

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CACHERISMO³

As in other contexts in Costa Rica, homosexual behaviour in the *casa* does not affect the sex worker=s inherent heterosexuality since men from the lower classes do not generally see homosexual behaviour as determining sexual orientation or identity (Schifter and Madrigal, 1996). Much more important are distinctions between activity and passivity, and between masculinity and femininity. For them, >homosexuals= are those men who show the characteristics of the opposite gender, and who show their desire for other men. Male sex workers in the *casa* see themselves as *cacheros* or >men= whose public liaisons are with women and who display all the appropriate characteristics of their gender.

Noé does not consider himself a homosexual because >I am not attracted by men=, Eric defines himself as >100% for the vagina= and Julio feels heterosexual because he only feels attracted to women.

Mario considers himself bisexual, but he defines this as being a man who likes to penetrate both men and women; for him, >it is the same, having sex with a woman or with a man ... the bottom is what I like.=

According to Tío, being gay is >feeling like a woman=. There are different degrees of gayness. The most extreme is the *loca* (>queen= in English) who is >obsessed with being a woman=, but for Tío being gay is not synonymous with being effeminate. What makes him different from gay men, however, is that he does not >like other men=, >I do not turn to see them in the street, as others do=. Tomás agrees that cruising other men and rejecting women is what determines homosexuality.

These different perceptions of homosexuality are symptomatic of a particular gender dynamic.

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People are defined by a behaviour we will call *cacherismo* rather than by internal personalities or sexual practices. Being recognised as a *cachero* demands a power hierarchy in which, symbolically at least, the male prostitute remains in control. For such sex workers, homosexual practices do not make them gay, homosexual or bisexual, and although they use these words, the meanings they give them differ from those more commonly used.⁴ As long as sexual desire is continued to be shown towards the opposite sex and behaviour is masculine at all times, one is still a man.

The *casa* is located in a marginal area of San José where other sources of employment are scarce, and most adult men are unemployed. In this context, selling your body is one of the few ways of gaining earning money and gaining the social prestige that comes with this. So long as gender conventions are preserved, male sex workers are largely accepted by the communities in which they live, where gender is defined primarily through strength and physicality rather than through supposedly different psychologies.

Male sex workers such as those described here are masculine, they play male sports like pool and soccer, they get married and they have children. They do not openly question the gender system. In this respect, it is interesting to observe how other customers of the pool halls nearby, aware of the fact that these youths work in the *casa*, do not discriminate against them or reject them as friends. This is not the same for the owner of the brothel, who is seen as *aloca* for being an exclusive and effeminate homosexual. He has not left his home for about seven years, and never talks to neighbours.

In order for *cacheros* not to be seen as homosexual or bisexual, they must differentiate
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themselves from their clients. This is achieved through dichotomizing sexual behaviours and life projects.

If the *cachero* is characterized by his youthfulness, focality, masculinity, heterosexuality and dominance, the latter is typified by his passivity, homosexuality, old age, multifocality, and submission to the *cachero*'s desires. These oppositions are not neutral: one has higher value than the other. *Cacheros*, according to the dominant discourse, are worth more than homosexuals.

Materialism

A young *cachero* has sex for money. José tells us that >money is my only interest=. He is not interested in emotional relationships with men since, as his friend Arnoldo states, >women are for that=. Neither would have sex if >payment was not involved=, a view also shared by Mono. None claimed to feel sexual attraction towards a man, even during their childhood. All of them had their first sexual experiences with women, and enjoy sexual relationships with them, not with other men. Clients, on the contrary, >want to be told that they are interesting and attractive, but I do not care about them=, says Alberto.

Focality versus multifocality

Cacheros are unlikely to participate in the Costa Rican gay community. They stay away from homosexual bars, clubs, activities, organizations or gay gathering places for fear of being recognised or thought gay. José, for example, emphatically denies >having put one foot in a gay bar=. Julio does not like to >greet, recognize or meet clients outside the brothe=. If he is walking on the street and

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recognizes a client, he tries to ignore him. Vernol explains that he >never greet(s) a *loca* in the street=. Miguel thinks that it is best not to be seen in any homosexual place because >they themselves (gay men) begin gossiping with others=. Leo told us that when he sees a client, he >crosses the street and pretends not to see him=. For those interviewed, socializing outside the brothel means homosexualizing themselves. >My mother knows that I work in the *casa*=. says Rodrigo, >but she does not like me to go to gay parties because I will become like them=. Nevertheless, some of the men do visit private apartments or houses. Once the client has given a phone number, they can make dates, but only if the visit is to a private place and in the context of prostitution.

