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Published online: 22 Feb 2019.

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'I dodged the stigma bullet': Canadian sex workers' situated responses to occupational stigma

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ABSTRACT

Stigma attached to sex workers' occupation, sometimes disparagingly referred to as 'prostitution' or 'whore' stigma, is a fundamental challenge for people in sex work. Yet sex workers are not powerless when confronting occupational stigma. We employed thematic analysis with data from in-person interviews conducted in 2012–13 with a diverse sample of 218 adult sex workers in Canada. Our participants perceived a high degree of occupational stigma, which they responded to and managed using four main strategies. First, some participants internalised negative discourses about their sex work and accepted their discredited status. Second, many controlled access to information about themselves, consciously keeping knowledge of their occupation from most people while sharing it with trusted others. Third, some participants rejected society's negative view of their occupation. Finally, some attempted to reduce the personal impact of stigma by reframing sex work to emphasise its positive and empowering elements. Participants often strategically responded to stigma contingent on the situated contexts of their work and personal life. We discuss these findings in relation to the existing knowledge base about stigma attached to sex workers' occupation as well as how these findings may direct future research on stigma strategies.

Introduction

Stigma involves the production of negative stereotypes, which legitimise discrimination towards the stigmatised, often leading to their social exclusion and making healthcare, housing and social supports less accessible (Link and Phelan 2014). Stigma negatively affects identity formation and social interaction, is linked to distress in the workplace and limits access to social resources (Pescosolido et al. 2008; Stenger and Roulet 2018; Stuber, Meyer and Link 2008). Stigma theorists have shown that stigma is a fundamental cause of health inequalities and is as important a determinant of health

as other major determinants such as socioeconomic status, gender and race (Hatzenbuehler, Phelan and Link 2013; Link and Hatzenbuehler 2016). Understanding how stigmatisation emerges and takes shape, and its outcomes for those stigmatised, is thus a vital step in reducing its negative impacts (Parker and Aggleton 2003).

Stigma attached to sex workers' occupation, sometimes disparagingly called 'prostitution' or 'whore' stigma (Pheterson 1989), is an example of what Goffman (1963) referred to as a conduct stigma caused by behaviours that contravene perceived and established standards, in this case originating in dominant cultural norms about sexuality. This occupational stigma has been identified as a major barrier for people, especially women, in sex work. As Pheterson notes, '[t]he "whore stigma," a social and legal branding of women who are suspected of being or acting like prostitutes, is a primary obstacle to achieving [their human] rights throughout the world' (Pheterson 1990, 397).

Seen as 'symbolically dirty', sex workers are stereotyped as irresponsible, criminal or vectors of disease and are treated as a threat to self or public (Abel 2011, 1181). Those deemed 'forced' into sex work tend to be pitied and deserving of rescue (Agustín 2005), while 'those who choose prostitution free of coercion may be judged particularly harshly, as they are held responsible for selecting "deviancy"' (Koken 2012, 211). Stigma associated with the act of selling sexual services is so ingrained in today's public institutions and in public interactions that it often goes unrecognised by stigmatisers (Benoit et al. 2017).

Occupational stigma transforms an individual experience of being discredited as a sex worker into a group experience of being managed and/or regulated (Lazarus et al. 2012). The stigma of being labelled a prostitute sometimes intersects with racist, homophobic and transphobic stigmas (Benoit et al. 2018). Racialised sex workers are keenly aware of how racial stereotypes and sex work stigmas intersect to mark them as less than human and is linked to high levels of violence and discrimination (Hunt 2014). Men in sex work face their own set of stigmas related to heteronormative sexual scripts endorsed by gay clients, while research shows that the intersection of stigmas related to gender, sexuality and sex work is a hefty burden for transgender sex workers in many countries (Bernstein 2007; Ganju and Saggurti 2017; Lyons et al. 2017).

It would be incorrect to assume, however, that the stigma attached to selling sexual services is an 'immutable constant' (Weitzer 2018). Rather it has been shown to vary in history and across cultures and social contexts (Hallgrimsdottir et al. 2008). Moreover, sex workers, similar to other stigmatised groups (Corrigan, Kosyluk and Rüsch 2013; Corrigan and Watson 2002; Howarth 2006; Stenger and Roulet 2018; Watson 2002), are actors with varying degrees of agency in responding to the negative judgements made by others.

