

# Squaring Up: Experiences of Transition from Off-Street Sex Work to Square Work and Duality—Concurrent Involvement in Both—in Vancouver, BC

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Many studies of exit from sex work are inspired by role theory, where people experience a lack of attachment to a role; are faced with individual, interactional, and structural challenges; contemplate transition and exit a role; and then struggle to establish postrole identities and new lives. This framework has been used to explicate the factors and experiences of those who leave or attempt to leave the sex industry; however, it is limited because studies present sex work as a harmful and dangerous profession that people are trapped in, escaping, or have survived. In this paper, I discuss Vancouver's history of violence against sex workers and I review research on sex work exiting and bring forward recommendations for the design of exit program based on the experiences of 22 active and former off-street sex workers from Vancouver, British Columbia. I describe study participants who include Sex-Work-No-More participants who would not return to the industry, Sex-Work-Maybe participants who consider reinvolvement, and Dual-Life participants who are employed in sex work and conventional work simultaneously. These participants uniquely challenge narrow, binary understandings of involvement and transition because they discuss their use of deception to obtain resources needed to make change; the support that clients have provided; their strategic engagement in sex work as a means to exit; their considerations of reentry; and for some, their dual employment. In light of new legislation that criminalizes activities related to sex work—the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act—and the Federal government announcement of \$20 million dollars for the creation of exit services nationwide, hearing from sex workers is essential to advancing agendas in this area.

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I would like to thank all of the participants who openly shared if and how they included sex work as a career or an economic strategy. I thank my mentors Dr. John Lowman, Chris Atchison, Tamara O'Doherty, Dr. Ted Palys, Maggie de Vries, and Natasha Bowen for inspiration and support.

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De nombreuses études de la sortie du travail du sexe sont inspirées par la théorie des rôles, où les gens éprouvent un manque d'attachement à un rôle; sont confrontés à des défis particuliers, interactionnelles et structurelles; contempler transition et quitter un rôle; et ensuite du mal à établir des identités post-rôle et les nouvelles vies. Ce cadre a été utilisé pour expliquer les facteurs et les expériences de ceux qui quittent ou tentent de quitter l'industrie du sexe; Cependant, elle est limitée parce que le travail présente des études de sexe comme une profession nocive et dangereux que les gens sont piégés dedans, échapper ou ont survécu. Dans cet article, je discute de l'histoire de la violence contre les travailleurs du sexe de Vancouver et je passe en revue la recherche sur le travail du sexe sortant et de formuler des recommandations pour la conception d'un programme de sortie fondée dans les expériences de 22 travailleurs actifs et les anciens hors rue sexe de Vancouver CB Je décris les participants à l'étude qui incluent le travail du sexe-No-More participants qui ne reviendrait pas à l'industrie; Sex-travail, peut-être les participants qui considèrent réengagement; et les participants Dual-vie qui sont employés dans le travail du sexe et le travail classique simultanément. Ces participants contestent unique, ententes binaires étroites de la participation et de la transition parce qu'ils discutent de leur recours à la tromperie pour obtenir les ressources nécessaires pour apporter des changements; le soutien que les clients ont fourni; leur engagement stratégique dans le travail du sexe comme un moyen de sortir; leurs considérations de rentrée; et pour certains, leur double emploi. À la lumière de la nouvelle législation qui criminalise les activités liées au sexe de travail - Loi sur la protection des collectivités et des personnes victimes d'exploitation - et l'annonce du gouvernement fédéral de 20 millions de dollars pour la création de services de sortie à l'échelle nationale, l'audition de travailleurs du sexe est essentielle pour programmes faisant la promotion dans ce domaine.

I think the biggest thing is that exiting is a process that I still don't fully understand you know. (Richard, 38, Sex-Work-No-More)

Sixty-seven women who traded sex went missing from the streets of Vancouver, British Columbia, while I was an outreach and support worker for PACE Society (1995 to 2000) and during my time as executive director (2000 to 2006). PACE is a Vancouver charity that provides direct support and advocacy for and with sex workers. I had relationships with some of these women who later disappeared. Some women were pronounced dead when their DNA was found on the property of serial killer Robert Pickton. Many of us in advocacy and support roles during that time witnessed the disappearances of our community members and appealed to authorities directly and through media, to end the criminalization and displacement of street-based sex work. We called for the prioritization of the health, safety, and rights of sex workers and asked for law enforcement to investigate the assault, rape, and abduction of sex workers. This call to action was

not taken up and as a result, Vancouver, British Columbia, stands as a horrific example of what happens when sex workers are dehumanized to the extent that they are excluded from social and legal protections.