Temporarity

The type of *cacherismo* displayed by the young men interviewed is an activity of youth, and is usually short lived. Once the individual gets married, has children or leaves sex work, few would label him bisexual or homosexual. There are no male prostitutes over the age of 25 in the *casa* and it is expected that only a few years will be spent in sex work. Thousands of now mature men may therefore have been earlier involved in this kind of sex work without anyone having the slightest idea. Mono feels that >at 25, I am already considered a veteran=. Arnoldo thinks that his work >is temporary. One can never be old and a prostitute=. Carlos knows many men who used to work in the house, but who have now totally >abandoned this work=.

As if to demonstrate the transitory nature of their work, many of the young men have girlfriends, have lived with a woman or are already married. Most have more than one child. Only one of them
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admitted to not having an ongoing relationship with a woman, though he too has occasional sexual relationships with women. Many of their female partners know about the work they do, or at least suspect it. Noé admits having told his wife what he does to avoid >somebody else coming and telling her=. Rodrigo's mother knows her son is a *cachero*, and she laughs about it, although she wants him to marry. Mono's girlfriend waits for him in the pool hall next to the brothel. As he explains, >She knows that I do this for money and that I am not being unfaithful=. Whether women know about the activity or not, *cacheros* make it clear that they have female partners. >I cuddle my girlfriend near the pool so that my friends see me and know that I am not gay=, says Tomás.

Indifference

When they walk into the brothel, *cacheros* sit down and talk, and casually greet the customers. An understood behaviour is not to show a preference for any of them. When Tío was asked if he was attracted by any particular client he answered with a definite >No=. Erick told us that the client is the one who chooses, >I do not choose=. Rodrigo thinks the same, having sex with >old, fat, bald, or ugly clients, does not matter to me=. Noé likes to penetrate his clients anally, >I stick it in anyone who gives his ass to me=. Tomás does not have any problem when having oral sex: >As long as they don't bite my dick, any sucking is good=. Arnoldo tells us that he does not reject any of the customers: >Money is money=.

When a preference for a special client is felt, the desire is usually repressed. Julio tells us that there are times when >I like a client more than another ... but I try to avoid this=. When he was asked
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why, he said >I was afraid of liking him=. The same thing is true of Miguel who confesses that he has never liked men, but with this kind of life he is afraid of >homosexualizing myself= since prostitution becomes habitual and >one could get to like it=.

Older men

Most of the interviewees admit to preferring men over forty years of age. In principle, this may be logical since these are the ones with more money, and many of them have the greatest need to pay for sex. While some younger gay and bisexual men visit the brothel, workers reported rejecting them. Jorge told us >I don't like youngsters, I could not have sex with them=. Vernol said that >the young guys that come here are too effeminate; they are young *locas* that demand too much and want to be treated as women=. Sex workers feel that by having sex with men of their own age they are >homosexualizing= themselves. Although the young client also pays, his youthfulness blurs the boundary between prostitution and homosexuality. In order to be a *cachero*, there has to be a hierarchy and visible power differences. An older man has less power because he has lost his youth and >has to pay=, says Herson. Between two young men, this kind of difference does not exist.

SEXUAL PRACTICES

There was no consensus among interviewees regarding the practices that were possible, and those that are not. Most claimed that they never allow themselves to be fucked, and that this is what differentiates them from their clients. Vernol stated he had >a huge dick= and that clients would >die=

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for him to fuck them, or >let them suck me=. >Few of them can take me, and sometimes I spend half an hour trying to shove it in. But when I get it in, they cry with happiness ... They need to be very *macho* to endure such a big dick. I couldn't.= Tomás also considers that he is a man because >I don't give my butt to any gay. If they want a dick, they can get it all. It is gross for me to suck, and I would never let them fuck me=. Mono thinks in a similar way. >Homosexuals=, he says >like anal sex. Not me, never.=

Another illustration of power differentials in the sex work context links to violence and cruelty. Some workers said they enjoyed hitting and hurting clients, humiliating them in many ways. Vernol likes to slap his clients when he fucks them. Bryan makes his customers suck him, scratches their backs, and when least expected, >I hit them with a whip=. Rodrigo forces customers to beg him to touch them.