In relation to sex workers' responses to the stigma attached to their occupation, all studies to date focus on one gender in isolation from other genders, and most involve small qualitative studies of workers who identify as women, many who are street-involved (Begum et al. 2013; Cornish 2006; Forsyth and Deshotels 1998; Koken 2012; Kong 2006; Murray et al. 2010; Ngo et al. 2007; Orchard et al. 2013; Robillard 2010; Sallmann 2010; Sanders 2005; Thompson and Harred 1992; Thompson, Harred and

Burks 2003; Wong, Holroyd and Bingham 2011). A few studies focus on sex workers who identify as men (Jiao and Bungay 2018; Koken et al. 2004; Morrison and Whitehead 2005). We could find no studies of sex workers' responses to stigma that included mixed genders and multiple work locations.

Sex workers' responses to deal with sex work stigma

The concept of *internalisation* – also called self-stigmatisation by some scholars – (Corrigan and Watson 2002; Corrigan, Kosyluk and Rüsch 2013) – is a commonly cited response to occupational sex work. This occurs when the stigmatised individual internalises negative discourses and normalises or accepts their discredited status (Ngo et al. 2007; Sallmann 2010). Undignified assumptions about people involved in sex work jobs come to appear as justified and adopted as being true representations of the self (Wong, Holroyd and Bingham 2011).

Information control is a second response found in the stigma literature (Goffman 1963; Koken 2012; Thompson and Harred 1992). Here information is actively controlled through selective disclosure, depending on the social context. The sex worker may assess the amount of risk they face if they reveal their occupation and how to mitigate or avoid that risk by choosing to disclose or withhold information related to their occupation (Jiao and Bungay 2018; Koken et al. 2004; Kong 2006; Murray et al. 2010; Ngo et al. 2007; Sanders 2005; Thompson, Harred and Burks 2003; Wong, Holroyd and Bingham 2011). This may result in cognitive and emotive distancing, whereby alternative personas and/or strict separation between work identity and personal selves are constructed and enforced (Abel 2011; Forsyth and Deshotels 1998; Orchard et al. 2013; Robillard 2010). These role-play or distancing reactions sometimes result in what Begum et al. (2013) describe as the 'double life'.

Less frequently discussed in the stigma literature are two other responses that involve more active resistance on the part of the stigmatised. Rather than accepting their stigmatised status as 'just the way things are' (Cornish 2006), some sex workers *reject* stigmatisers' assumptions and negative judgement. In particular, they reject the notion that sex work is fundamentally different from other types of work or that the work is inherently harmful (Bruckert and Hannem 2013). Finally, some sex workers employ *reframing* techniques to describe their work in positive terms, such as making connections between sex work and empowering outcomes in their lives or pointing to elements of sex work that are useful for society at large (Abel 2010; Benoit, McCarthy and Jansson 2015; Jiao and Bungay 2018; Koken et al. 2004; Thompson, Harred and Burks 2003; Wong, Holroyd and Bingham 2011). According to Morrison and Whitehead, '[r]eframing techniques apply a counter lens to sex work in order to reduce stigma' (Morrison and Whitehead 2005, 173). Participants in Koken et al.'s study 'framed sex work as an altruistic service that was valuable and helpful to clients in need, akin to work in the "helping professions" such as therapy or nursing' (Koken et al. 2004, 26–27).

As noted above, previous studies of sex workers' stigma responses have been limited by a focus on one or two of the strategies and focusing on one gender or work location. It is unclear how stigma strategies are used concurrently and across genders

and work locations. Our paper addresses this gap by examining responses to occupational stigma among a diverse sample of adult sex workers (N = 218) that included people identifying as different genders, racial/ethnic statuses and delivering services across a wide variety of work locations. Participants often strategically responded to stigma in different ways contingent on the situated contexts of their work and personal life.

Prior to 2010, it was a criminal offence in Canada to keep or be found in a common bawdy house (Section 210(1)), to live on the avails of prostitution – as in anyone who receives a monetary benefit via prostitution (Section 212(1)(j)) – and to communicate for the purposes of prostitution (Section 213(1)(c)). These laws were challenged in 2010 in the Ontario Supreme Court. The case was heard by the Supreme Court of Canada (SCC) in 2013 (indexed as Canada v. Bedford). The SCC unanimously ruled in favour of the plaintiffs. The SCC ruled the prostitution laws stay in effect for one year; afterwards, the sections would be removed from the Criminal Code. The Conservative Party enacted and legislated the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (PCEPA) in December 2014, making it illegal for clients to obtain sexual services in any venue or to communicate in any place – public or private – for the purpose of obtaining sexual services for consideration.

