‘Doing massage: body work through a narrative lens’

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Abstract

Massage as an activity and as a form of body work has multiple associations, including with health, relaxation, sex, beauty and pampering. Thus, what massage is, is open to interpretation. The massage workers in this study talked about and defined massage in multiple ways, situating themselves in relation to these ideas via their stories. This paper focuses on two of the themes which emerged, namely ‘touch’ and ‘(in)appropriateness’. The research used an approach influenced by narrative, and while the focus of this paper comes largely from a thematic analysis of the interview data, other factors such as structure and context are crucial. The paper concludes with reflection on the methodological position of ‘narrative inquiry’, flagging the advantages this approach offered the research.

Keywords: body work, CAM, massage, narrative, touch.
Introduction: Body work and CAM

As a type of work, massage is situated in the field of Complementary and Alternative Medicines (CAM), which saw increasing growth in the closing decades of the twentieth century and has continued in popularity into the new millennium. As an umbrella term, ‘CAM’ incorporates many diverse practices, which are often irreconcilable in their multiple approaches to bodies, health and wellbeing. In spite of being persistently grouped together in both social scientific and popular discourse, it is therefore more appropriate and in fact crucial to approach such practices individually if they are to be examined in any depth. Hence this paper focuses specifically on one area of CAM practice: massage. ‘Massage’ is in turn a label which can be applied to numerous different types of work involving the body, the most familiar in the UK being Swedish (therapeutic) massage, which involves a routine of stroking and rubbing the body. While the majority of people in the UK may be familiar with the idea of massage, and may even use some aspects of it in day-to-day life, ‘lay’ understandings of massage as a paid interaction are likely to vary depending on context and experience. This form of body work has many popular shared associations, including with health, relaxation, beauty, pampering and sex, the latter in the sense of both paid sex work and intimate contact between partners. In the interviews with male massage workers under discussion here, they described their own views of massage and the understandings of others as nuanced and varied. A range of descriptive terms such as ‘clinical’, ‘esoteric’, ‘eclectic’ and ‘airy fairy’ arose in the stories these men told about what they do and how others see them. The varying interpretations of massage will be further explicated with reference to four interviews conducted in the spring of 2007. The significance of ‘touch and (in)appropriateness’ became apparent in the analysis of these interviews.

While there has been a certain amount of social scientific interest in CAM in recent years (Cant and Calnan 1991; Saks 1992, 2002; Sharma 1992; Cant and Sharma 1998, amongst others), the majority of this has tended to focus on the ‘big five’ disciplines of osteopathy, chiropractic, medical
herbalism, homeopathy and acupuncture. These five, as grouped together in a House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology report (2000), are the most organised in professional terms and have the greatest scientific ‘evidence base’. They also hold the greatest general acceptance and legitimacy in the eyes of both the public and the medical profession, perhaps with the exception of homeopathy, which is subject to the greatest amount of ongoing scrutiny despite (or perhaps due to) its availability on the NHS since its inception in 1948. Massage, on the other hand, fell into a second group in the Select Committee report, a group which was described as ‘complementing’ conventional biomedicine. Massage was deemed by this report to be in need of more extensive professional organisation and regulation in order to increase acceptance, and to improve both the position of massage vis-à-vis conventional science and the confidence of the general public. Much of the social scientific literature on CAM has focused on such issues of professionalisation (Cant and Sharma 1995; Saks 2000, 2002, Sharma 2005[1996]), as well as surveying the use of therapies and their perception by the public (Ong and Banks 2003; Kelner and Wellman 1997, 2000). The sparse literature specific to massage has taken a similar focus (Fournier 2002; Oerton and Phoenix 2001; Oerton 2004a).

