The Purchase of Intimacy

BY VIVIANA ZELIZER

Economists analyze behavior at the surface, for the most part ignoring the messiness of culture and interpersonal psychology in order to make powerful generalizations about the way things – markets, in particular – work. By contrast, Viviana Zelizer, a sociologist at Princeton, explores the import of economic transactions in precisely the areas that economists fear to tread. In her latest book, *The Purchase of Intimacy*, Zelizer analyzes the economic infrastructure of intimate relations – everything from parent-child to doctor-patient to client-prostitute. ¶ Read this excerpt for a fascinating take on the economics of coupling. Read it, too, simply for an introduction to the way economic sociologists approach the dismal science.

— Peter Passell

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On June 23, 1997, the Kansas Board for Discipline of Attorneys convened to consider the conduct of Jerry L. Berg, a Wichita divorce lawyer. In separate complaints, six of Berg’s female clients accused him of improper sexual behavior. The board recommended disbarment. Although no specific prohibition banning attorney-client sexual relations exists in Kansas, the board condemned “exploitation of the attorney-client relationship to the detriment of the client.”

In one of the six complaints, R.M. reported consulting Berg about her divorce in August 1993, after her first lawyer had made no progress with her case. Berg and R.M. had first met during her own parents’ divorce a few years earlier, and had discussed the then-teenage R.M.’s alcohol and drug addiction problems.

R.M. now worried about losing custody of her one-year-old child to her estranged husband, as well as ensuring the receipt of child-support payments from him.

On October 14, 1993, the night before her divorce was final, R.M. went to Berg’s office to sign a property settlement agreement. Although she was below the legal drinking age, Berg invited her out, ordering several alcoholic drinks, including one called “sex on the beach.” After discussing sexual matters, they returned to his office to sign more papers.

It was then, R.M. testified, that Berg “grabbed” and kissed her, and that she performed oral sex on him. Although acknowledging that the sex was not forced, she reported being scared and worried that if she resisted, Berg would not represent her in court. After the divorce was granted, R.M. endorsed an income-tax refund as payment to Berg. Although she was still short by $200, Berg marked the bill “paid in full.” R.M. testified, “I felt like a whore, because I felt like I had paid for my services the night before.”

Berg did not send her any more bills. Their sexual relationship continued, as R.M. still consulted Berg on other legal matters. It ended abruptly on June 14, 1994, when Berg, seeking consolation after losing an important case, visited R.M. at her apartment. Recovering from a miscarriage, she refused to have sex, but he insisted. Two days later, she sent Berg a letter terminating his services as her attorney. Until then, R.M. stated, she considered Berg to be her lawyer.

In his defense, Berg contended that his sexual relations with R.M. started after her divorce settlement. At that point, in his view, she was no longer his client. If the attorney-client relationship did not exist, Berg argued, the sexual relationship was legitimate. Berg appealed his disbarment. In March 1998, however, the Supreme Court of Kansas concurred with the Board of Discipline’s decision to disbar Berg.

The Berg case reports spectacular mingling of intimacy, economic transactions and professional relations. In such cases, lawyers and legal scholars often dispute where to draw the line between proper and improper relations. The discipline panel and the Kansas Supreme Court finally decided to treat Berg
as a lawyer who had abused his relationship with a client.

In so doing, they denied that the couple were lovers or, for that matter, a prostitute and client. The parties hardly disputed what had happened, or even the participants’ intentions. At issue was whether the combination of relationships, transactions and payment media was morally and professionally acceptable. The board and the State Supreme Court said no.

They were defending a well-marked professional boundary from corruption in two opposite directions. On one side, they defended against the possibility that licensed practitioners would use their authority to gain illicit intimate attentions, thus bringing dishonor and distrust on the profession. On the other, they defended against the possibility that intimate relations would lead practitioners to violate established understandings and practices, disrupting the profession’s carefully rationalized internal organization.

Consider another case that came to trial in Wisconsin six years before the Berg judgment. David Kritzik, a wealthy widower, “partial to the company of young women,” had over the course of at least six years given Leigh Ann Conley and Lynnette Harris (twin sisters) more than $500,000. He regularly left a check at his office, which Conley picked up every week to 10 days.

The case raises the issue of the taxability of monetary transfers to a mistress in long-term relationships. Were those transfers gifts or compensation? If gifts, Kritzik was obliged to pay gift tax on the money; if compensation, the sisters had to pay income tax. The government claimed that the money was compensation. As part of its evidence, it argued that the form of transfer was that of an employee picking up wages. Harris and Conley were convicted of evading income taxes and sent to jail.

After Kritzik’s death, however, their attorneys appealed the case. Although the lawyers insisted that the form of monetary transfer identified it as compensation, the appeal pointed out that it could have been an entitlement: “this form of payment … could just as easily be that of a dependent picking up regular support checks.” The district court, furthermore, rejected an affidavit presented by Kritzik to IRS investigators before his death, in which he stated that both Harris and Conley were prostitutes. The court dismissed his claim as a likely lie to protect himself from civil or criminal penalties for his failure to pay gift taxes.