Materials and methods

Study and procedures

This study took a community-based participatory approach. More than thirty collaborators were involved in the study design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of the findings. Collaborators came from five provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Quebec and Newfoundland) and included people with sex work experience, representatives from sex worker-led organisations, outreach agencies and public health or human rights groups, in addition to academics. Sub-groups of collaborators, including individuals with lived experience of sex work and representatives from sex worker organisations and academics met frequently.

Research participants were aged 18 or older and legally able to work in Canada, allowing for comparisons to other legal workers. The final inclusion criteria required participants to have received money in exchange for in-person sexual services on at least 15 different occasions in the 12 months preceding the interview. The research team chose these criteria to focus on sexual services provided to clients in person on at least a part-time regular basis.

As with other hidden populations, it was difficult to randomise selection (Weitzer 2010). Participants (N = 218) were recruited from six Canadian census metropolitan areas in 2012–13: Victoria, Montreal, St John's, Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge, Calgary and Fort McMurray. Recruitment strategies included contacting workers online, newspaper and online advertisements, posters in social and health services, presentations at the beginning of collaborator programs and participant peer recruitment (McCarthy, Benoit and Jansson 2014; Benoit, McCarthy and Jansson 2015). The final sample consisted of a cross-section of sex workers in regard to age, sex, Indigenous status and ethnicity and who mentioned a diversity of locations where they advertised,

negotiated and delivered services. The project was approved by the Human Research Ethics Board at the University of Victoria, Canada.

Interview procedure

All participants received an honorarium of CAN$60. The survey consisted of closed-ended and open-ended questions, asked sequentially. The full interview lasted an average of one-and-a-half hours. The majority of interviews were conducted by two of the authors in a variety of locations, including participants' homes, coffee shops and other public spaces. Interviews in English and French were audio-recorded, transcribed and the latter translated to English.

The qualitative data analysed for this article were taken from the open-ended discussion that followed these interrelated questions: *The kind of work people do is often directly linked to their identity and sense of self. Does your involvement in sex work shape the way you think about yourself? Do you think it influences the way the public thinks about you?* Interviewers probed for sex workers' perceptions and experiences of occupational stigma, whether or not negative stereotypes of sex workers affected them as individuals and the influence that sex work had on their personal relationships. There were 201 transcripts available for coding after accounting for refusals and technical and interviewer mistakes, including poor quality of the recording and failure of the interviewer to ask the full set of questions.

Qualitative analysis

Participants' answers were coded using NVivo 10 software following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines. The second (RM) and fourth authors (MS) reviewed all transcripts to become familiar with the data. All authors, including people with lived experience, then independently reviewed the preliminary coding schemes based on analysis of a random subsample of the transcripts. The second (RM) and fourth authors (MS) then compared their coding schemes and, through several steps of re-visiting the data and comparing coding strategies, achieved consensus on a final coding structure that was analogous to the main stigma responses found in the literature. The second (RM) and fourth authors (MS) then applied the coding structure to the entire set of transcripts. The analysis consisted of collaborative, iterative cycles of coding, considering themes, reviewing the relevant literature, auditing coding, re-considering themes and re-coding conducted by multiple authors until consensus was achieved on final codes. These verification techniques were employed to help increase rigour in the qualitative analysis and interpretation (Morse 2015). All participants quoted below were given pseudonyms to protect anonymity, and their recruitment site is provided in parentheses.

Findings

Sex workers are a heterogeneous group who work in varied environments that offer more or less control over their working conditions, safety and exposure to

Table 1. Overview of sex workers' characteristics.

Characteristics	Adults in the sex industry (n = 218)	Canadian population data[*] (N = 29,312,160)
	%	%
Gender		
Women	76%	51%
Men	17%	49%
Trans	7%	—
Age (mean)	34 years	41 years
Ethnicity		
Visible Minority	12%	22%
Indigenous	19%	5%
Other	69%	73%
Education		
High School	52%	82%
Married/Common Law	30%	58%
Own Home	11%	67%
Annual Personal Income (median)	CAN$39,500	CAN$34,204

*Population data derived from 2016 Canadian census (Statistics Canada 2017).

occupational stigma. That being said, participants in our study reported a high prevalence of socio-demographic characteristics related to structural disadvantage (see Table 1): They were more likely to identify as women and Indigenous and were younger than other Canadian workers. Participants were also less likely to have finished high school, to own their own home and to be married/living common law. Only regarding visible minority status and annual personal income were participants not more structurally disadvantaged compared to other Canadian workers (Benoit, Ouellet and Jansson 2016).