Although not solely or primarily concerned with the issue of professionalisation, the preliminary research presented here contributes to this body of work by offering perspectives on two primary themes: ‘touch’ and ‘(in)appropriateness’, including how notions of (in)appropriate behaviour create or reinforce touching boundaries. These themes emerged from interviews which were carried out from a methodological position of narrative inquiry, in order to allow participants to speak of areas of interest and importance to them, and thus to allow new stories to be told. It also offers an alternative perspective to the existing massage literature, which focuses on female workers, by looking at some of the men who are very much in a minority in massage. It is difficult to be precise about numbers since, as with most CAM disciplines, there is no over-arching body which registers
workers, and registration itself is not compulsory. However, in the interest of illustration, the Scottish Massage Therapists Organisation, a relatively large registering body, lists 373 women and only 77 men as practicing in Scotland\(^1\). There is also some suggestion in the practitioner-oriented literature that female massage workers are preferred (Van Meter 2007; Moyer and Rounds 2008), although whether or not this is the case is difficult to determine, and anyway this is not the aim of this paper. What can be said with some certainty is that, not least due to its associations with other forms of body work, care and emotions, massage is a highly feminised and female-dominated field of work. For this reason, the position of men in this occupation is of particular sociological interest. But before moving on to how and what these men do, it is first necessary to look further into understandings of what massage is.

‘What is it you do?’

The Oxford English Dictionary defines massage as ‘the rubbing and kneading of muscles and joints of the body with the hands, especially to relieve tension or pain’, a definition which is interesting in its own right, given its implication that massage is solely a physical act. A broader definition of massage might consider the many other associations or effects of this type of touching, especially given the more common emphasis now on emotional or spiritual considerations in massage work (Vickers 1996). Either way, touch seems to represent a key factor in what massage workers do, and how they do it. Practitioner texts emphasize the significant of touch: ‘[m]assage is a relaxing and nourishing experience in itself, not least because of the unspoken communication based on touch’ (Lawless 1999:37). Thus, since touch may reasonably be perceived as central to what massage workers do, it might therefore be expected to play a substantial part in their stories about their work. Thus, after a brief introduction to ‘body work’, this paper will turn in greater detail to touch as it was talked about by the men I interviewed; and then to the closely related notion of (in)appropriateness.

\(^1\) Available at [http://www.scotmass.co.uk/ Directory/frames.htm](http://www.scotmass.co.uk/ Directory/frames.htm) (last accessed 20/11/08)
**Working on the body**

The term ‘body work’ is used here following Twigg (2000a; 2000b), Wolkowitz (2006) and others, in order to focus on work done to or on the bodies of others, and thus to move away from Shilling’s (1997) conceptualisation of the term as indicating work on one’s own body. Thus ‘body work’ is used in this paper to denote:

> ‘employment that takes the body as its immediate site of labour, involving intimate, messy contact with the (frequently supine or naked) body, its orifices or products through touch or close proximity’ (Wolkowitz 2006:147)

Approaching massage from the perspective of body work offers a number of advantages. Certain significant characteristics of massage work – in particular the necessity of co-presence and the significant levels of touch and physical intimacy involved – are underlined by such an approach. Similarities can also be seen with the experience of workers in a wide range of occupations, such as the typically low status or invisibility of body work; ‘misconceptions’ in popular understandings of some occupations; and similarities in strategies used by workers. Connections with other forms of body work are evident when looking at the examples of domestic care and beauty work, in terms of the levels of intimacy, skin-to-skin contact, boundary issues and professionalisation strategies (Twigg 2000a; 2000b; Gimlin 1996; Black 2004; Sharma and Black 2001). Both similarities and divergences among the types of body work identified in these instances are instructive, for example in the context of professional organisation and legitimacy claims. Oerton and Phoenix highlight certain parallels between massage and sex work:
‘…the projects of both prostitute women and women massage practitioners speak of commonalities; although not exclusively so, both groups of women work on men’s bodies and their clientele is typically heterosexual. And, significantly, both sex work and bodywork also involve forms of touch primarily engaged in for monetary gain.’

(Oerton and Phoenix 2001:389)

The role of touch in body work is again emphasised here; and the similarities in discursive devices used underlines what is to some extent a shared characteristic, but also a conflation between these two types of touching work, which has an impact on the day-to-day practice of those who do massage. The discursive slippage between massage and sex work which pervades common sense understandings – at least in the UK context – is acted out in the behaviour of some worked-on people, and it has to be managed by workers, as will be illustrated below. However, the workers discussed by Oerton and Phoenix are exclusively female, whereas the interviews drawn on in this paper are all with men. The differing gender dynamic in my research brings issues of its own, for example in relation to notions of hegemonic masculinity and normative heterosexuality, as discussed below.