The court finally agreed that Kritzik’s payments were gifts. Invoking legal precedent, the appellants’ counsel successfully argued that “a person is entitled to treat cash and property received from a lover as gifts, as long as the relationship consists of something more than specific payments for specific sessions of sex.” A number of Kritzik’s letters to Harris entered the trial record as evidence of his continuing affection and trust. He wrote, for example, that “so far as the things I give you are concerned – let me say that I get as great if not even greater pleasure in giving than you get in receiving,” adding, “I love giving things to you and to see you happy and enjoying them.”
The appeal challenged the idea that economic transactions speak for themselves, as well as challenging the effort to deduce relations from transactions alone. Indeed the judges in the case negotiated over exactly where to place the boundary of commercial and loving relationships. One judge, while concurring in the reversal of the sisters’ convictions, worried about the breadth of the principle that his fellow jurists invoked: “I part company with the majority when it distills from our gift/income jurisprudence a rule that would tax only the most base type of cash-for-sex exchange and categorically exempt from tax liability all other transfers of money and property to so-called mistresses or companions.”

Regardless of their philosophical differences, members of the court agreed that distinctions between categories of payment hinge on the type of relationship between the parties involved: lover-mistress versus patron-prostitute. Of course, if Kritzik and Harris had been husband and wife, their transfers of money would likely have been tax-free domestic transactions.

Although courts speak a language of intention and morality, they do the legal version of relational work. They consult a matrix of possible relations among the parties involved, locate the relationship at hand within that matrix, establish distinctions from other relationships, and within the relationship insist on the proper matching of relation, transaction and media. Exact boundaries within the matrix themselves are contested, as interested parties negotiate the line separating proper and improper forms of intimacy.

With Berg and R.M., both the discipline panel and the Supreme Court of Kansas defined the contested relationship as attorney-client, setting it apart from ordinary lovers or prostitute-patron. They thereby declared Berg’s sexual interaction with R.M. and his billing procedures illegitimate. Ironically, they also implicitly agreed that if the relationship between the couple had been that of lovers, rather than attorney and client, precisely the same transactions would have been acceptable – or at least legal. The court drew a moral boundary, separating the proper relations of lawyer and client from those of lovers.

Boundaries between intimate relationships have some remarkable characteristics. Although participants, observers and third parties commonly mark such distinctions, rarely are the defining interactions on one side of a boundary or the other universally acceptable or unacceptable in themselves – they depend on context. Sexual intercourse, for example, becomes an enforceable obligation for spouses, an option for lovers and a forbidden transgression for lawyer-client pairs. Similarly, expensive gifts become obligations in some relations, options in others and forbidden transgressions in still others. Boundaries also include temporal limits, so that questions arise concerning what relation

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a couple occupied at the time of a certain transaction: were they then a married couple, engaged to be married, unmarried lovers, spouses of other persons, business partners, lawyer and client, patron and prostitute, or acquaintances on a date? When it involves intimacy, relational work takes plenty of effort.

Surprising features of intimacy do not end there. Paradoxically, intimate relations rarely involve two persons alone. Third parties acquire strong investments in a pair’s intimacy and often intervene. The Berg and Kritzik cases have shown us the interest that professional associations and government agencies (in the Kritzik case, the IRS) exert over intimate relations. Parents, kin, friends and fellow members of religious congregations often intervene to promote some versions of courtship and to discourage others. Within intimate relations, the parties negotiate the particular forms and meanings of their relationship. But third parties almost always stand close at hand, defending the boundaries.

In everyday practice, people engage in a similar sorting of couples. They do not employ precisely the same distinctions as lawyers, or invoke exactly the same moral evaluations of different kinds of relations. But they do sort across the whole range of relations that involve the possibility of intimacy, from lawyer-client or doctor-patient to friends, neighbors, workmates and kin.

**ANALYZING INTIMATE PAIRS**
In both cases discussed earlier, the intimacy was sexual, but similar principles apply to a wide range of intimacy. Sharing of secrets, handling confidential files, providing advice, giving insider economic information, offering solace and administering bodily care all involve different sorts of intimacy, but commonly occur in the absence of sexual relations. Whether sexual or otherwise, paired intimate relations hold out the promise – and threat – of emotional interaction more intense and consequential than everyday social relations.

Such intimate transactions occur over a wide range of pairs: friends, partners, neighbors, co-workers, employer-employee, professional-client, parent-child. In all, economic transactions frequently mingle with intimacy. Third parties obviously play important parts in shaping paired relationships: mutual friends introduce likely couples, parents try to block unfortunate matches, police monitor illegal transactions, couples themselves go to advisers for adjudication or support. Here, I look at couples’ relationships in routine social practices.

**DIFFERENTIATED INTIMACY**
Many professions build in stringent boundaries separating appropriate from inappropriate relations between practitioners and clients. One clinician’s guide for psychotherapists sternly warns against providing patients with falsified diagnoses that qualify the patient for insurance reimbursement or disability payments, and against testifying for a patient in a legal dispute. Besides being illegal and unethical, the guide asserts, such practices go beyond “the clinician-patient relationship to become a ‘special favor.’ ”

Furthermore, the guide stigmatizes the disclosure of confidential patient information except in cases of lawful subpoenas, or patient-authorized release to payers, such as insurers. Clinician and patient relations, moreover, should never slip into financial adviser-investor exchanges – “for example, if a patient who is a company executive divulges some business matter during therapy that might affect the price of a stock, buying or selling the stock could be considered a breach of privilege.”
The guide also counsels against seeing patients after hours or making the clinician's home telephone number available to them. Psychotherapists center their professional expertise on a certain kind of intimacy. Yet they also impose a sharply bounded definition of proper and improper intimate transactions between therapist and patient.