Less than half of participants identified their sexual orientation as 'straight'. One-half of participants reported good or excellent general health; one-third reported good or excellent mental health and nearly half reported unmet health needs. Two-thirds said they were a recipient of income assistance, and one-third said they currently had a long-term disability. Four participants (1.8%) said they were HIV-positive.

The majority of participants reported trying out different work locations concurrently and over time, and so we avoid using binary categories such as outdoor/indoor or on-street/off-street as they fail to capture the wide range of locations (ranging from home, hotels, motels, studios, bars, vehicles and parks) where participants negotiated and delivered sex work services. During the 12 months preceding the interview, one-third of participants had delivered sexual services in an outdoor location ('park/outdoors' or 'vehicle'), while almost everyone (99%) had delivered services in an indoor location such as their own residence, in a hotel room or in an escort agency.

We organised the codes into four types of reactions to occupational stigma among participants: *internalisation*, *information control*, *rejection* and *reframing*. Most participants mentioned more than one response. The most commonly paired reactions in our sample were *information control* and *rejection*, and *information control* and *reframing*. In the sections that follow, we describe how participants articulated these responses. We present the stigma responses in order of the least, to the most, agency displayed by participants.

Internalisation

The acceptance of stigmatising labels and stereotypes or admitting to their own 'differentness' due to feelings of shame and blame was reported by a quarter of participants in our study. Janet (Fort McMurray) stated: '[sex work] makes me feel dirty, it gives me low self-esteem, I hate it … you know how people look at me, how I look at myself, yeah, it makes me feel like shit'. Darcy (Montreal) complained that her intimate partner would sometimes refer to her as a 'fucking whore', which she stated was 'annoying because it's true', suggesting that she had internalised this negative label and thus it is difficult to defend herself against this accusation. Rachelle (Montreal) put it this way: 'I've still got this internalised sense that I screwed up somehow by going into this job, that I should be striving – I should aim high'.

Information control

The strategic control of information was the most frequent strategy reported by participants, mentioned by over half of those providing data on the topic. Information control involved fully concealing their work status ('passing' for a non-sex worker) or partial disclosure of their work status ('covering' it from those they feared), depending on their assessment of risk to their self and others in their network.

Concerning information control techniques, Michelle (Victoria) noted, 'There's definitely a stigma attached to the sex industry. You can't just go around telling people what you do'. Gracie (Calgary) said, 'I'm always kind of uncomfortable and … I always have to lie. You can't just say, "Oh yeah, I'm a hooker" or whatever you want to say'. Deanna (Calgary) put it like this,

> [G]oing to tell my boyfriend – or, my son's girlfriend's parents, that I'm a sex worker? Not a chance. How about the principal of the school? Am I going to tell him that? Knowing that he's a judgmental dumb fuck? No. I'm not going to tell him either. (Deanna, Calgary)

Tristan (Calgary) stated he was worried about institutional labelling if the word got around about his involvement in sex work: 'You know, too many people find out and then somebody's going to call the cops'. Raine (Montreal) feared that if the sex worker identity was disclosed it would become her master status: 'If I actually tell this to anybody else and if it comes out, like as much as it has now, I think that that was all the public is ever going to see me as, a sex worker'.

Some participants talked about how selective disclosure required mediating occupational stigma through living 'double lives' to separate their personal life from their work. For some, this was a performance of a distinct sex worker persona complete with a pseudonym. Collin (Victoria) summarised: 'In a sense I lead sort of a double life, right. Everyone does, you have your private life; you have your professional life'. Natalia (Montreal) told us she has a double persona that is observable only to her sex work clients: 'My "double" is "more feminine" and wears "high heels and tights".'

For some participants, information about their work status was quietly revealed through 'coming out' stories to family and friends. Marley (Kitchener) described how she was able to 'dodge the stigma bullet' because she disclosed her sex work only to those she trusted in her social network and they kept her secret.

Rejection

Rejection, mentioned by over one-third of participants, went beyond efforts to control discrediting information about their sex work. Participants mentioning this strategy acknowledged the presence of stigmatising discourses and attitudes held by society but rejected the notion that sex work is morally wrong or that the work is inherently harmful to participants. Further, they argue that these negative attitudes (i.e. the stigma) are what is problematic about sex work, not the work itself.