Cacheros rarely admit to participating in oral sex. Most of them say that it is their clients' desire to fellate them that helps them have an erection. The *casa*'s owner said that in his experience what >hooks= some otherwise heterosexual men on male prostitution is the quality of oral sex clients provide. >Women do not know how to suck, and the youngsters go crazy with the clients= expertise on this field=, he said.

Kissing is out of the question. Noé says that he >feels like vomiting when he has to kiss a client=. Miguel says he never kisses a client on the mouth. >I let them kiss my neck or my legs, but never my mouth ...= Herson says the same >I'm not the kind who likes kissing a man=. Semen is, however, less of a problem. Since masturbation is a very common practice, sex workers do not worry

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about getting semen on their hands, or with wiping away a client=s semen. Neither does it bother them to ejaculate in a client=s mouth. Interviewees reported generally using condoms with their clients. Most said that they would never have penetrative sex without one. This was not the case with female partners or wives. >I never use the condom with my wife. She does not know what I do in the street, and it would worry her=, says Marco. The same thing is true for Mono >My lover is very hot, and so am I. Sometimes I come from fucking three men and she wants sex. She does not like me to stick it with the condom. She says she likes the shape of my dick=.

There are other differences too when having sex with women. With a girl, says Miguel, >one is more tender and delicate=. Noé feels that women only want men to fuck them in the vagina, and they do not like anything else=. Vernol agreed, >Only once did I fuck my girlfriend up the ass. She said that she wanted to know how homosexuals had sex. But she never let me do it again ... she said it was not natural=. Arnoldo had asked his girlfriend to let him do it, >but she said it is not normal=.

Oral sex was not very common with women either. Few of the interviewees said that their female partners fellated them. >Women do not know how to suck=, said Miguel. Rodrigo agreed that women do not >have experience=. Yet, the *cacheros* did not have any problem giving oral sex to their female partners. Julio says that he likes to suck his girl friend=s cunt and >to lick it all=. He would never do this with a client. The same was true of Vernol who >uses his tongue before sticking my cock in. When she screams that she wants it ... then the whole thing goes=.

It was not only sexual practices that differentiate relations with clients from relations with
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girlfriends and wives. Language (or lack of it) is also important. Paid sex normally occurs in silence. >I do not like to talk because I lose concentration=, said Augusto. César believed that if clients ask him to say nice things to them, his erection will >go down= immediately. Vernol does not want >to hear anything from the client=. This is especially true if the client >is effeminate because (then) I feel I am with a woman=. Tomás finds that he likes to tell >dirty things= to women, but >not to my clients=. Rodrigo confesses that he prefers >not to say a single word after agreeing the price=. For a *cachero*, talking with clients while having sex is either an obstacle to fantasizing about women, or an intolerable emotional bond.

CONTRADICTIONS

A series of factors work against *cacherismo*. These threaten the self definition of *cacheros*, and the social relations that distinguish sex workers and clients.

Pleasure

Theoretically, sex workers seek only money in their relations with clients. In order to have an erection with a man, most of them said that they closed their eyes and fantasized about having sex with a woman. Herson says he imagines he is with a woman and concentrates on this. Otherwise >everything is a disaster=. In spite of these difficulties, some have learned to enjoy sex with men and to change their way of thinking. One of these was Noé, an attractive bricklayer and soccer referee. He says that he began because >a friend invited me to come to the *casa*. Never before had he >even thought of making

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it with a man=. Although the first time he had sex with a man he felt >dirty and ashamed=, little by little he has changed his way of thinking. >I have to be honest with you. There is nothing so delicious as to stick your dick into a butt. When women lubricate, they open so much that you don=t feel anything, while a butt gets tighter and it feels more=. Mono agreed with this by saying that in some ways homosexual sex is more enjoyable. >Women are like an endless hole, while there are men that are so closed that one can come much better=. Carlos believed the same. >I do not feel any attraction towards men, but it is a true that one feels better, physically speaking, fucking a man than a woman.=

Oral sex is also a source of enjoyment. The fact that girlfriends, wives or lovers do not want to practice it, make some sex workers enjoy it more with their clients. Some of them feel so randy that when no clients show up, as was the case for Marco, >I jerk off thinking about the way this client usually sucks=. Others reported sometimes fellating one another when no customers show up, because >you begin to miss it=.