In 2011, public consultations commenced in response to growing demand for an inquiry into police activities surrounding the “missing and murdered women’s case.” Wally Oppal (2012) who led the inquiry condemned the Vancouver police for working at cross-purposes by creating the conditions for predation upon street-based workers through enforcement and displacement strategies, and concurrently investigating missing women—all the while holding attitudes that blamed these women for their predicaments. Jason Gratl, independent counsel representing the public interest in the inquiry, confirmed that due to their prejudices, law enforcement officers were unwilling to utilize resources to save the lives of sex workers (Gratl 2012). This negative attitude toward sex workers is not unique to Vancouver. Shaver, Lewis, and Maticka-Tyndale (2011) state that police officers in Eastern Canada applied a twisted logic by refusing to follow up violence against sex workers in instances where the sex worker would benefit in order to demonstrate that sex work was harmful and to motivate exit.

There is a long history of violence against sex workers in Vancouver. The first reported murder of a sex worker occurred in 1975, and between 1982 and 1994 there were 50 additional murders (Lowman 2000). The disappearances of sex workers was buttressed by the “discourse of disposal” (Lowman 2000:1003) wherein community groups, media, and police worked together to negatively shape public opinion and physically move sex workers out of neighborhoods, making them available for predators. This criminalization of sex workers coupled with their stigmatization continues to physically and socially displace sex workers to dark and remote locations at the fringes of our social concern.

On December 6, 2014, the Conservative government’s Bill C-36 became the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (PCEPA). The bill was a response to the decision by the Supreme Court of Canada on December 20, 2013, to strike down sections 210, 212 (j), and 213 of the Canadian Criminal Code in *Bedford v. Canada*. Chief Justice Beverly McLachlin who presided over *Bedford v. Canada* SSC stated that parliament can regulate against nuisances related to sex work but not at the expense of the safety and lives of sex workers.<sup>1</sup> This was a momentous decision wherein Supreme Court judges unanimously chose to prioritize the safety of sex workers, acknowledging that criminalizing and displacing sex workers infringes upon their charter rights.

The goal of the PCEPA is to eliminate the demand for purchasing sexual services through prohibiting the activities of sex workers, clients,

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<sup>1</sup> See Supreme Court judgments *Canada v. Bedford*: <https://scc-csc.lexum.com/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/13389/index.do>.

and third parties through its asymmetrical criminalization structure. The act will not only affect sex clients through direct criminalization but will also negatively influence the health, safety, and security of sex workers (Krüsi et al. 2014; Lowman 2013). In tandem with PCEPA, the Conservative government has committed to support sex workers' exit. On June 4, 2014, Justice Minister Peter MacKay made exiting a national priority by announcing a \$20-million government fund<sup>2</sup> to support Canadians who desire to leave the sex industry (Smith 2014). Scouler and O'Neill (2007) write specifically about the harms government approaches to criminalize buying sex while creating welfare programs that "rescue" sex workers through rehabilitation programs. The voices of sex workers are typically excluded from this kind of policy approach, so it should come as no surprise that sex worker groups such as Maggie's in Toronto and PEERS Victoria were denied Department of Justice funding.<sup>3</sup> In Vancouver, a consortium of sex work support organizations developed a report,<sup>4</sup> applied for this funding, and was initially denied. They now have an opportunity to pursue federal funding.