In the body work literature I found it interesting that many examples allow significant space for issues related to touch, both in terms of how it is used and its impact on those touching or being touched. Sharma and Black’s observation on the interplay between touch and emotions provides a pertinent example of this:

‘If that intimacy [between worker and worked-on person] is welcome […] then touch may unleash communication on other levels; the therapist may be require to handle feelings that are not initially and obviously to do with bodies, as for example
when clients confide about their family or marital problems in the course of a
‘treatment’. ’ (Sharma and Black 2001:962, my emphasis)

Here the authors highlight the significant amounts of emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) which body workers may be expected to perform, while also emphasising the inextricable link between emotions and tactility and the immediate, pre-linguistic role of touch in communication. Hence, touch begins to emerge as one of the most significant and interesting aspects of body work.

Touch is highly context-specific and open to interpretation in a variety of ways, including as healing, threatening, caring and myriad more. It has piqued the interest of social scientists since at least the first half of the twentieth century, in relation to body techniques (Mauss (1973[1934]), the ‘civilising process’ (Elias 1998[1939]), and as a basis for knowing about and being in the world (Merleau-Ponty 1962[1945]). The literature has expanded significantly in more recent times: considering just a few examples among many, there have been examinations of literal and metaphorical meanings of touch (Vasseleu 1998; Classen 2005; Paterson 2007); touch in relation to body image and illness (Chapman 2000); touch in workplace interactions (Lee and Guerrero 2001); and the interplay between politics and touch (Manning 2007). Touch is particularly well explored in the context of biomedicine, especially in nursing studies. Here it has largely been approached as a mode of communication, but a wide variety of types of touch has been recognized. For instance, Routasalo identifies no less than twenty-seven forms, ranging from ‘necessary’ and ‘instrumental’ to ‘expressive’ and ‘caring/social’ (Routasalo 1999), once again highlighting the extent to which interpretations of touch are fluid and context-dependent. The substantial and diverse body of literature which has sprung up around touch in nursing and palliative care over the last forty years (McCorkle 1974; Sims 1988; Estabrooks and Morse 1992; Routasalo and Isola 1996) only serves to underline this variety, while also showing potential parallels which can be drawn between types of
work involving body exposure or contact which transgresses day-to-day norms for people who are not otherwise intimate (see Lawler 1991; Savage 1995).

Approaches in biomedicine have also been useful in exploring the role of touch in shaping or signifying power relationships. The doctor-patient relationship has long been acknowledged as overtly hierarchical and shot through with less-than-subtle power negotiations (Parsons 1951; Freidson 1970). The proscriptions of biomedical discourse keep practices of touch under rigid control within this relationship (Redleaf 1998); and such controls are particularly evident in the context of physical examinations, where strategies are employed by workers to sustain boundaries and desexualise patients (Giuffre and Williams 2000; Nadelson and Notman 2002). The parallels between touch in massage and biomedicine are numerous and overall, situating massage among other types of body work – be it sex work, care work, or biomedical work – has the additional advantage of locating massage work in a broader field of academic study. Some of the links discussed above will be returned to later in the discussion of the key themes which emerged from the interviews I did with some men who do massage.

**Getting a ‘feel’ for massage**

The circumstances that lead CAM practitioners into this field of work have previously been linked to their own experience of CAM as clients (Sharma 1992), and the circumstances that lead me to research massage are equally biographical. My way into the field was in part through personal experience as the recipient of countless massages of various types, both in the UK and abroad, and also in part through my employment in the CAM sector. By working in a clerical capacity in a CAM clinic, I was in a position not only to gain an initial ‘feel’ for my field of research, but also to access potential participants. Thus two of the men I interviewed, Dan and Andy\(^2\), were colleagues, both of

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\(^2\) Pseudonyms are used throughout.
whom I had also had massages from and who I interviewed in the rooms in which they usually do massage. The remaining two were recruited via ‘snowballing’. Rob I had met on one previous occasion, and I did not meet James until the interview itself. These two men were both interviewed in their homes.