Pleasure therefore poses a major threat to a predominantly heterosexual identity. Rodrigo stated that he has come to like sex with some clients so much that he is becoming homosexual. Carlos also admitted to something of a crisis because now he does not enjoy sex with his wife as he did before. Tomás has cut down having sex with women since he got into >orgies with men. Imagine having someone sucking you in the front and in the back, and another one pinching you all over your body=. And Miguel thinks that prostitution has made >the gay (all) men have inside= come out.

Vernol's relations with men had put him in situations where the line between heterosexuality and
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homosexuality was blurred. He described having been invited back by one gay man, and to his surprise, the man had also invited a lesbian friend and her partner. The >more feminine= lesbian took off her bra and jumped into bed. His client asked Vernol to fuck her while the more masculine lesbian >wanted to fuck me with a vibrator=. >I refused this= he said >but I had to fuck the prettiest dyke first and then the other one let me do it to her too. I took turns with one or the other while the guy was waiting for me to fuck him, and only come in him=. Vernol recalled having had >a great time, it was crazy sex that night. I don't even know who was taking me=. >I hope this does not mean that I will become gay=, he concluded. But these orgies >confuse me=.

Money and Drugs

Another factor that threatens *cacherismo* is an over dependence on the money that sex work can bring. Many young men confessed that they did not know what they spent their money on, and that it is like a drug for them. Ricardo said >I get sexually excited just by thinking about the five-thousand colones bill that I will earn=. Julio said that he never thinks a man with money is ugly, the >money makes them look more attractive=. Mono admits that he earns hundreds of thousands of colones, but he loses it as quickly on gambling, which is one of his weaknesses. Arnoldo confesses that he never has enough money to buy the things he likes, and buying those things is >as delicious or more delicious than sex. When I buy a shirt I like, it=s really pleasurable=. Noé did not know where he had spent all the money he had earned: >It's like water, it goes out of my hands without my even realizing it=.

Money can also be used to buy alcohol and other drugs. Only one interviewee stated that he had never taken crack. Most smoked marihuana and drank a lot of alcohol. Arnoldo admitted having

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sold his mother's clothes in order to buy crack. Mono said that the first thing that came to his mind when he was paid for the interview was to go and >smoke the money=. Noé said the same, and added that he cannot quit. He took the food away from his children >to buy drugs=. Herson believes that he is not totally hooked by crack, though he knows he >cannot quit=. Rodrigo believed that he >was not going to be trapped=, but >I am already into it=.

The need to buy drugs can result in *cacheros* providing sexual services that run contrary to their self identities. Noé is aware that because of drugs, >he has given his butt and (even) lived with a man=. Augusto admitted the same thing: >(sometimes) I need drugs so much, that I do whatever is necessary, even suck and let myself be fucked by a man=. Arnoldo said he has not gone into that yet, but he knows that >many of them give their butts in order to buy drugs=. Mono laughed about one of his workmates who got involved with a client that only likes to penetrate. He got >ten thousand colones he would not have earned if it didn't let the guy fuck him=.

Some *cacheros* establish relationships with gay men in order to have a better life or to buy drugs. Tomás said that he once went to live with a man in order to have the luxury he wanted. >People began to call me gay, and to say that I had become a *loca*, but as they are not giving me any economic support, I do not care=. Rodrigo felt the same: >I want to stop being poor and I want to have what I desire. If a guy comes and gives that to me, I am willing to go and live with him.=

A need for money and drugs therefore changes the sexual geography of *cacherismo* and its temporality. Some young men begin to work in gay saunas to earn more money; others go to parks and

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even to gay bars to hook someone. A few establish more lasting relationships with regular clients, and some may divorce and abandon their children.

Romantic love

The dividing line between homosexuality and *cacherismo* is romantic love. *Cacheros* should not love their clients, nor should they establish emotional relationships with them. Relationships should be seen, by clients and friends, as a business in which one party sells and the other one buys. Yet, there is evidence that popular sector discourses of sex and sexuality are becoming more flexible in their treatment of love between men.

In popular and marginal sectors in Costa Rica, love is generally expressed by the things that one person is willing to do for another. The idea that two people in love have some kind of psychological bond or more >profound communication= belongs to the middle rather than the lower classes. The belief that men and women are psychologically different is also more common among the middle classes. For poorer people, men and women simply *do* different things at home and at work, they do not have different psychological >mentalities=. Both have to find ways to survive in a world of scarcity, and that is why their bodies, not their minds, have to find ways to do so. Love is expressed through the care they show for each other (Schifter, 1989).