Kieran (Montreal) put it like this: 'Yeah, I'm like the bane of society, I'm like the scourge … the sex worker, homosexual … but it's not, it's not who I am. I'm not my identity'. Participants reacted particularly strongly to the constant conflation of sex work with substance use. They rejected being seen as 'dirty' or called 'junkies' and almost unanimously disavowed the assumption that all sex workers were victims without agency. Participants also contested the conflation of sex work and Indigeneity, including Tracy (Calgary): '[E]veryone just assumes Natives have substance abuse problems and will end up working on the street or something'. The trope of the sex worker as 'prostituted' or 'pimped' was also challenged. Charlene (Kitchener) explained: '[W]e're not all pimped out by some big scary man, and we're not forced to do this and drugged out laying on a bed waiting for the next [client]'. Sienna (Victoria) worried about the pervasiveness of the stigma and its capacity to overwhelm other aspects of her life, but also asserted her worth and talked back to occupational stereotypes saying:

> This is a stigma. Just because all women – women like me do this … doesn't mean that I'm a bad mother. Doesn't mean that I'm not capable of working an everyday job. You know, it doesn't mean I'm stupid … because I know that I am far from stupid. (Sienna, Victoria)

These participants often rejected stigmatising labels on the basis that sex work provided a living wage and lifestyle for their dependants that a minimum wage precarious job could not. Vera (Kitchener) said her ex-husband repeatedly attempted to stigmatise and shame her about her involvement in sex work, but she rejected it, stating that their sons were 'enjoying hockey … and all the things that this [sex work] has provided for them'.

The theme of rejection included narratives in which the participants positioned themselves in relation to other work, thus rejecting the notion that their work was fundamentally different from other jobs. Harmony (St. John's) put it this way:

> This is what I do. This is who I am. This is what I'm good at. And most people don't understand when I say that. Most people say 'No, you're much better than that' but people don't understand, like some people get up and go to work, okay, like our Premier, she goes to work every day and just because she's behind a desk writing whatever she got to do, still a job. You use your hands to write. I use something else to work. (Harmony, St. John's)

Bella (Kitchener) also appealed to a sense of occupational normalcy, saying: 'I treat it like any other job. The way you walk into work, I walk into work the same way'. Jackie (St. John's) stated: 'I go to work, I pay my taxes, leave me the F. alone'.

Some participants, including Karen (Fort McMurray), drew comparisons to contemporary dating rituals, underlining the similarities between the explicit exchange of sex

for money, which occurs in sex work, versus the implicit expectations of sex in dating rituals outside of sex work:

> I mean guys go out to the bar all the time and sleep with different girls. They just don't get paid, but they're still paying for it. They're paying for the girls to party, they're paying to take them out to eat. [It is] because they want to be able to sleep with this person. It's the same thing, to me, in my mind. (Karen, Fort McMurray)

Oscar (Montreal) drew attention to a double sexual standard in his rejection of occupational stigma: 'It's like a male will sleep with a lot of females. He's like a dominant, he's like praised, but if a female does the same thing, she's slutty'.

Reframing

Reframing emerged as the second most frequent response to occupational stigma, mentioned by over half of the participants. Reframing is the opposite of internalisation and involves emphasising the personal benefits of being a sex worker and of the sex work occupation for society at large. Reframing responses included making connections between sex work and empowering outcomes in participants' lives or pointing to elements of sex work that are useful for society at large. Celia (St. John's) summed up the impacts of sex work on her identity:

> I'm more accepting of people … I'm better at interacting with people, I'm better at reading facial expression. I can read people more, I'm better at talking to people and I think I'm more well-rounded. (Celia, St. John's)

Participants also described the ways in which sex work had positively impacted on their sexual identity. Kim (Kitchener) told us sex work allowed her to 'explore all kinds of sex I wouldn't have explored otherwise'. Reese (St. John's) said sex work 'allows me to disconnect sex acts from romantic feelings, which is kind of empowering in my personal dating life'. Gabby (Calgary) narrated that 'sex is supposed to be about pleasing the man in the society' and 'not about us [women]', but sex work 'changed the way I view myself as a sexual person. I kind of own it more as a person, and as a woman'. In a similar way, Ryleigh (Calgary) mentioned that in sex work she felt 'more powerful as a female', while Danielle (Calgary) said that her involvement in sex work has given her the tools to 'stand up for myself more', including in everyday interactions: 'When men are staring at me on the street, I will sort of stare back more, with a stronger presence'. Danielle concluded that involvement in sex work helped her to become 'less tolerant of misogyny and sexualisation in my personal life'.