While the interviews were initially expected to be approximately one to one and a half hours in length, they in fact ranged in length from forty five minutes to two and a half hours. Both the shortest and longest were perhaps attributable to participants’ familiarity (or lack thereof) with narrating their experience, which will be discussed further below. Interviews were digitally recorded, fully transcribed by myself and analysed for both structure and themes. The analysis will be discussed more fully in later sections.

**Body work through a narrative lens**

The methodological stance taken to the interviews I carried out, with part of the analysis of them presented here, is around one form of ‘narrative inquiry’ (Riessman 2008), and it explores how the participants talk about doing massage and how they present their accounts in their interviews. Narrative is a much-contested term, with meanings which can vary from context to context and with no universally accepted definition of how it may be applied. However, there has been a growing chorus of interdisciplinary academic use of the concept since the so-called ‘narrative turn’ in social science and humanities (see Josselson 1993, 1995, 1996, 1999; Lieblich 1997; Atkinson and Delamont 2006; Stanley and Temple 2008). In one sense it is possible to talk about ‘narrative analysis’, of ways of reading data which attend to their temporal organisation, plots, characters and genres (see Mishler 1986; Frank 1995). It is also possible to talk narrowly of narratives as responses to specific questions in an interview context, which are then closely read in a sociolinguistic analysis (Labov 1982). Alternatively, ‘narrative’ may be used more broadly to signify ways of knowing and
ordering social worlds (Bruner 1987), as a ‘dynamic structure embedded in society’ (Sparkes and Smith 2007), or as methods for investigating such structures (Gubrium and Holstein 1998; Sparkes 2005).

The perspective on ‘narrative’ favoured in this paper differs from the above in that narrative is approached as an overall form of inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Sparkes and Smith 2007; Riessman 1993, 2008). Here narrative becomes a methodology, in the sense of an overall orientation towards research, drawing together:

‘the practice of storytelling (the narrative impulse – a universal way of knowing and communicating […]); narrative data (the empirical materials, or objects for scrutiny); and narrative analysis (the systematic study of narrative data’’ (Riessman 2008:6)

Thus aspects of thematic and structural narrative analysis are combined with a particular epistemological position, to offer a more ‘holistic’ approach. This is useful because it incorporates both the phenomena being examined and the way in which it is understood within one broad methodology. It attends to the role of the researcher in the co-construction of narrative data and highlights their interpretive role, while at the same time maintaining an interpretation which is close to the data itself. To best allow for the latter, narrative data is kept ‘intact’, meaning that while it would of course be impractical to present entire transcripts in a short paper, quotes from transcripts have not been ‘tidied up’ in any way. This allows for the representation of the nuances of participants’ speech, and the distinctive accounts they give of their experiences (see footnote 3 for transcribing conventions).

Maintaining a non-tidied but rigorously annotated transcript also allows for an effective structural analysis of each interview to be conducted. In the case of my research, this meant looking at the
individual accounts overall, and the ways in which they were created between each man that I interviewed and myself, in other words ‘shift[ing] attention from the “told” to the “telling”’ (Riessman 2008:77). While not examined for plot, genre and so forth, the unfolding of each interview was considered, in order to gain a clearer understanding of the context in which things were said. The length of turns taken were examined with regards to the overall shape of the interview and to the emerging relationship between myself and the participants. One example of this is in the highlighting by this analysis of a possible ‘refusal to narrate’ which seemed to occur in my interview with James (cf. McKeVitt 2000). This could perhaps have been a result of James not having previously had opportunity to ‘rehears’ a coherent narrative, but which certainly resulted in his being a markedly shorter interview than the rest. This was in stark contrast to the long interview with Rob, who had experience not only in talking about his massage work but also in various ‘talking therapies’, as both practitioner and client. The significance of contextual information can thus be seen crucial (Holstein and Gubrium 2004) and, in the contribution it can make to reflexivity, is highly valuable both in justifying knowledge claims made by the research and in enhancing the ‘trustworthiness’ of the research itself (Riessman 2008).