With or without the support of organizations, people continuously enter and leave the industry. There is an invisibility of the mundane off-street sex workers who locate customers through advertisements and private networks, who are the silent majority in the industry, yet they are largely ignored in media representations of sex work in Canada and in exit studies. This paper contributes to discourse about transition out of off-street sex work through examination of 22 "ordinary" off-street sex workers who problematize how the exit process has been theorized. Literature specific to sex work transitioning includes research that depicts sex work solely as harmful and as something individuals need help to break away from (Brown et al. 2006; Hedin and Månsson 2004; Månsson and Hedin 1999; McIntyre 2002; Sanders 2007). Foundational research on sex work exit includes Månsson and Hedin (1999) who studied mainly street-based workers and were inspired by role exit theorists and research on how people "break away" from alcohol abuse or drug addiction. They suggest exit happens through stages that are based on accumulation of structural and interactional factors that promote change. Their staged sex work entry-and-exit model posits individuals drift in and become loosely involved or totally ensnared; then they are faced with traumatic or positive events such as violence or falling in love and these lead to immediate or gradual breaks or exits (Månsson and Hedin 1999). Returning to sex work is described as an incomplete breakaway. They conclude that it is a sex worker's own

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<sup>2</sup> See Call for Proposals: <http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/fund-fina/cj-jp/fund-fond/ngo.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Personal email correspondences among Canadian sex work activists and sex worker organizations from May 22 to 25, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> [http://wish-vancouver.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/SexWork-TRE-REPORT\\_MAY-6-2015.pdf](http://wish-vancouver.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/SexWork-TRE-REPORT_MAY-6-2015.pdf).

ability to cope with structural, personal, and interactional factors that determine whether the break from sex work is completed. Their four-stage breakaway theory holds that sex workers contemplate a break, experience turning-point events and exit, and then experience challenges that leave them “dangling between two life patterns, living in a state of uncertainty and ambivalence” (Hedin and Månsson 2004:225) to finally build a new life through repairing the injuries of sex work. Moving in or out of sex work is not perceived as a goal or process that sex workers have any control of and using terms such as “dangling” to describe life at the intersection of sex work and square work does a disservice to those who are strategically positioned there.

Sanders (2007) developed a typology that depicts four paths out of sex work: (1) *reactionary routes* out where individuals exit, unplanned, due to significant events; (2) *gradual planning* where workers have time to make financial plans; (3) *natural progression* where people feel that their time in sex work has run its course; and (4) *the yo-yo pattern* where the unplanned exits of street-based workers force their return to prostitution where they are trapped because of their criminal justice involvement or a need for money or drugs. Off-street workers are unable to successfully leave because of low-waged employment. Former sex workers in this study are described as experiencing elements of all four of these categorizations, but here again the focus is on leaving sex work and reentry is depicted as chaotic. There is no discussion about strategic involvement because sex work is understood as harm.

Developing on Månsson and Hedin’s (1999), Hedin and Månsson’s (2004), and Sanders’ (2007) typologies, theorists such as Baker, Dalla, and Williamson (2010) have created models based on an examination of push/pull factors identified among exit studies. Baker et al. (2010) describe exit from sex work as “being free of prostitution” (p. 582) as if sex work is a disease. They designed a six-staged integrated exit model based on self-destructive individual factors, unhealthy relational factors, and structural factors that include poverty, and societal factors of stigma and discrimination. Their model flows from immersion in sex work through to deliberation and an initial exit, then loops back to reentry and barriers until a worker makes a final exit. Similar to Sanders (2007), Månsson and Hedin (1999), and Hedin and Månsson (2004), they highlight deficits in sex workers and the range of factors that challenge their exit such as nonexistent coping skills and their lack of confidence and initiative. They also state that sex workers pose a challenge to support organizations because “their lack of behavioral action makes them invisible to formal support providers” (Baker et al. 2010:593). Here, we see researchers suggesting that sex workers need to be more accommodating to support organizations instead of the opposite being true.