**INTIMACY AMONG HOUSEHOLDS**

Similar differentiation occurs with very different consequences in relations among friends, neighbors and kin. Margaret Nelson and Joan Smith's study of inter-household exchanges among Coolidge County, Vermont blue-collar residents captures some of this variation. Examining economic survival strategies in this rural community, Nelson and Smith found extensive differentiation of the services that neighbors, friends and kin rendered to one another.

Different transactions and media applied to different social relations. One couple, Bruce and Nancy Sharp, for instance, reported Bruce’s varied fee schedule for his snowplowing services in the community. While he said that his rates varied depending on the time spent on the job, Nancy soon revealed her husband’s more complex tariff schedule. Although Bruce charged an hourly or contracted rate for the town store, he expected only a token, reduced rate from an elderly couple and exclusively in-kind reciprocity from his friends: a six-pack of beer or some ice cream, for example, from his friend Ted. When the interviewers asked if he had expected money from Ted, Bruce was emphatic: “No, not for friends.”

His reduced rate for the elderly couple, explained Nancy, was “because they want to pay something. You don’t make a killing on that.” He did it, Bruce explained, “to give me extra soda money, cigarette money.” Nancy again qualified her husband’s answer, adding, “You did it a lot of times as a favor … you just did it to be nice different times. He does one for the apartment house [in return for which] Stuart brought you a load of corn.”

Gender differences also figured importantly in the local economy of favors. Women’s provision of goods and services to kin and friends, for instance, were more likely to be treated as gift-like trading or swapping, while men were allowed to collect fees, even from friends and relatives. Thus, women referred to their exchanges of babysitting as trading or swapping, never as barter.

The same was true with women’s sewing and knitting. They offered these products as gifts, rarely bartering them one for another. One of the study’s respondents, Barbara Latrell, whose side job involved sewing, explained why she made the wedding dresses for all her nieces for free: “That was her wedding present. Many hours of hand sewing.”

The system as a whole had an ironic consequence: those for whom the inter-household exchanges were most valuable actually incurred fewer obligations. Households with higher, more stable income readily took on long-term commitments to barter goods and services; people in lower-income households, however, were reluctant to take on extensive commitments because of the risk that calls for reciprocity would come when they had little to offer.

For example, Ellen and Charles Rivers, who had been deeply involved in the community, withdrew after their economic troubles began. When asked, “What do you think people owe their families?” Ellen responded, “I don’t feel I have any obligation to anybody, really. When my sister has her baby in September, yes, she’s watched my kids a lot for me, for no pay or anything. Yes, I will return the favor to her. … But as far as owing any-
From dating to the brink of marriage, the mingling of courtship and economic transactions occurs continuously.

body anything – no.” The same strategy applied to neighbors and friends: “Both Charles and I feel the same way about this – we don’t really like to owe anybody anything, including favors, because they can always come back on you in a negative way. So, whenever things are done it’s usually been an exchange for pay.”

The differentiation involved a remarkable elaboration not only of transactions, but also of payment media. As in professional-client relations, bartering of goods and services among kin and acquaintances exemplifies the main point of this chapter. Participants unquestionably mingle intimacy and economic transactions, but they do not do so indiscriminately. On the contrary, they make fine differentiations and mark significant boundaries between relations. And within each set, they carefully match transactions and media with those relations.

COURTSHIP
A surprisingly similar dynamic operates in the very different world of courtship and sexual relations. Clearly, in both cases participants regularly mingle economic transactions with strong intimacy. Conventional forms of courtship that frequently lead to marriage operate somewhat differently from relations that might produce intense sexuality but are unlikely to end with marriage. They also call up contrasting sorts of moral concerns. At one end, we have the specter of a woman’s ruined virtue; at the other, the specter of crass prostitution.

Consider courtship first. Defined broadly, courtship includes all the relationships that have some significant chance of leading to long-term public cohabitation – the whole range from flirtation to the verge of marriage. Courtship necessarily involves economic transactions in a number of ways. Couples frequently undertake immediate mutual expenditures, such as shared entertainment, meals and gifts. And courting couples mark transitions in their relationships with costly ceremonies, festivities, investments and gifts. Estimates of U.S. expenditures on the costliest such events of all – weddings – range from $40 billion to $130 billion a year.

Couples regularly connect their families to each other, often depending on their families’ economic support. Over the long run, the families themselves often develop an interest in the economic return from those who marry in. And families often incorporate newcomers into family farms, businesses or housing. From dating to the brink of marriage, therefore, the mingling of courtship and economic transactions occurs continuously.

ENGAGEMENTS
The transition from courtship to engagement still marks an important moment in American young people’s lives. And for many, it involves substantial expenditures. Indeed, a recent
study shows they spend an estimated annual $9 billion for engagement rings and wedding bands. According to another study, for 70 percent of all brides and 75 percent of first-time brides in the United States, the diamond ring is a couple’s first wedding-related purchase. But engagement has evolved substantially over time.

Westerners have employed various forms of betrothal – public announcement of a couple’s intention to marry – for centuries. A marriage-bound couple commonly took on formal obligations to churches and families in addition to their mutual commitments. Indeed, churches and families often enjoyed rights to impose sanctions on young people who flaunted those obligations – for example, by eloping. In the United States, however, the custom known as engagement only became common during the 19th century. Less a church and family announcement than a couple’s own declaration of intentions, engagement consisted of a pair’s designating each other publicly as committed to marrying. As a consequence, relations to other parties – former lovers, friends and family – changed significantly.