In addition to the above, a narrative inquiry methodology can produce valuable sociological research since the very way in which participants configure the events that they recount is rooted in assumptions reflecting their world-view, including what they assume to be shared understandings, or a lack of such, between themselves and their audience. It can be argued that traditional thematic analyses limit the possibilities for new stories to be told, and that attention to the ‘narrative resources’ drawn on by participants - what it is (or is not) possible to tell - offers insight into the wider social world (Frank forthcoming; see also Plummer 1995).
For me, the most daunting issue when first encountering narrative inquiry (and perhaps any method which utilises loosely structured or unstructured interviewing techniques) was that of control, which within reason has to be relinquished by the researcher if the participant is to talk freely. This was something I was new to, and the extent to which I handed over the direction of the interview grew over time, and was markedly different in the last interview when compared with the first. On the whole, allowing the participant to speak on their own terms as much as possible, and for them to influence the shape of the interview and not just its context, allows for maximum flexibility at the level of data creation. In this instance, it certainly allowed for the unfolding of stories within and common themes across the interviews which would not have arisen in a more tightly researcher-controlled context. Having reflected on the benefits of this approach I will now move on to discuss the analysis of these interviews in greater depth.

‘Men don’t touch each other, and they DON’T go to another man for relaxation’

For the people I interviewed, the fact that they were men was important in their massage, and pervades their narratives of their embodied experience of this work. Equally, cultural norms shape notions of acceptable and unacceptable touch, which in turn feed into the work these men do and how it is perceived by themselves and others. Contemporary western notions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) are seen to preclude men from physical intimacy, and in a culture of normative heterosexual values touch between men is (homo)sexualised and thus stigmatised. Such norms apply no less to occupations stereotyped as feminine, as noted by Twigg in the case of nursing and carework:

‘…men who work in caring occupations suffer from a series of cultural assumptions that since this is women’s work, men who do it must be effeminate and therefore gay
[...] They also suffer from the homophobia of male clients, or at least from male anxieties about intimate tending by another man.’ (Twigg 2000b:130)

All of the men foregrounded gender at some point in what they said and one of them in particular expressed an acute awareness of expectations related to masculinity and the impact of such norms on the use of touch in contemporary UK society:

‘that’s a cultural thing for us here in the UK and western society in general.. but ESPECIALLY I think in Scotland.. y’know you’ve got this traditional sort of. em. working class. heavy industry hard drinking society.. where men don’t touch each other never mind.. HUG one another, and they certainly don’t hold hands.. and they DON’T go to another man for relaxation’ (Andy, lines 722-28)³

Perceptions of an essentialised, stereotyped view of male sexuality as inherently threatening are reflected in this and other examples from Andy’s interview. The perceptions and norms he talks about are presented as creating a cultural ‘catch-22’, where people are reluctant to see a male massage worker because there are not many available, and are therefore not the norm; but where an insufficient client base prevents any more men from setting up a successful massage business.

James too foregrounded implications of the gender of the worker, stating that the widely-held concept of massage being a ‘female’ occupation was a misconception and one which had directly affected his experience of massage work. In giving his account of being interviewed for a massage job within a branch of an international hotel chain, James expressed his surprised that ‘they were much more interested in how did I feel about working in a FEMALE JOB… I mean it was very

³ Transcription note: full stops each denote one second of a pause, and upper case lettering is used for emphasis. Line numbers are given and […] is used to indicate where, due to constraints of space, parts of the transcript have been omitted.
much this concentration that.. massage is female’ (James, lines 46-50). James later returned to the
topic of women in massage, adding: ‘I mean you do get some female masseuses who are very good
and can give very firm massage. but there’s an awful lot just don’t have it’ (James, lines 398-399),
and then:

‘I find that an awful lot of the girls come through these training courses in the
colleges and they’re not trained.. not trained to that extent y’know they’ve got. they
know the moves. but they’ve not got the strength and a a lot of people comment on
this, y’know’ (James lines 415-418)

James’ views on massage as a ‘female’ job and his comparison of male and female massage workers
may in part have been influenced by his perception of the aims of my research. However, all four
participants were aware of my interest in issues related to the gender of the worker, and none of the
others returned to this comparison persistently throughout their interviews. Existing literature on
men in other ‘female dominated’ occupations identifies similar types of re-labelling (Williams 1993;
Henson and Krasas Rogers 2001; Simpson 2004), and hence, this aspect of James’ story may be read
as a discursive re-framing of massage work as something that men - with the implication of
inherently greater physical strength - are actually better suited to. It is also a key aspect of James’
story, as told on this occasion.