In all of these accounts, sex work equates harm and sex workers are in need of rescue. This bounds our understanding of involvement as well

as transition. Some media outfits perpetuate this view. The tag line read, “Vancouver Group to Help Sex Workers Escape” in a May 5, 2015, commuter newspaper article about the Vancouver consortium.<sup>5</sup> Depicting sex work as something merely to be escaped is a limiting framework that suppresses the experiences of those who live sex work as work; those who supplement square work with sex work; and those who view sex work as an opportunity to ameliorate structural oppressions such as patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism experienced as gender inequality, poverty, and racism. Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips, and Benoit (2009), in their analysis of media narratives (1980 to 2005), found that sex workers were represented as “morally and legally corrupt, and as vectors of social and physical malaise” (p. 278). What is missing in media representations of transition is the range of experiences where sex workers as active agents shape their futures around the barriers that exist because of the social positions we relegate them to. Missing are the activities of mundane sex workers who are positioned at or around a socioeconomic midpoint. They are not the elite, nor are they impoverished. They are educated and savvy and their experiences reveal gaps in knowledge about transition. Their contributions include the following: their strategic involvement in sex work as a means to exit, the role of clients, how they think about and plan their return to sex work, and their duality as they expose us to the ways in which people negotiate work in both fields.

There are disadvantages of reducing sex work involvement to a compilation of factors related to structure and agency that may hinder exit. O’Neill and Campbell (2010) advise that utilizing the concept of intersectionality when examining sex work exit will move the discussion away from structure/agency debates and toward more materialist cultural approaches that will reveal the complex realities of transitioning from sex work. There exists a multiplicity of experiences in the sex industry. Transition may be affected by intersecting socio-structural positions, biographies, skills, dispositions, types, and locations of sex work; compounded by the diverse ways that people engage with the work, set their schedules, and limit or expand the services on offer. Some experience sex work as harmful, some as functional, others fully enjoy their work and see it as no more risky than forms of “square” labor. Further, framing sex work as harm by extension vilifies clients and third parties, thus excluding the ways that they may participate in supporting transition. Finally, there is a paucity of information about those who find positions of duality—who may perceive involvement in both fields as instances that present both opportunities and challenges. Hearing from these individuals in concert with those who have exited will enrich understandings of transition precisely because they have not left roles in sex work.

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<sup>5</sup> See 24Hrs Vancouver: <http://vancouver.24hrs.ca/2015/05/05/vancouver-group-to-help-sex-workers-escape>.

Contemporaneous publications speak to the agency of sex workers and their innovative responses to the socio-structural positions that they occupy (Parent et al. 2013; Showden and Majic 2014; van der Meulen, Durisin, and Love 2013). Some research on transitioning present complex analyses (Bowen 2013; Koostra 2010; Law 2011, 2013; UK Network of Sex Work Projects [UKNSWP] 2008) appreciating that the industry is experienced as both exploitive and liberating. Research identifies a range of factors among the reasons people leave for, including aging, frustration with clients, falling in or out of love, violence, or pregnancy (Dalla 2006; Sanders 2007). Exit supports include help from friends, family, lovers, sex worker organizations, and third-party bridges (Oselin 2010) such as the state and its agents. Past research has identified forces that influence reentry, highlighting challenges adjusting to low wages, finding and keeping jobs, and accessing resources (Benoit and Millar 2001; Brown et al. 2006; Dalla 2006; Jeffrey 2009; Koostra 2010; Månsson and Hedin 1999; Mayhew and Mossman 2007; McIntyre 2002; Millar 2002; Sanders 2007; UKNSWP 2008). Unfortunately, reentry is sometimes framed as being trapped in sex work or a sex workers' failure to break away in order to thrive in conventional work (Hedin and Månsson 2004; Månsson and Hedin 1999; McIntyre 2002; Sanders 2007).

Those who leave sex work have “embodied” social structures (colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy) in such ways that they possess the mental capacities or “cognitive categories” (Wacquant 1990) needed to make a desired transition. Those who transition utilize “capitals” (Bourdieu 1986)—such as money, information, and relationships—to obtain the employment they desire. Specific experiences of movement from marginalized forms of employment or “tainted jobs” (Bruckert 2012) to mainstream employment among stigmatized individuals add layers of complexity to the process of transition. Goffman (1963) distinguishes “discrediting” stigma, when the attribute is known, from “discreditable” stigma, when information is not known. Discreditable stigma applies to those transitioning from sex work as they must conceal their biographies in most of their social encounters. Just as terms such as “prostitute” are offensive to sex workers because from their Latin roots they mean to dishonor or to publically “expose someone to shame and rebuke” (Büschi 2014:726), Law (2013) suggests that using the term “exit” in transition studies is disrespectful because it simplifies the diverse employment experiences within sex work.