Engagement stood between informal courtship and marriage. It involved sexual exclusivity, greater intimacy and a distinctive set of economic transactions. Couples withdrew from more general courtship activities, abandoning the usual conventions of flirtation, and commonly appearing together on social occasions. Despite significant class and ethnic differences, engagement always involved greater physical and emotional intimacy than less-committed forms of companionship.

The engaged couple further marked the relationship with a variety of economic transactions. Beginning in the 1840s, couples announced engagements with an exchange of rings – only later did the ring become a female token. But a wide range of other joint economic transactions followed the engagement. They included the trousseau, acquisition of goods and housing for the prospective cohabiting couple, and exchange of personal gifts. In fact, the trousseau often accomplished the outfitting of both the bride and the home.

Nineteenth-century trousseaus turned into a formidable economic venture, as future brides sewed and shopped for increasingly elaborate clothing, linens and household furnishings. Men, meanwhile, were typically saving money for housing. In addition to a couple’s own economic preparation for marriage, engagement frequently changed other relations within families. For example, interviewing retired mill workers in Amoskeag, New Hampshire in the 1970s, Tamara Hareven and Randolph Langenbach reported the recollections of 71-year-old Anna Douville – the last of 12 children in her family to marry. While she lived at home, Anna turned her entire pay over to her mother. When Anna met her future husband, the mother reciprocated:

She got me started on my hope chest. After the week’s shopping was done and the bills were paid, we would take all the money that she had left to the store and buy me sheets and pillowcases. She bought me a
dishpan, all my pots and pans, knives and dishes. When I got married [in 1933], we didn’t have to buy a damn thing for years because I had all the things I needed. My mother thought I deserved it because I gave her all my pay to the last week that I worked.

Besides the engagement ring and the trousseau, engaged couples entered a distinct informal gift economy. Etiquette manuals were emphatic: expensive presents “unless it be the engagement ring” were “not in the best taste.” Nor were gifts of wearing apparel – especially not the wedding dress. Even if the bride was “as poor as a church mouse,” advised experts, a very plain trousseau was preferable to “the elaborate outfitting toward the purchase of which the groom-expectant has largely contributed.” While somewhat less strict about a “bridegroom-elect’s” gifts to his future bride, the first (1922) edition of Emily Post’s *Etiquette* still insisted that any item considered “maintenance” – such as wearing apparel or furniture – was off-limits. Post was quite specific: “It is perfectly suitable for her to drive his car, or ride his horse. … But, if she would keep her self-respect, the car must not become hers.”

Etiquette writers thus struggled to draw a line defining proper and improper gifts between engaged parties. Their boundary excluded gifts that would be appropriate between husbands and wives on one side, and from a prostitute’s clients on the other. The wrong gift, warned Post, could cast the bride “in a category with women of another class” – meaning kept women. That is why courtship gifts were supposed to express affection or admiration without suggesting payment or support.

The gift economy changed radically when the bride became a man’s wife; her husband’s gifts turned into household transfers, subject to different rules. Etiquette manuals reminded brides of the distinction between engagement and marriage transfers: “until the fateful words are spoken that make the twain one flesh,” instructed one etiquette writer, the bride “has no claim whatever on the purse of her future husband.”

For all their period charm, these concerns about proper engagement etiquette have not disappeared today. A late-1990s edition of Emily Post’s *Etiquette* declares that:

An engagement ring is not essential to the validity of the betrothal. Some people confuse the engagement ring with the wedding ring and believe the former is as indispensable as the latter. This is not the case. The wedding ring is a requirement of the marriage service. The engagement ring is simply evidence that the couple definitely plan to marry.

The same manual devotes 11 full pages to enumerating items that belong in a proper bride’s trousseau.

Similar issues become acute in the case of broken engagements. If an engaged couple has acquired common property, pooled their funds, started shared economic enterprises, received support from families, or exchanged substantial gifts, the status of those economic
transactions after an engagement ends frequently becomes a matter of rancorous dispute. Engagement rings provide an obvious case in point: typically expensive and closely tied to the public announcement of a commitment to marry, rings raise the question of ownership if the engagement were to end. The 1990s Etiquette manual states the rule unequivocally:

In the unfortunate event of a broken engagement, the ring and all other gifts of value must be returned to the former fiancée. Gifts received from relatives or friends should also be returned. ... If the man should die before the wedding, his fiancée may keep her engagement ring. ... If the bride-to-be should die, her family should return the engagement ring to the groom and any gifts received to the donors.

Thus, the matching of economic transactions to relations continues. The purveyors of etiquette spell out practices that represent a very general set of understandings about engagement: that it is a distinct form of relationship rather than a weak form of marriage; that the man and woman involved retain control over their own property.

**DATING, TREATING AND GOING STEADY**

From the early 20th century to the 1950s, middle-class Americans distinguished a whole series of possible relations between unmarried couples other than engagement. Among the middle class, dating replaced the older custom of “calling.” By the mid-1920s, Beth Bailey tells us in her history of American courtship, From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America, “going somewhere” – to restaurants, the theater, dance halls – had displaced the earlier system of young men "calling" at a girl’s home or “keeping company” under the watchful eyes of her family.