The impact of gender on massage work is inextricably linked with cultural factors, and while there is
not space here to go into all the many socially and culturally-shaped notions of (in)appropriate touch
and bodily contact, it is interesting to note that all four of the men interviewed alluded to these
issues. Andy did so in relation to Middle Eastern customs of men holding hands. Rob did so in the
context of ‘Watsu’ (water shiatsu) training schools in California, where students practice naked.
James did so in reference to massage in other European contexts. Dan referred to the composition of
his male client-base, which he talked about being influenced by religion and local culture of the city in which he is based:

‘the majority of male clients I have are from out of town[laughs]. Swedish.. eh Canadian.. American.. south of England.. I don’t think I’ve got any [male] [Scottish city] clients.. […] primarily its out of.. not folk from [Scottish city] because [puts on exaggerated version of that city’s accent] we’re all very staid and protestant’ (Dan, lines 449-53)

Dan presented levels of comfort with touch as strongly culturally-shaped here, and also in relation to his own feelings about massage. When asked about his choice of massage practice (in his case Shiatsu, which is usually practiced on a clothed person, unlike the therapeutic massage practiced by the other participants, for which the worked-on person usually undresses), he remarked:

‘I’m a typical [Scottish city] Scottish male in that em I still have issues regarding working on somebody that I don’t know on the skin with just towels protecting. I don’t know what it is.. my wife’s a massage therapist and I have no problem working on her but then she’s my wife [laughs] so I don’t know. I just have issues about that’ (Dan lines 41-45)

Thus the ways in which massage and touch are done are, as far as the accounts presented in these interviews go, cross-cut not only with gender and sexuality, but local and other cultural norms which are typically adhered to. The case is similar in relation to closely linked theme of ‘(in)appropriateness’.
(In)Appropriateness

Ideas about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour are closely tied to assumptions about male and female sexuality, with females often stereotyped as vulnerable victims and males as powerful, threatening, and more likely to act on their sexual ‘urges’. In these interviews, touch was presented as something which could be deployed in either appropriate or inappropriate ways. For example, Andy commented: ‘I can understand a lot of women wouldn’t feel comfortable JUST in case… someone’s em., gonna touch them inappropriately’ (Andy, lines 318-19). In fact, Andy returned repeatedly to the topic of touch, often for relatively long turns, and the following excerpt illustrates the intertwining of touch and appropriate behaviour:

‘we don’t as a society touch each other enough or if we do.. people are often uncomfortable with it. em. so it’s something I tried to build into my children to be comfortable with touch, em, again as long as it’s APPROPRIATE […] and I. every time I see my friends I always make a point of shaking somebody’s hand.. em. just as a as a kinda physical thing […] breaking down some of the physical barriers because there’s far too many people live without touch and it’s. it’s a very VERY important part of our lives’ (Andy, lines 106-12)

This presentation of appropriate or inappropriate forms of touch echoes the biomedical perspectives on touch outlined earlier, as well as more general societal norms of un/acceptable behaviour. The theme of ‘(in)appropriateness’ ran in some form through all the accounts, so the question which needs to be posed at this point is: what is meant by ‘appropriateness’ and how do they ‘do’ it? One significant factor concerns ‘towel technique’ (sometimes called ‘draping’), a skill in which people who do massage are trained in order to manage the exposure of the worked-on person’s body. Here a comparison with the biomedical context may once again be fruitful, since studies of the latter have shown draping being used in order to transform the patient from ‘non-
sterile’ to ‘sterile’ (Fox 1997) and therefore suitable to be worked on. The men I interviewed emphasised the importance of maintaining appropriate bodily cover, as in the following from Andy, where he describes his response to a woman he was working on who wished to have her breasts uncovered:

‘I didn’t get into a discussion I just said no. I’ll re-cover you.. em. […] so that’s… more professional so that there was no room for any misunderstanding or.. or whatever. and I didn’t it wasn’t I didn’t feel awkward about it. em. I didn’t feel embarrassed.. it was just a matter of fact. look just. y’know professional boundaries and lets keep it there’ (Andy, lines 923-33)

Maintaining appropriate cover has been related to the diffusion of what could otherwise be interpreted as a sexual interaction (Giuffre and Williams 2000) and is explicitly related to notions of ‘professional’ values and behaviour. But here Andy focuses on what he did not feel in relation to this breech of appropriate behaviour, and he returned to this topic later in the interview. This suggests its significance as a story, as well as Andy’s keenness for me to understand the issue as he sees it. Andy was the only one of the men I interviewed to discuss inappropriate behaviour when the worked-on person was female, and the general assumption conveyed in the men’s accounts was that such incidents would be more likely to occur when the worker was female, and the worked-on person male. Several references were made to the more precarious situation of women doing massage work in hotels, where there is a perception that sexual services might more often be expected. Rob, for example, recounted a story of a woman he knew being sexually assaulted by a male ‘client’ in a hotel spa, while Dan commented that ‘I’m sure women therapists must get that [harassment] all the time’, stories which reflect normative ideas about women as victims and men as aggressors. When they did talk about inappropriate behaviour towards themselves from worked-
on men, this in turn reflected normative conceptions of male sexuality. In the following example, James presents his reaction to an ‘inappropriate’ suggestion in a male-male massage context:

‘he came here he booked a massage.. and I mean he then started suggesting that we went further than the norm so and I said look if you want that then go somewhere else. and he seemed quite surprised. y’know. and we more or less turfed him out [laughs]’ (James, lines 92-95)

James here makes direct reference to adherence to a ‘norm’ in the massage interaction, which for him has a clear, and clearly heterosexual, boundary. His response to the transgression of the worked-on man is recounted as particularly physical (‘turfing’ him out), as well as verbal, and suggests both the normalisation of heterosexuality in massage – given his emphatic reaction that homosexual behaviour was unacceptable – and the potential for embarrassment or even outright conflict when the worker and worked-on person’s expectations do not meet (cf. Goffman 1967). An interesting comparison can be made with a similar situation talked about by Rob, who responded quite differently:

‘there was only the once I had one person that when I went back [into the room] he was still there in the same position and still waiting on something to happen and then I told him […] I do have other clients today and if you haven’t moved from the room I may have to take other action.. action to remove you from the room.. and eh I went away and came back and he was still there. and I said ok you’re obviously not getting the message. I said its it’s a real shame because you have been worked on and been given a thorough treatment today from my sort of view and I said so I’m now going to leave I’m now going to phone. the police’ (Rob, lines 538- 548)
In the context of the interview, it was clear that the ‘something’ this man was waiting for was sexual. However, Rob’s response is presented as an attempt at reasoning and discussion, in comparison to James’ briefer account of a more immediately physical response. These differences can be connected to the two men’s self-presentation (Goffman [1959]1990) and conceptions of their own identity: throughout the interview Rob clearly situates himself within the ‘gay community’ – having originally worked from a gay and lesbian centre and self-identifying as a gay man – whereas James presents himself as a married heterosexual. But more certainly, what can be taken from these examples is that each can be read as representing that particular person’s own conception of appropriateness in relation to their work, their own and shared ideas of masculinity, and the wider societal context. The divergence between the two responses to seemingly very similar situations illustrates the fluidity and context-specific character of ‘(in)appropriateness’, which is defined and done in a variety of ways in the different stories about massage presented here.