Participants herein discuss the factors and conditions that would support their return to sex work, the role that clients played in their transition, and how they reluctantly used deception to obtain the resources needed to leave. I argue that only through inclusion of Canadians with diverse transitioning and dual-life experiences can we design effective supports for those wishing to retire from sex work. People who have experienced transition have asked for nonjudgmental supports (Koostra 2010; Law 2011; UKNSWP 2008). Sex workers possess the knowledge needed to de-

Table 1

**Participant Details**

<b>Participant name<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Biographical info (age in years)</b>	<b>Time in sex work (time in years)</b>	<b>Transition status</b>
Colleen	30-year-old white heterosexual woman with no dependents	2	Out of sex work, no plans to return
Debbie	43-year-old mixed race bisexual woman with no children	19	Out of sex work, no plans to return
Richard	38-year-old white gay man with no dependents	20	Out of sex work, no plans to return
Amy	35-year-old white heterosexual woman with one minor child	8	Out of sex work, no plans to return
Jessie	41-year-old white femme gender queer who has co-parented three children	1.5	Out of sex work, no plans to return
Josey	26-year-old white bisexual woman with no children	8	Out of sex work, no plans to return
Lianne	43-year-old Asian heterosexual woman, married with no children	15	Out of sex work, no plans to return
Shannon	47-year-old white bisexual woman, married with one adult child	4	Out of sex work, no plans to return
Stuart	43-year-old white gay man with no children	6	Out of sex work, no plans to return
Tammy	20-year-old white bisexual woman with no children	5	Out of sex work, may return
Cheryl	38-year-old indigenous bisexual woman with three children	13	Reentered dual life after interview
Nicole	35-year-old indigenous heterosexual woman with one child	10	Out of sex work, may return
Kayla	61-year-old white heterosexual woman with no children	31	Out of sex work, may return
Julie	48-year-old black woman of Caribbean descent, heterosexual "gay for pay"	13	Out of sex work, may return

*(Continued)*



Table 1

*Continued*

<b>Participant name<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Biographical info (age in years)</b>	<b>Time in sex work (time in years)</b>	<b>Transition status</b>
Dominic	29-year-old white queer man with one child	7	Out of sex work, may return
Darla	46-year-old black woman of Caribbean descent with one adult child	6	Out of sex work, may return
Simone	27-year-old white heterosexual woman with one child	11	Out of sex work, may return
Candy	45-year-old white bisexual woman with one child	30	Dual life
Teresa	36-year-old white heterosexual woman with no children	9	Dual life
Donna	35-year-old white heterosexual woman with no children	12	Dual life
Jolene	43-year-old white heterosexual female with no children	26	Dual life
Veronica	43-year-old white heterosexual woman with no children	21	Dual life

<sup>a</sup>Participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

sign context-specific, nonpunitive continuums of support for their peers and their leadership will inform our general understanding of transitioning both empirically and practically. If research and policy frameworks are made from the mindset that sex work is lived as purely harm, then policy interventions may pathologize and exclude those deemed “vulnerable,” yielding ineffectual strategies, limited in their applicability and lacking in material benefit to sex workers.

### *Procedures and Participants*

This project received ethical approval from the Office of Research Ethics at Simon Fraser University on February 14, 2012. I sent invitations to my extensive network of sex workers and organizations garnered over my 20-year experience working on sex work issues in Vancouver.<sup>6</sup> Interviews took

<sup>6</sup> Recruitment began with a purposeful sampling strategy that snowballed through referrals.

place from February 15 to May 7, 2012. Twenty-two interviews were conducted, lasting between one and three hours. Participants were not paid. I opted to conduct phenomenological interviews because they support the democratic coproduction of knowledge and are observational and reflexive (Flood 2010).