What defined the date? It meant that when a couple “went out,” the man spent money on their entertainment. Thus, Bailey concludes, “money – men’s money – became the basis of the dating system, and thus, of courtship.” With frightened fascination, observers watched the increasingly competitive streak in dating, which Willard Waller, in his 1937 study of Pennsylvania State University, dubbed the “dating and rating” system – the establishment of a strict hierarchy of desirability among companions for public occasions such as dances and sports events. For the next few decades, dating continued to pivot on the man’s payment for most of the entertainment expenses.

The new relations of dating thus involved a distinct intimate economy. After World War II, although young people continued to date, they created a new form of relationship halfway between engagement and dating. They called it “going steady,” a more exclusive, longer-term, and often more sexually intimate relationship than dating. Sometimes, going steady subdivided into more than one category. Among University of Kansas college students of the 1950s, for example, Bailey reports: “A whole new set of ‘official’ statuses emerged to designate the seriousness of relationships: going steady, lavaliered, pinned, engaged. Each of these was more serious than the last, and each step allowed greater sexual intimacy. Necking with a 'steady' was one thing, necking with a casual date something else entirely.”

Going steady involved pooled resources far more than did dating. Among high-school students, who rapidly adopted the practice, boys and girls exchanged class rings, wore matching “steady jackets,” or a boy gave the girl a letter sweater.

Today, of course, single men still invite single women out for meals or entertainment,
pick up the tab and expect a degree of intimacy to prevail during the encounter. They still sometimes call this arrangement “dating.” However, since the mid-1950s, a whole new array of courtship relations has evolved in the United States.

In a survey of women on 11 college campuses, for example, Norval Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt found that undergraduates divided their heterosexual encounters into five rough categories: (1) interactions involving sex without commitment, including “hooking up” or what some of the women called “friends with benefits,” (2) rapidly established committed relationships involving sexual activity, sometimes referred to as “joined at the hip,” (3) less intense, slower moving, committed relationships that might or might not involve sexual activity, (4) “hanging out,” the most common type of relationship, which means going out or spending time with one or more partners, and (5) “dating” in the old sense of the word, which accounted for only a small minority of those encounters.

Despite the new terminology and practices, some residues of the old system remain. The Fabulous Girl’s Guide to Decorum, touted as the “etiquette guide for the new millennium,” offers the following advice on “proper date behavior” to young women:

Some women feel it’s not a date unless the guy pays the bill. But ... an FG [Fabulous Girl] is a modern woman and does not hold to these old-fashioned principles. Usually, who picks up the tab on those early dates can be tricky. If your suitor makes it clear that he’d like to take you out to dinner, then you can let him pay for the meal. When a man asks an FG out for an afternoon coffee or cocktails, it is not wrong to assume that he will pay for her. Nonetheless, an FG always carries some cash in case he’s cheap. ... If you do not intend to see this guy again, then you should definitely pay for your half of the bill.

Of course, you know that paying for a meal doesn’t mean anyone is obliged to offer themselves for dessert later, but he might not.

Thus, who pays continues to be a crucial question symbolizing the nature of the relationship. Will the Internet change all that? Electronic chat rooms, instant messaging and computer-mediated dating services have certainly introduced new practices into the old world of courtship. More than 45 million Americans visited dating Web sites in a single month of 2003.

These past and current urban middle-class customs do not, of course, exhaust the variety of courtship that has existed in the United States. Courtship has always differed by ethnicity, race, class and religion. Among urban working-class Americans who had left school, for example, a new form of relationship called “treating” emerged in the 20th century. Treating was a popular arrangement by which young working-class women obtained financial help, gifts and access to entertainment from a fiancée or a “steady” but also from casual acquaintances, in exchange for a variety of sexual favors, from flirting to intercourse.

Young working women earning low wages and obligated to contribute to their families’ income had little spending money left over for their own clothes or entertainment. So they relied on men friends to “treat” them to dancing, drinks, theater or dinner. Working-class informal etiquette allowed a much broader range of respectable indirect payments to women than did that of the middle class; working-class girls accepted not only recreation and food from a man but gifts of clothing or even a vacation trip.

People distinguished treating not only from the much more sexually restricted relationship of middle-class dating but also from
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the sexually explicit bargain of prostitution. They invested considerable effort, indeed, in marking the boundary between acceptable treating and unacceptable whoredom. As long as she did not receive cash payment from men at the time of sexual relations, the treating girl did not become a prostitute. Surveying the practice of treating in New York City between 1900 and 1932, Elizabeth Clement reports that “the young women exchanged sexual favors for dinner and the night’s expenses, or more tangibly for stockings, shoes and other consumer goods.”

In contrast to prostitutes, treating women and their companions established a sort of gift economy. Clement explains: “Not only did they not accept cash, but they did not really exchange services for material goods. Instead, they received presents from their friends.”

As in any gift economy, not all presents were equally acceptable. Reporting on the same custom in Chicago, Texas Tech University sociologist Randy McBee quotes Rose Kaiser, a young Jewish woman. Kaiser rejected certain gifts from men, such as silk stockings, “because they’d want to put them on [me].”