Conclusions

The analysis presented here contributes to the growing field of body work and highlights some useful and interesting comparisons which can be made between different types of work which take bodies as their focus. As demonstrated above, parallels can be drawn with care work in relation to the issues presented for men in stereotypically ‘female’ occupations, including the questions raised about male workers’ motivations, an issue reflected on by some of my participants. Associated with this are issues of social and occupational status, which in most forms of body work is low, particularly those which involve the closest, most intimate contact. Additionally, an analysis which looks at massage through the analytical lens of body work not only allows commonalities and divergences to be identified, but also allows for the possibility of shared strategies among practices as varied as beauty, sex, health and death work.
Body work has been conceptualised as running in parallel with the more familiar notion of emotional labour, whilst occupying its own analytical space. I would propose that future research on massage work should integrate the two, so as to enable a more fully rounded sociological investigation of this field. Bringing these two concepts together is appropriate, not least due to the holistic philosophical understandings of the body which take bodies and emotions as inseparable and which underpin a large proportion of massage practice, but also in reflecting and contributing to an academic climate which increasingly sees the value in embodied, ‘holistic’ approaches to sociology itself.

As discussed above, this research, part of which is presented here, was conducted using a form of narrative inquiry, and several key advantages were offered by using this approach. Among these is the recognition of the ‘narrative impulse’, that people know and understand their social worlds through telling stories about them. Another is an awareness of the co-constructed character of interview data, that rather than offering a window onto the ‘true’ experience of these men what narrative data represents is an interaction between two people in a specific (and specified) context. The analysis presented here has been largely thematic, in that two key themes of ‘touch’ and ‘(in)appropriateness’ which were found to be common across the interviews with these men have been the main focus. However, these themes arose spontaneously from loosely-structured interviews, and may not have become so apparent in their importance to the men I interviewed, had they not been afforded the space to talk relatively freely and to introduce issues of significance to them. The import of these issues may also have been neglected had the investigation not gone beyond a traditional thematic analysis to consider at what stage in the interview and for how long they were talked about. This contextualisation, rather than a breaking apart of interviews for abstracted, bite-sized snippets, is what I consider to be one of the main strengths of a narrative inquiry methodology.
One of the key points that my research highlights is that, for these men who do massage, the topics of ‘(in)appropriateness’ and ‘touch’ are closely intertwined. In terms of understandings of both themes, the narrative data presented here suggests that there are clear boundaries which must be maintained around touch in order to present, in a context-specific sense, appropriate professional standards and in a broader sense to create or maintain wider social norms of heterosexuality and masculinity. The normalisation of heterosexuality and stereotypical male/female divisions of labour are both maintained and challenged in massage work. Where a male massage worker may be judged for doing ‘women’s work’, this work is re-framed as something men are actually better at, drawing on narrative resources of men as ‘naturally’ physically stronger. Thus the gendering of certain occupations is challenged, but in a way which perpetuates male superiority, and at the same time characterising women as being more vulnerable and more likely subjects of abuse in this line of work. Even where the hetero-normativity of massage work is to some extent challenged, as in parts of Rob’s account, assumptions about male sexuality prevail, with inappropriate and thus threatening behaviour coming only from men.

The most emphatic ways in which touch was categorised was as one or the other of the appropriate/inappropriate dichotomy and, overall, whether in reference to touch, behaviour in a massage interaction, or the fact that they do massage at all, (in)appropriateness is a significant theme in what these men say and how they say it. The potential ambiguity and ambivalence of touch creates a perceived necessity for it to be tightly controlled via norms of appropriate or inappropriate behaviour. The ways in which these men emphasis what is or is not appropriate for them is telling of their own social worlds, in which touching is only appropriate between certain people at certain times in particular places.
In relation to both themes, one observation which has interested me is that despite, the subject-matter, none of the four interviews discussed here involved any physical contact between myself and the participants. In subsequent interviews with women who do massage, participants have on several occasions chosen to ‘demonstrate’ on me a point they have had difficulty expressing verbally. To put this difference down to the gender of the participant could render it overly mono-causal, when several more other factors relating to the interview dynamic could have been involved, and more attention would be required to this issue to say something conclusive. However, it is a point which drew my own attention and which I think would be worthy of further investigation in its relation to notions of (in)appropriateness. This also ties closely to the problems, both mundane and methodological, in communicating things to do with the touch and senses which are usually implicit and unspoken. The most appropriate means by which touch may be investigated (see Oerton 2004b for an exploration of this in the specific context of massage) forms a significant part of my ongoing research project on massage work.

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