Digital audio files from interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using QSR NVivo 8 (QSR International Pty Ltd., Burlington, MA) and PASW Statistics 18 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). Through analysis, my sample of 22 participants came to comprise three distinct groups: nine who had exited and will not return to sex work (*Sex-Work-No-More*); eight who had exited and may return (*Sex-Work-Maybe*); and five who had not transitioned, instead they held simultaneous employment both in and out of sex work (*Dual-Life*).

Participants<sup>7</sup> ranged in age from 20 to 61 years with an average age of 38. Similar to other studies of off-street workers (Althorp 2013; Law 2011; O'Doherty 2007, 2011), my sample was well educated; one person obtained a master's degree, four participants had college and vocational certificates. Of the 15 who had completed high school, 11 had some university or college education. At the time of interview, 21 participants were employed full- or part-time in conventional jobs<sup>8</sup> such as executive leadership, outreach or support workers in the volunteer sector; some were employed in the private sector, health services, corrections, and education. Ten participants worked primarily as in- and outcall escorts for agencies; others worked as independent sex workers, dancers, and porn actors. Off-street sex work experiences included the following: massage in "rub and tugs," bondage-dominance-sadomasochism, live erotic performances, and tickle torture.

## SEX-WORK-NO-MORE

The 17 exited participants negotiated capital and exercised agency given how structure, and their interpretations of it, influenced the ways in which they have come to understand and live in the world. The nine Sex-Work-No-More participants described numerous overlapping factors that facilitated their transitions, including falling in or out of love, health conditions, and frustration with sex work. Leaving the sex industry was a way to eliminate harm, gain control over their lives, and align thoughts about sex work with their behaviors. Amy stated, "If I went back it would be morally hurtful to myself and it's not about anyone else it's just not right for me." The primary reason for exit provided was a desire to pursue or continue an intimate relationship. Josey explained that her new love drew a picture of her, depicting her as very sad: "I remember the first time he drew me . . .

<sup>7</sup> See Table 1 for more information about the participants.

<sup>8</sup> In future studies, I plan to document the proportion of time spent in each kind of work and income levels for comparison.

sort of ugly like, like my face really fucking sad . . . I had been seen for the first time.” After this experience, Josey wanted to leave sex work and this sad version of her behind to live a happy life with her new love.

Overall, support from others, help from sex worker organizations and government agencies, and employment were among supports named by all 17 exited participants. Debbie accessed a sex worker organization for support to leave the industry. Uniquely, the organization provided funding for a college-level certificate program: “I got my expenses paid for the entire 7 months . . . I got my course paid through [named organization] and I went to school.” For those who desire to leave sex work, acquiring a livable wage is among their top concerns.

State agents supported transition for some. After two years in sex work Colleen grew increasingly frustrated with her unsupportive pimp. One night she was outed as a sex worker to a family member and reached out to her pimp for support:

It was 10 pm and my [family member] had seen me working . . . I called my pimp because I was upset and crying and he told me to go back to work. So I called these 2 detectives . . . they left this interrogation to come check on me and that was so significant.

These officers showing this level of concern for Colleen inspired her to leave. They aided in her relocation and subsequent transition out of sex work.

## **SEX-WORK-MAYBE**

The eight Sex-Work-Maybe participants left sex work for reasons similar to Sex-Work-No-More participants. Barriers to returning to the industry for Sex-Work-Maybe participants included having stable square jobs, being in love, and uncertainty about how engagement in sex work would affect sobriety and mental health. Two Sex-Work-Maybe participants were hesitant to return to the industry because of the growing popularity of the “girlfriend experience” (GFE)—a service that requires intimate acts that may include the exchange of bodily fluids. Julie stated, “If you’re not GFE then they won’t hire you . . . how dare you tell a girl what she can charge to exchange fluid!” Engaging in GFE services blocks Julie’s return because it is unsafe and blurs the line between sex work and her personal non-commercial sexual exchange—a demarcation required for her mental and physical health.