Treating girls and their companions thus worked out a complex round of exchanges far different from the conventions of dating and prostitution. Yet working-class treating paralleled middle-class dating in four important regards: (1) it permitted a degree of interpersonal intimacy the parties would not ordinarily engage in outside of the arrangement, (2) it remained temporary in that, once entered, a treat did not imply either party’s right or obligation to continue the relationship, (3) through known transitions and agreements, it could lead into adjacent relationships – certainly, prostitution on one side, but also longer term monogamous commitments on the other, and (4) treating was in itself no more a paid occupation than was dating.

Nevertheless, many American women – and some men – have at one time or another earned their livings through the sale of explicitly sexual services. Informal estimates place the American commercial sex industry in the vicinity of $8 billion to $10 billion a year. Those occupations have only occasionally and contingently overlapped with courtship. Let us call the entire array of specialized sex-providing occupations “sex work.”

Such occupations include telephone sex, production of pornography, peep shows, some forms of massage, escort services and a wide variety of prostitution. They vary enormously in duration of encounters, extent and character of physical contact, range of intimacy, setting and overall style. We need not survey the entire range of sex work, however, to make this chapter’s main points: in this zone of intimacy, as in others, couples mingle economic transactions with intimate attentions, implicitly consult available matrices to define their relations, mark the boundaries of those relations emphatically and match relations, transactions and media according to established conventions.

Meanwhile, third parties generally act to defend the boundaries. Comparison of two frequent forms of sex work – taxi dancing and prostitution – underline these points.
Begin with taxi dancing, an occupation that moral critics of the 1920s and 1930s often lumped with treating and prostitution. In early-20th-century American cities, dance halls became increasingly important sites for encounters between single men and women. In fact, treating women often met their companions in dance halls.

The taxi-dance hall, typically restricted to male patrons, was a remarkable setting for social encounters. The men paid an entrance fee and then purchased 10-cent tickets for 60 to 90 seconds of dancing with a young woman. The taxi dancers worked on a fifty-fifty commission arrangement, with half of the money going to the dance hall owner.

At first glance, taxi dancing seems a peculiar form of sex work: a fleeting, flirting contact between man and woman akin to telephone sex or a peep show. On closer examination, however, it turns out to contain a differentiated world of intimacy. Within its commercial framework, men and women formed friendships, paired off for liaisons outside the dance hall, initiated courtship, and created a complex economy of favors, gifts, tips and obligations. From one perspective, the taxi-dance hall operated as a crass commercial establishment. From another, it served as a remarkably sophisticated and effective matchmaker.

Leo Rosten, chronicler of American immigrant and working-class life, recalled a
Far from a pathetic imitation of courtship or a furtive neighbor of prostitution, the world of the taxi dance reveals a terrain of differentiated ties, each with its own matching of relation, transactions and media.

Saturday night tour of three New York taxi-dance ballrooms and his encounters with the women who made their living by dancing with paying customers (Mona, Jean, Honey and others). At Seventh Avenue’s Honey-moon Lane Danceland, Mona led him to the dance floor letting “her body, all marshmallow, flow against mine … and murmured a voluptuous ‘Mmmm-mmh!’” After dancing for a moment “approaching ecstasy,” a buzzer loudly “honked.” Mona quickly “disengaged her clutch,” instructing him to get more dance tickets. When Rosten protested that he thought his ticket was for a whole dance, Mona announced that “a dance is every time the buzzer buzzes.” Which was every minute.

After Rosten promptly returned with 10 more tickets, Mona was once again “warm and yielding in my arms – until the buzzer finished its 10th pecuniary decree.” Jean later explained that the dancers kept only half of the price of their tickets, plus “you have to add the presents … like nice lingerie, a bracelet, a purse, a piece of jewelry, maybe an evening gown.” Or sometimes cash. At the Majestic Danceland, Honey told Rosten about a St. Louis real-estate dealer who dated her: once, “he leaned over in the cab he was taking me to some scrumptious Chinese food in, and without one single word he leaned over and kissed me – nothing rough or forcing, just a real sweet little kiss. Then he handed me $10 without a peep.”

Sociologist Paul Cressey provided a systematic account of Chicago taxi dance halls in the 1920s. He started out as a case worker and investigator for Chicago’s Juvenile Protective Association, but later reported his findings under the supervision of the great University of Chicago urban sociologist Ernest W. Burgess. Analyzing the phenomenon, he invoked classic “hostile worlds” reasoning. First, he worried about the “mercenary and silent world” of taxi dancing, where “feminine society is for sale, and at a neat price.” As a result,
“the impersonal attitudes of the marketplace very soon supersede the romantic impulses which normally might develop.”

Still worse, romanticism “becomes merely another acceptable method for the commercial exploitation of men.” But then Cressey noted how the “romantic impulse” often undermined the rational economic order of the taxi dance hall. Indeed, dancers often made private arrangements that cut into the owners’ profits – for example, by offering free dances to favored customers.

Despite his moral qualms, Cressey provided dramatic, careful observations of what actually went on. Here he describes the standard encounter:

As soon as the girl receives a ticket from the patron, she tears it in half, gives one part to the ubiquitous ticket-collectors, and the other half she blandly stores with other receipts under the hem of her silk stocking – where, before the evening is over, the accumulation appears as a large and oddly placed tumor. She volunteers no conversation, as the music begins, she nonchalantly turns toward her new patron ready for the dance with him.

The dance lasted 90 seconds and shrank to 60 seconds near closing hour. After closing time – between midnight and 3 a.m. – those men who had not already made arrangements to meet women after the dance often stood outside the dance hall waiting for the women to emerge.