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But love is also something of a drug, justifying anything that is done on its behalf, including choosing the wrong gender (Scott, 1978). Jorge considers that love is >the most wonderful thing on earth= a >crazy thing where you loose control and does not care who you get involved with=. When he is asked about how he realizes that he loves another person, he says that he feels >passion=, >obsession= and that he >cannot stop thinking about her and doing things for her=. Alberto agrees that love erases any >loneliness= and >forgives= any failure. Arnoldo believes that when one is in love, one >does things that would not do otherwise=. Mono believes that love >overcomes any obstacle=, and forgives >any fall=. When one loves, he says, >one forgives anything and one can even fall in love with another man=.

When respondents were asked how they express their love, the answer was clear: through the things they *did* for the other person. Arnoldo buys chocolates for his girlfriend. Noé cuddles and caresses his wife. José cleans the house to show his lover that he loves her. Augusto goes to the supermarket >every once in a while=. Pedro brings his wife a cup of coffee. Vernol does it through sex: >I show her that I love her with good sex=.

When passion is over, a relationship begins. Passion is substituted by caring for each other (Johnson, 1983). In the case of the *cacheros* who are used to experiencing love through the care that two people give one another, and less through communication about intimate issues or traumas, Hollywood style, it is not difficult to fall in love with another man for whom they do not feel any passion.

Tomás is aware of this when he said us that the man that supports him treated him >so well and agosto 25, 2002

with so much tenderness= that he is >enchanted= by this relationship. The same happens to Rodrigo who felt like >dying= when a client that supported him abandoned him to go with another man. Noé has lived with another man for seven years, and when he was asked if he loved this man, he said >Yes=. Jeffrey confessed that he could fall in love with a man >that would be willing to give me good clothing and other kinds of things=.

Because *cacheros* belong to a social class in which love is not characterized by psychological complementarity, they are more vulnerable to falling in love with someone who helps them survive and cope with the >burden of life=, as Marco put it, independently if this person is a man or a woman. When a client appears who can establish a relationship with one of these men, this is when *cacherismo* receives its worse threat, and this is when the dividing line between sex as a business and homosexuality vanishes completely.

AIDS

Cacheros are very aware of AIDS. When they were asked about sources of transmission, they all replied that anal sex without a condom posed the greatest risk. They also showed sophistication in pointing to the lack of consensus among scientists about the dangers of oral sex, and of passivity versus activity in anal sex.. Greater awareness about AIDS was shared by clients, some of whom have changed their >likes=, as Noé says. As a result, active anal sex seemed less in demand: >Most clients only want us to >jack them off=>, according to Arnoldo.

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One of the impacts of AIDS, has been an apparent homogenization of sexual practice between *cacheros* and clients. >Nowadays, with all this masturbation it is not possible to tell who is active or passive=, says Luis. >Before, the *cachero*=, says Noé, >was the one who fucked a gay man, but now, ... I don't know ...= A few *cacheros* feel that their active role is evaporating: >I like to fuck, but I do not do it here very often because I am afraid of transmitting a disease to my wife=, says Marco. >The truth is that you do not know who is active and who is passive anymore=, he concludes. While the demand for receptive anal sex has decreased, the demand for insertive sex has gone up (because clients think it is safer), and some clients try to take sex workers away from the brothel to live with them so as >to have only one person fucking them=, says Vernol. A few clients are willing to pay more in order to have the >safety of having a loyal partner=, he says. They ask for AIDS tests, or for the man to go and live with them, in order to >be safe=, says Tomás. The chance of finding an older man who will pay for their studies, support them, give them lodging and friendship has increased. José described a friend, Esteban, who met an American who >took him to Miami and now he comes back with a lot of money and (is) living a great life=. Augusto was economically supported by a >gay= who has given him a >life of a king= in exchange for sex: >My partner does not care if I have sex with my girlfriend, he just prohibits me from having sex with other men=.

This new demand for more permanent relationships has a great impact on the *cacheros*. Some try to fool their neighbours by saying, as Alberto did, >I live with my uncle=. Others continued to live with women in order to hide their male lovers. Most problematic of all is the fact that their relationships with men take them out of their communities, expose them to be seen by others, involve them in the gay community and turn them into >homosexuals=, the *cachero*'s most feared stigma .