Other participants noted that sex work boosted their self-confidence, often because of the positive feedback from those close to them. Justine (Victoria) said of her aunt's response to her telling her she was a sex worker: 'My aunt sent me this beautiful email saying: "You're so brave and we really need people like you to talk about this and empower people in the same situations".' Other participants expressed gratification of being appreciated as a personal service provider or seen as interesting company and sexually attractive. Theo (Kitchener) stated that 'you get a chance to find out a lot about a single person; and I do enjoy people, and I do enjoy learning about people', while Maia (Calgary) said that sex work experiences were directly related to increased self-knowledge and the ability to set boundaries: 'I've come into myself a lot … I'm

learning what I'm ok with and what I'm not ok with, what I'm willing to do [and] not willing to do'. Likewise, Luna (Kitchener) reflected:

> [W]hen clients come, they do because of my attitude, and because of the way I look, and because of the service I give, that's, that's very positive, that way. My thoughts, like, yes, it has made me feel more positive about myself. (Luna, Kitchener)

Some participants also talked about the benefits of their job in terms of building a capacity to 'take control' over other aspects of their lives. Gwen (Kitchener) said: 'it [sex work] definitely has given me like a sense of like independence and a sense of control and power'. Piper (St. John's) was also clear on this point: 'I probably see myself as like a little more assertive, maybe even a little more aggressive, if that needs to be. Since I started working here, I don't get walked on ever'.

For others, sex work was not just a 'dead end' job, but a viable career option or a bridge to pursuing other educational or professional opportunities. Kate (St. John's) said: 'I think opening this business [Escort Agency] has made me more confident because I did it all myself, which I never thought I would be able to do.' Gwen (Kitchener) describes the feelings of financial independence from sex work:

> It helped me to gain a lot of confidence and to kind of like feel a little bit more independent, especially like with the financial aspect of it too. Just having the money and the time to be able to do things that I – that are like advancing my other career or whatever. (Gwen, Kitchener)

Access to economic security and material benefits led to feelings of self-worth that had been previously unattainable for participants such as Mason (Calgary):

> I consider myself almost on vacation. I'm able to do what I want, I go and have sex for this, and that's how I survive and get by. I have a savings account that's more steady in a certain bracket than I've ever had. I have more financial security doing this than I've had [doing] anything else. (Mason, Calgary)

Finally, reframing responses sometimes included the use of work-oriented descriptors to normalise sex work and its potential positive societal contribution. Willow (Calgary) described:

> I think I'm being creative in a way to make money and I'm helping people. I'm helping guys. That's the way I look at it. […] So, like, when a person asks me what I do, I'm a trainer, that's what I do. (Willow, Calgary)

Emilia (Victoria) said: 'It's so much more than just sex. You know? People really need love and attention and affection and they're paying for your time and it's – there's so much more to it […] I really do love it'. Aubree (Kitchener) summed it up this way:

> I do get enjoyment because I actually help people. I don't – you know, it could be the guy in a bad marriage, or, the virgin who hasn't even touched a boob before. I feel I'm helping someone to get to a point in their life that isn't hurting anyone … I don't think it should be a shameful thing to do. (Aubree, Kitchener)

Discussion

Link and Hatzenbuehler (2016, 659) state that 'policy is very closely related to stigma for multiple groups in multiple ways. And, of course, laws, regulations and policies are

one important component of structural stigma'. Prostitution stigma manifests itself in laws, regulations and social policies (Van Der Meulen, Durisin and Love 2013) aimed at keeping sex workers 'down, in and away' (Link and Phelan 2014).

Yet a negative perception of stigma does not inevitably mean it will be internalised and have health-damaging effects on individuals. Sex work stigma is not absolute (Weitzer 2018) but, rather, is a variable that is sensitive to temporal and social contexts (Benoit et al. 2018; Hallgrimsdottir et al. 2008; Stenger and Roulet 2018). Most participants in this study mentioned more than one response, and only a minority said they internalised the disparaging discourses about them and applied negative beliefs to themselves and their work or its intersection with other forms of stigma with which they were grappling. Thus, when asked if involvement in sex work or the way the public viewed sex workers affected their identity formation or 'sense of self', the majority of our participants rejected this idea. Instead, as reported with some other stigmatised groups, the majority of participants assessed their concrete circumstances and found ways to cope, evade, adapt, reduce and resist the stigma and sometimes turn it on its head (Benoit et al. 2017; Cornish 2006; Howarth 2006; Lazarus et al. 2012).