Sex-Work-Maybe participants viewed sex work as an option for future employment. Dominic explained that his relationship with sex work felt unfinished: “I don’t think that I’m done with it [sex work] . . . I would go back . . . I would ideally do it in a more intentional way.” His use of the word “intentional” challenges notions of reentry as being chaotic and

due to oppressive structural factors (Baker et al 2010; Hedin and Månsson 2004; Månsson and Hedin 1999; Mayhew and Mossman 2007; McIntyre 2002; Sanders 2007). Some reenter because they want to. Transition for participants here, whether permanent or temporary, was aided by participants controlling when and how they exited. Simone exercised agency by rejecting advice about transitioning from a sex worker organization: “Most people said you need to stop seeing clients right now . . . I mean exiting is a challenge in general I don’t need to make it strenuous.” Simone was encouraged to make a clean break from sex work by staff but she resisted this strategy as she knew it would cause her undue stress and financial hardship. Sex workers need to set their own individualized agendas and timelines in order to retire on their own terms, if at all.

### **EXPERIENCES AND INSIGHTS FROM SEX-WORK-NO-MORE AND SEX-WORK-MAYBE PARTICIPANTS**

Roughly half of the 17 participants who left sex work saw themselves as out for good and the other half were out for now. Sex-Work-No-More participants made a firm separation between the fields of sex work and square work. Reentry into sex work has been interpreted in works such as Baker et al. (2010) as an unsuccessful attempt to achieve an ex-role. Some participants viewed a return to sex work in this way. Richard contemplates exit: “It’s way more than just not doing sex work, it’s learning the skills, being productive . . . the process I mean . . . am I out? Am I ever gonna be out?” For Richard, ending the behavior of trading sex did not signify exit for him. Although he was not interested in returning to sex work, the risk of that occurring if he did not establish himself in a conventional role made him question his transition. Simone, a Sex-Work-Maybe participant, felt differently: “I don’t think it will ever be off the table . . . I’m always gonna know how to find a client. I can never be truly fucked with these skills.” Having experience in sex work promoted a sense of economic security for Simone—a way of making money that she had free and continuous access to. There is a need for openness and candor around reentry in the conceptualization of transition programs. Sex workers need space to explore reentry and position them in relation to it.

Although only six of my participants identified as indigenous and people of color, race played into transition decisions.<sup>9</sup> Julie remarked, “Being a Black woman and being able to walk into the fancy stores in town and have people run up and serve you, that’s huge . . . sex work gave me the ability to do whatever I wanted to do.” Sex work provided Julie a disposable income and a consequential “visibility” in Canadian society that she believed she

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<sup>9</sup> Discussion about the interrelationship of race, sex work, and class is limited in this study and needs further examination.

would not have had otherwise. Julie retains sex work as an option to earn money in consideration of her race, class, gender, and economic potential in Canada. Darla discussed how her racial identity and sex work interacted to produce her unique experiences of stigma: “I never told anybody . . . being Black and the close relationship with Black identity and prostitution . . . I was living a stereotype.” Darla’s gender and racial identities made disclosure about a history in sex work so unsafe that she conceals this information to this day, in spite of achieving economic security in conventional work. Being confronted with “whore stigma” (Pheterson 1993) was the greatest challenge to leaving sex work for all participants. Sex work theorists indicate that those who leave hide their biographical information from friend and foe; create new histories cued to build acceptance in non-sex working environments, and deceive others to avoid stigma and obtain the resources for transition (Bowen 2013; Millar 2002; O’Doherty 2011; Pheterson 1993; Rickard 2001; Ross 2009; Sanders 2007; Shaver et al. 2011). Kayla’s attempt at “sexiting”—strategic engagement in sex work and square work with goals toward leaving the industry (Bowen 2013)—was thwarted by a police officer who outed her at her square job: “The cop told [my co-worker] that I was a prostitute and a junkie and she spread it all over the place, all over the unit!” Kayla lost this job and remained in sex work until she was able to negotiate another transition. She still struggles to make sense of how making her unemployed was protecting or serving anyone’s interests.