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Lila

One of the most important actors in the *casa* is its owner, an effeminate gay man of about 50 years of age, who has been in jail for prostitution. Lila, as he is known in the brothel, lives off prostitution. For every sexual relation in the *casa*, he charges 1,000 to 2,000 colones for the room. For years, his business has been to recruit young men from the streets, pool halls, parks, toilets and amusement parks. Now he does not go out, young men are brought by their friends or by clients needing a place to have sex.

Recruitment is based on physical beauty. Lila does not look for any signal that the boy is interested in prostitution. He invites him to the *casa* (or the boy is brought by others) and >tests= them to see what shape they are in. Clients prefer youngsters with big penises, but this is not the only criterion for acceptance. Some are extremely beautiful and this is enough. Recruitment takes place primarily from areas where the population has more Spanish than *mestizo* characteristics since, in Lila=s view boys from very marginal areas, with many Central American immigrants, are not attractive to his clients. Young men are recruited at varying ages. Tomás, for example, was taken to the brothel by a friend when he was only 10 years old. Lila taught him oral sex and kept him doing this until he turned 14, when he began to penetrate his clients. Mono arrived there at 14 years, and has stayed for almost 7 years. Others work part-time when they are still living with their parents and other relatives. There are some mothers, like Rodrigo's, who take the boys to the brothel, and there are also brothers that recruit

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one another.

The young boy arrives without really knowing what will happen. The first sexual experience with a man may be shocking, but none of them said that it had been a trauma. In many cases, the reason given for this was their prior heterosexual initiation. When asked to talk about their first sexual experience, most reported it having been with a much older woman. Mono, for example, was seduced by a cousin who was 20 years older than him. The same thing had happened to Noé, whose first experience was with a female friend of his mother. He was only 13, and the woman invited him to have some coffee, and after some time, >she took off the dress and asked me to go down on her and suck her=. Herson was initiated at the age of eleven by a 15 year-old. She invited him to her house and >took off her clothes=. For him, the experience was a surprise because >I did not know what a vagina was=. Nevertheless, they had sex and continued to do so for several years. Carlos was initiated by a prostitute who was much older than he was. His friends took him to see her practically by force when he was 12.

If we compare these sexual experiences with those Lila promotes, we do not see a great difference, apart from the gender of the initiators. Many of these young men, according to some >modern= criteria, were sexually abused, both by men and women. They were initiated into sex at a very early age by tricks and false means. However, from the interviews, it cannot be inferred that there is any lasting hostility towards the men or the women who abused them. The fear they felt, and even their shock of seeing sexual organs they had never seen before, is recognized. Yet, there is no personal recognition of abuse. When past events were talked about, they were related in such a way as to

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suggest that respondents were recalling the best times of their lives.

This could explain why so few show any resentment about Lila having introduced them to sex work. Contrary to expectation, there were no feelings of revulsion towards him. Instead, there was much apparent gratitude because of the protection offered, the fact that he lends them money and allows them to stay in his house when they are kicked out of their homes. >For me, Lila is like a mother=, said Mono. >I did not have anywhere to live, and Lila gave me a home for seven years=. Herson feels the same: >I never knew my parents because I was raised by my grandparents. Lila has been my father and my mother=. Others who have never lived with Lila also feel love for him: >That *loca* is the only person I can count on when I need help=. The young men were also aware that Lila does not like them to do drugs. He does not provide them and only tolerates them because >I cannot do anything to stop them=.

Since Lila is like a father-mother for those *cacheros* who do not have support at home and/or who come from poor families, some start to see homosexuality in a favourable way. A few, like Noé, see homosexuals as hard working and creative. Mono does not like *locas*, but feels accepting towards more masculine gays, and he considers them >my friends=. Rodrigo says that he cannot stand people mocking gays: >I tell them that one should not talk bad about anyone because one never knows what could be his punishment=. The relatively cordial environment of the *casa* enables there to be a degree of intimacy between *cacheros* and clients. In contrast to saunas in Costa Rica where sex workers rarely talk to their clients before or after sex, Lila's house is a place where jokes are told and where both minorities share their common problems. >I have been impressed by hearing what gays have to

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undergo just because they were effeminate when they were children. I never imagined such a big pressure=, states Mono. The living room in the brothel, in contrast to the rooms where sexual relations are held, is a space for conversation and relaxation within the prevailing culture of *cacherismo*.