In the course of his description, Cressey actually distinguished five different relationships that sometimes existed between taxi dance girls and their patrons, each with its own rules of payment: (1) the standard dance session, (2) “free dances” for more “favored suitors,” (3) “mistress” arrangements, an “alliance” in which for a few months a man paid for the dancer’s rent or groceries, (4) the “plural alliance,” where the girl “enters an understanding by which she agrees to be faithful to a certain three or four men,” who through “separate arrangements” meet her “financial requirements” of rent, groceries or clothes, and (5) dates, running from a shared drink or show to what Cressey called “overnight dates,” which according to him, “quickly take on the character of clandestine prostitution.”

Although a standard dance session usually initiated acquaintance between a man and a woman who later went on to more extensive companionship, the date provided a crucial pivot among these relationships. From a date, the couple might move on to longer term cohabitation, exclusive or shared. But they might also simply return to the occasional dance session.

Preoccupied to some extent with his moral conceptions, Cressey understated the extent to which the taxi-dance hall was operating as a local social center. In fact, his descriptions document a wide range of flirtation, friendships and matchmaking.

Thus, despite Cressey’s misgivings, none of the various patron-dancer relationships equated with the straightforward sale of sexual services. Indeed, Cressey himself acknowledged the distinction. Patrons eager to obtain an after-dance date with one of the girls, he observed, were “polite and courteous”:

Since the girl’s society outside the dance hall – so much sought after by many of the patrons – can be secured only through the dubious process of courtship rather than the more dependable method of bargaining, the popular taxi dancer has a favorable status … which seems to arise in part from the very uncertainty of her favors.

One patron explained courting strategies:

I’ve found that the main thing to remember in trying to interest these girls is that they are not hard-boiled prostitutes. They don’t
want to make money that way. But they do like presents, and – most of all – attention.

Clearly, taxi dancers and their patrons were negotiating individualized relationships within the limits of available conventions. Far from a pathetic imitation of courtship or a furtive neighbor of prostitution, the world of the taxi dance reveals a terrain of differentiated ties, each with its own matching of relation, transactions and media.

PROSTITUTION

In a largely forgotten but still telling article first published in 1952, C. Wright Mills vented his famous indignation on rich men who condemned street prostitutes but maintained high-priced mistresses, frequented call girls, purchased sexual services for their customers and thus lured young women into vice. “American salesmanship and plutocratic demand,” he argued, offered irresistible lures. “In fact, wherever attractive, ambitious girls meet men with the money or power to realize their ambitions, sex will be available at a price.” For all his radical populism, Mills resorted to a standard, hostile-worlds conclusion: money corrupts intimacy.

The realm of prostitution and other sex work shows us a differentiated social landscape, with its own well-marked boundaries and its own distinctive matching of relation, transactions and media. Prostitution has, of course, undergone enormous mutations as American social life has altered. Changes include the rise and fall of the brothel, the emergence of the call girl and the expansion of electronic contacts. The word “prostitution,” furthermore, covers a wide range of activities, such as brothel prostitution, streetwalking, call girls and more. Here, I concentrate on women who offer their sexual services more or less publicly in American urban areas.

During the 19th century, brothel prostitution, running from sordid to sumptuous, played a significant part in American public life. In the later heyday of taxi dancing and treating, prostitution persisted as a quite separate professional activity.

Ruth Rosen studied American prostitutes – women who regularly offered to perform sexual intercourse or closely related services for a fee – between 1900 and 1918. Her historical survey covers the range from low-paid streetwalkers to expensive kept women. She shows that prostitutes made two kinds of distinctions: between different kinds of prostitution and between themselves and other women. Higher-ranking prostitutes, for instance, distanced themselves very clearly from the unladylike “low women.”

Prostitutes also contrasted their professionalism with the gullibility of non-professionals. As Rosen reports, “They joked about the ‘charity girls’ who freely gave away sexual favors, and they derided the ‘respectable’ wives of their customers. … They expressed contempt for the ‘respectable’ domestic and factory workers who worked for subsistence pay … and often had to submit to sexual harassment by their bosses.”

Similar divisions persist to our own time. Contemporary variants on prostitution in the United States include streetwalkers, call girls, escorts and brothel prostitutes, as well as male and transgendered prostitution. Within each, we find further differentiation and hierarchies of prestige, power and wealth. Although in the extreme, the narrow exchange of sexual services for money does indeed occur, even within the world of prostitution we find differentiation as prostitutes distinguish their income by type of activity or by customer.

Streetwalkers, for instance, report differences between what Barnard College sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein calls “career prostitutes” who exchange sex for cash, and the
lower-ranked “crack or heroin prostitutes” who barter sex for drugs. Meanwhile, call girls’ income and prestige are not only higher than that of streetwalkers but also outdo escorts, brothel or massage-parlor workers.

Let us look more closely at differences among streetwalkers, call girls and brothel prostitutes. It would be easy to reduce those differences to degrees of economic complexity: streetwalkers are nothing but the equivalent of street vendors, while call girls are boutique experts and brothel prostitutes, supermarket salesgirls. It would be equally easy to assume what lurks behind such structural differences. For all prostitutes, in this view, the ever-present price for sex eliminates any possibility of intimacy.