Scambler and Paoli (2008) suggest that stigmatised people often resort to information control tactics to avoid public censure. The majority of participants used this response to help mediate the impact of stigma on their work and personal lives (Koken 2012; Thompson and Harred 1992). They were careful to disclose details about their sex work only to those they trusted not to reveal it publicly (Begum et al. 2013; Forsyth and Deshotels 1998; Jiao and Bungay 2018; Koken et al. 2004; Kong 2006; Murray et al. 2010; Ngo et al. 2007; Thompson, Harred and Burks 2003; Wong, Holroyd and Bingham 2011). In most settings, they used cognitive and emotive distancing to separate their work identity and personal selves (Abel 2011; Forsyth and Deshotels 1998; Orchard et al. 2013; Robillard 2010; Thompson and Harred 1992). These role-play or distancing tactics resulted in a less stigmatising counter-narrative to present to others that focused attention on more normative social roles, such as being a parent, family member or a member of the local community (Dodsworth 2014; Kong 2006).

Though less frequently mentioned in the sex work literature, rejection was another common response to occupational stigma (Benoit, McCarthy and Jansson 2015; Koken et al. 2004; Wong, Holroyd and Bingham 2011). Rejection involved a critical awareness of how society 'looks' at sex workers and or how others 'see' them – but at the same time refusing to accept these perceptions. Many study participants stated that, despite pervasive stigma linked to selling sexual services in Canadian society, the accompanying stereotypes and negative labels were not how they saw themselves. These strategies reveal a complex understanding of stigma's components: Stereotypes, labels, alienation, status loss, discrimination and rhetorical tactics (Link and Phelan 2001) that enable many participants to use their (constrained) agency to talk back to these processes (Sullivan 2010) and to challenge the socially sanctioned misinformation that others draw upon to rationalise the poor treatment of sex workers (Pheterson 1989).

Finally, participants frequently drew upon reframing techniques to refute the stigma coupled with their occupation. Reframing responses revealed reflexive thinking and illuminated a complex understanding of the limitations but also the benefits of sex

work (Koken 2012; Koken et al. 2004; Morrison and Whitehead 2005). Reframing went a step further beyond rejection of the negative occupational stereotypes by drawing attention to the personal and societal benefits of sex work. These included experiences of empowerment, increased confidence, self-reliance, economic benefits, improved relationships and greater authenticity in private life. Many participants noted that sex work for them was a routine economic activity and they accepted it as one facet of their social identity. Some stated clearly that what they do for a living is a normal business pursuit with important contributions to society and it should be recognised as such. Reframing responses showed that some sex workers found a sense of power through sex work, including opportunities to set personal boundaries, change social dynamics and exercise greater agency. Koken (2012) describes how reframing stigmatising discourses about sex work and sharing positive aspects of their occupational experiences is a signal that workers can take pride in the services they provide.

The findings presented in this paper are not without their limitations. This paper presents qualitative data, and we are unable to generalise our findings to the greater population of sex workers in Canada. Furthermore, the nature of the study (i.e. in-person, recorded interviews), as well as the punitive legal context of sex work at the time of the study, may have reduced the interest of eligible participants. Our aim to recruit individuals who identified themselves as selling sexual services for money may also have potentially biased our sample, possibly excluding those who occupy more socially marginalised statuses (Foley 2017; Hunt 2014; Orchard et al. 2018), such as those who barter sexual services for goods, housing or for illegal substances.

Conclusion

Findings from this study provide an analytic framework from which future researchers can assess the power of stigma attached to sex workers' occupation and how sex workers respond to, cope, manage and sometimes challenge negative judgements. Our central finding of the mutability of stigma contributes to the small body of studies that challenge the view of those in sex work jobs as inevitably exploited and victimised by highlighting their agency and activism that improve their social conditions. We hope our research will inform anti-stigma interventions related to sex work in Canada and other countries. Sex workers and sex worker-led organisations should be directly involved in this process so that the programmes and policies produced have a genuine chance of realising positive change for sex workers in their local communities.

Funding

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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