COMPARTMENTALIZATION

One of the things that immediately attracts attention on entering the *casa* is its dirtiness. Lila breeds dogs, and as he does not have a backyard. The smell and the excrement are too strong to ignore. The *cacheros* are aware that the place is not attractive and that as a result they lose clients. Yet, they step on the excrement as if it does not exist. This may lead us to think that the boys are dirty, but they are not; they are both well-dressed and attractive. Their indifference towards the excrement around is a symptom of something beyond carelessness which we will call compartmentalization.

When the interview transcripts were read, and what the boys said was compared with what they did, it is tempting to conclude that they are lying. There is evidence, for example, that their sexual practices are very different from those dictated by the dominant discourse of *cacherismo*. It is evident that condoms are not always used in the brothel. Lila does not provide the boys with condoms, and use is inconsistent. Few condoms were evident in the rooms or in the garbage cans. Some interviewees said they used them, but others did not. Others admitted that either they, or their clients, do not like to use them.

Another contradiction has to do with sexual practices. A substantial number of respondents
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practised both insertive and receptive sex. Very few said they enjoyed the latter, but those who were more honest recognized that only a few who work in the *casa* >do not give their butt=. That is why the statement that *cacheros* are only active is untrue. The need for money, drugs or even love, leads to all kinds of practices and risks.

Some of the sex workers also had serious problems with crack use. It was not accurate, as some said, that they can control their drug consumption and that they do not steal or commit crimes. When the information Lila provided was compared with that from *cacheros* themselves, it became clear that many of the latter had already had problems with the law, and some had been in jail.

These, and many other narratives could be considered >lies=. José tells us that he has only had sex with three men in all his life, whereas Lila says that this is his daily score. Mono told us that he was 23 one day, 25 the next and 27 the next. Noé says he has never been penetrated, but other clients say he has. Instead of analysing these narratives as >lies=, it is better to see them as compartmentalisations; that is, different ways of viewing things that are established when there is no possibility of living otherwise with conflicts and contradicting pressures.

Cacheros such as those described here, have learned a discourse that protects them, in theory, from being stigmatized as homosexuals. The rules of the game in this discourse are known and supported by them. Yet, social pressures often sabotage these norms. The line that divides sexual commerce from homosexuality is very thin. That is why, in order to remain perceived as *cacheros*, they have to separate off the contradictions and exceptions to the rules. This is what compartmentalization achieves, a set of mental >compartments= that do not link easily to one another.

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The young men know very well that when they go through the door of the brothel they >are transformed into another thing=, says Arnaldo. This means that they have to be very different in the street from what they are in the *casa*. In the brothel, they are men that have sex with men; in the street, they are lovers, boyfriends, and fathers. Jorge feels that >I have several personalities; there are many Jorges out there=. Miguel does not understand >why I am one thing in my home, and another in the street=. Carlos knows that >nobody really knows how I am, not even my wife=.

The effects of compartmentalization are also reflected in language. *Cacheros* talk one language in the brothel, and another one outside. Rodrigo says that inside, they speak in a >more feminine= way. This means that they can talk about emotional things that they would never discuss in the pool hall. They like to imitate Lila, and >move= like *locas*. In the street, says Vernol, >one walks more like a *macho*, speaks tougher, does not accept anything from anybody=.

Cacherismo and compartmentalization

While it is impossible to know where *cacherismo* originated, it has long been there in Costa Rica. It still exists in jails and agricultural zones where women are largely absent, and almost certainly predates urbanization and industrialization. Lila is over 50 years old and remembers that he had relationships with *cacheros* when he was a boy. Prior to the Second World War, Costa Rica was a small, agricultural and poor country. Men had to marry and support their families and women were supposed to be virgins until they got married. It took time to achieve the independence from home to agosto 25, 2002

get married. Marital postponement could have been one factor motivating sexual practice among men. The *cachero* institution may have emerged so that men could have sexual experiences with other men without being perceived as homosexual. Nevertheless, factors such as the ones described, are beginning to challenge the dominance of this discourse. Increasingly, the *cacheros* are facing something of an identity crisis.

HIV PREVENTION

The young men interviewed have good knowledge of AIDS prevention and safer sex. All were aware of the dangers of AIDS and the need to use condoms. Some also knew friends who had died of AIDS. Nevertheless, condoms are not always used and AIDS remained a distant threat. >There are (more everyday) problems of survival that concern me=, said Miguel and >AIDS is not the major one. I need to eat first=. It was not Lila =s worst fear either, >I am always afraid of the police and of spending my last days in prison=, he says. When asked why he did not provide condoms he replied: >Well, clients do not like them. If they did, they would bring them. I only charge for the room and cannot afford to lose clients over this.=

As a non-governmental organisation working in the field of sexual and reproductive health, ILPES had a moral responsibility to do something about HIV infection. One possibility might have been to inform the police. This would have had little impact since there are dozens of other *casas* in San José where these young men could go. Even if all of these could be closed, many young men would turn to the streets and disappear from sight.