There is, to be sure, some truth in these ideas. In some cases, precisely because of the money to be made in sexual services, these are occupations at great risk of exploitation, degradation and violence. Furthermore, there are indeed striking differences in the working conditions of different kinds of prostitutes.

Nevertheless, all three variants of prostitution exhibit a complex economic organization, and in all three the providers establish a set of contingently negotiated relations with their clients.

Streetwalkers, who reportedly constitute a minority of prostitutes, typically pick up their dates in public settings for brief sexual encounters in hotels or cars. Bernstein describes three distinct sites within a 10-block radius in San Francisco: the “upper-class” women of Geary and Mason; the “middle-class” women of Leavenworth and Geary; and the “lower-class” women of O’Farrell between Taylor and Jones. Each category of women is distinguished by race and physical appearance. The largely white, Asian and light-skinned black women – who stand alone or in all-female groups – at the Geary-Mason stroll, she notes, “are young, slim and expensively dressed; their tightly fitted suits, sweater sets and fur or leather coats code them for a relatively upscale market.”

Their prices start at $100, while only a few blocks away, shabbily dressed African-American streetwalkers get between $20 and $100. On two other sites, the usually older, homeless “crack prostitutes” exchange sex for either $20 or a vial of drugs.

Bernstein’s geographic divisions represent distinct categories of streetwalkers. Within each category, the women discriminate among preferred, acceptable and rejected partners. Indeed, as the sociologists Janet Lever and Deanne Dolnick report, street prostitutes
often have regular clients, sometimes long-standing ones. Some clients offer prostitutes gifts of food, cigarettes, alcohol and, occasionally, jewelry or flowers. Street prostitutes further mark the boundary of their relationships with customers by restricting the forms of physical contact they permit – for example, by negotiating which sexual acts they will perform and refusing such contact as mouth-to-mouth kissing.

Call girls establish quite different relations with their clients. They contract individually with customers in advance for a rendezvous that typically takes place on the woman’s own premises or in the client’s home. Compared with streetwalkers, call girls in Los Angeles charged significantly higher prices (a median of $200 versus the $30 median for streetwalkers), spent much longer periods with the client, and were more likely to have an ongoing relationship with him.

Call girls also engaged in a wider range of social interaction with the clients. Interactions included an occasional lunch or dinner, “sleepovers,” conversation, caresses, non-sexual massage and even kissing. From clients they often received jewelry, perfume, flowers and champagne. Call girls also formed particular attachments to some of their longstanding clients. One woman explained: “You can-
not know someone that long without it being a real relationship.”

What is more, call girls develop distinctive strategies for attracting long-term clients, although those strategies sometimes backfire. One sex worker that Bernstein talked to explained why she no longer offered her favorite clients free sex or cheaper rates:

They pretend to be flattered, but they never come back! ... There was one client I had who was so sexy ... Since good sex is a rare thing, I told him I’d see him for $20 (my normal rate is $250). Another guy, he was so sexy, I told him “come for free.” Both of them freaked out and never returned. ... They don’t believe they can have no-strings-attached sex, which is why they pay. They’d rather pay than get it for free.

For a much more bureaucratized version of prostitution than either streetwalking or the call-girl business, we can turn to high-priced contemporary brothels. Legal brothels in Nevada generate some $40 million in revenue annually. Take the Moonlite Bunnyranch, one of Nevada’s 35 licensed brothels. At the Bunnyranch, the customer picks one of the 12 to 20 girls lined up at the parlor, or else the girls approach him at the bar, for a “tour.” This involves going to a bedroom for negotiation of a service, including length of time and price. Each girl sets her own price, ranging from $150 to many thousands for “fantasy parties.” Once a deal is made, the customer pays the office manager by cash or credit card.

Bunnyranch workers receive cash and free food. Dennis Hof, the brothel’s owner, also rewards top earners with special gifts, photo frames or CD cases. As independent contractors, the women must pay taxes and are supposed to split their earnings fifty-fifty. They must also purchase their own condoms and pay for maids’ services, use of the house’s tanning-bed, adult movies, sex toys and their weekly medical exams.

Brothel management sets very serious restrictions on client-prostitute interactions: bedroom price negotiations are closely monitored from the office via intercom to avoid cheating, and kitchen timers are used by the office manager to regulate the agreed number of minutes couples spend together. Newly recruited workers must learn the brothel’s printed rules, while the more experienced workers train younger women in negotiating skills. Both the management and workers pride themselves on giving exceptional service. Air Force Amy, one of Bunnyranch’s top earners explained to a reporter:

A thousand bucks is a hell of a lot of money. ... But half of what you spend here has nothing to do with sex. It goes to the house for providing a nice, safe environment. No one here is going to take your wallet; the police aren’t going to come and raid the place; your name is not going in the paper. I am not calling you in the morning saying, “I thought you loved me, I think I’m pregnant.”

To be sure, many American brothels have operated under much more dangerous and oppressive conditions. But, in general, brothels have organized the provision of intimacy quite differently from other forms of sex work. Taxi dancing and prostitution are only two cases of commercial sex work. Other varieties include lap dancers, strip dancers, porn stars, telephone sex workers and masseuses.

Clearly, sex work differentiates at least as much as courtship. Throughout the world of commercial sex, we find the distinction of different, well-bounded intimate relations, the matching of relation, transactions and media, heavy involvement of third parties in enforcing those boundaries and further negotiation of meanings by the parties. We see participants engaging in delicate, consequential relational work.