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Since we were not going to wait for Lila or the young men to change their minds about the use of condoms, ILPES opted to provide them free. Lila agreed to give one to each worker each time he had sex with a client. Condoms started being used more frequently. >If there is a condom available, I insist on using it with everyone, said Enrique. >Now that Lila gives me a condom, I use it when I fuck a client, said Luis. Notwithstanding this success, not all *cacheros* protect themselves. Mono recognizes that some clients do not like them and that it takes too much time to convince them. >I can negotiate, but many of the young boys here can hardly talk, he said.

Several factors are directly relevant to the use of condoms in the *casa*. Crack and alcohol use is one of them. Some *cacheros* lose their capacity to communicate and negotiate when they are under the influence. >Yesterday I smoked so much crack that I don't remember anything I did. I could have had sex with four clients but I don't recall anything, says Mario. Mono recognizes that he will now do >anything for 5,000 colones to buy crack. Another barrier to condom use is intimacy. *Cacheros* distinguish between paid and romantic sex by whether or not a condom is used. Some men are willing to protect themselves with clients but not with male or female lovers. >When I am in love with a woman, I never use a condom. I must express I trust her, Enrique told us. >If a man supports me and loves me, I show him my love and confidence. He expects me to protect him by having sex only with him, argues David. Love is then expressed through trust, fidelity and lack of protection.

Lack of solidarity is a further obstacle. *Cacheros* do not see each other as members of a community. >Here everyone is on his own, remarked Luis. Mono thinks that everyone is a potential

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competitor. Carlos believes that >If there were not those who would give in to having sex without a condom, we could force clients to use them. But I get very upset when I know that such and such gave in to being fucked without a condom.= Arnolando also thinks that those sex workers who have sex without a condom >force us to do the same.=

Compartmentalization also affects the capacity to practice safer sex. The fact that some of the boys live in different >worlds= which demand contradictory behaviours makes them especially vulnerable to the unintended effects of some national AIDS efforts. The national AIDS campaign in Costa Rica, for example, has targeted mainly heterosexuals by promoting fidelity and marriage. The gay community=s campaign on the other hand has emphasized condom use. No one has addressed issues of prevention in the context of male sex work. When these young men learn about AIDS, they do so in the context of *either* heterosexuality or homosexuality, and not from a *cachero* perspective. As a result, they use different messages in different contexts. Mario, for example, uses condoms when having sex with men, but when engaging in heterosexual relations >I don=t use condoms. I follow the message of fidelity.= Carlos does the same: >I am faithful to my girlfriend. I don=t have sex with other women. I don=t need to protect myself.= Preventive behaviour obeys then the same compartmentalization that rules their lives.

One possible solution to these challenges lies in breaking down some of the mental >compartments= through which *cacheros* live their lives. Maybe this can be achieved through the kind of community building strategy that is now underway. With the support of the Embassy of the Netherlands in Costa Rica, ILPES is working to establish a local pool hall for *cacheros* to meet, hang out, and learn more about health issues. It is intended to recruit old *cacheros* as role models to talk

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about AIDS and drug prevention. Educational videos will be also be shown and more individually oriented prevention programmes started. Evaluation will show whether these relatively innovative efforts contribute to the kinds of harm reduction that it is hoped to achieve.

FOOTNOTES

1. The study described here was conducted by Jacobo Schifter and colleagues at ILPES in Costa Rica. The chapter was prepared by Jacobo Schifter and Peter Aggleton.
2. This fieldwork associated with this study was conducted in collaboration of Antonio Bustamante, a researcher with much experience working with *cachерismo* in Central American prisons.¹ Bustamante made the initial contacts and prepared the way for the fieldwork reported here.
3. *Cachero* is a word that does not have a clear translation into English. The closest counterpart would be >top-man=. *Cacheros* are not considered homosexuals or bisexuals, but heterosexuals who have sex with other men because of money or lack of women.
4. For example, for *cacheros* sodomy is not anal penetration, but masturbation. Likewise a =gay= is not a homosexual man that has come out of the closet, but a *loca* or >queen=.

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