Participants were often shocked by how they were treated by those they interacted with in the square world, especially for those who transitioned to postsecondary institutions. Josey went to university after leaving sex work and felt stigmatized by the ways in which sex workers and drug addicts were spoken of in classroom settings. She was both a former sex worker and a recovering addict and hid discrediting information. She explains, “I experienced stigma indirectly . . . you know that sort of violence of assumed camaraderie . . . I had to just watch people think that I was one of them.” Josey “passed” as a student. Attending university and hearing negative comments from people she thought were educated was emotionally scarring. Cheryl experienced stigma during a practicum placement at a Canadian university. She describes: “I was sitting at my desk doing my work and my manager came over . . . he looked at my [name plate on desk] and he read it and he was like what? It says [participant’s name] Media and Public Relations.” To be treated this way at her first square job out of sex work was profoundly traumatizing for Cheryl. She began the process of filing a complaint at the university against her co-workers but decided not to proceed: “I was a single mom . . . I just didn’t want to put myself through all that stress . . . I’ve always kinda been like disgusted with [Canadian university] ever since.” Shannon was stigmatized at a sex worker organization of all places. Although there was respect there for her experiences in sex work in general, being a former drug addict was

discreditable within this employment context. She shares, “I thrived in spite of [sex worker organization] and not so much because of them . . . [Staff member] actually called me a junkie whore.” Stigma toward sex workers and sex working addicts is so pervasive it permeates environments that purport to be safe for sex workers. It is unacceptable to humiliate those who are doing what some in society want sex workers to do—leave, especially within sex work support organizations. Reducing whore stigma and diminishing its effects among active, former, and dual-life populations will be a major task for transition programs.

Past studies among street-based workers describe them as being challenged by an inability to gain employment due to a lack of education and skills, noting that many entry-level jobs paid very little (Baker et al. 2010; Brown et al. 2006; Hedin and Månsson 2004; Jeffrey 2009; Månsson and Hedin 1999; Mayhew and Mossman 2007; McIntyre 2002; Sanders 2007). Brown et al. (2006) discuss sex workers supplementing sex work with welfare payments to transition more smoothly. Drawing on more than one income source to make a life change is not a new concept. Five of 17 exited participants here engaged in “sexiting” by doing sex work and other work as a means to fund exit; this strategy is not often disclosed. Nicole explains that she began work at a sex worker organization and saw regulars for a time before leaving the industry completely: “It was like boom 9 to 5 . . . and the expectation was that I wasn’t live<sup>10</sup> . . . It took me a while to fully exit.” Simone was employed at a sex worker organization and hid her sex work: “I hadn’t even exited yet but [sex worker organization] didn’t know that . . . I’m still there (laughter) and now I run the program.” Nicole’s and Simone’s choice of working at sex worker organizations was to reduce the stress they would otherwise experience if they had transitioned from sex work to conventional jobs. Markedly, both of these participants concealed their sexiting, which illustrates the deception that comes as a consequence of suppressing how some sex workers stave off hardship and maintain the standards of living while transitioning. Sanders (2007) highlights that yo-yoing in and out of sex work occurred among off-street workers who exited to mainstream jobs. I suggest that income from square jobs can be inadequate to fund the transition let alone ongoing square lifestyles. Sexiting is a strategy to access the resources needed while establishing square lives. These transition costs may include security deposits, furniture, moving expenses, new wardrobes, education/skill development, and emergency funds. Sexiting is functional because change costs money. Support programs that take the ideological position that all sex work is harmful may adopt zero-tolerance policies, rendering them incapable of recognizing and responding to nuance, thus misrepresenting the process of exiting to sex workers, policymakers, and the public.

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<sup>10</sup> “Live” is sex industry jargon for being involved in sex work.

In addition to understanding transition in relation to sex workers themselves, an awareness of how the relationships between sex workers and their clients work is needed. Participants shared that clients supported their transition out of sex work. Many received emotional support and information about community and state resources from clients. They can be counted among Oselin's (2010) third-party bridges. Lianne's transition was aided by a client: "He was a guy I met on one of the chat lines . . . he came in as like this rescuer and like he helped me with welfare and spent a lot of time with me." Framing these relationships as inherently exploitive (Jeffrey 2004; Raymond 1998) or ignoring them altogether contributes to the erasure of the role of clients in transition. Meaningful relationships between sex workers and clients can and do develop. Shannon married her client after he supported her to leave sex work and they remain so as of this publication. Two Sex-Work-No-More participants were aided to transition through the financial investment of their regular clients: Amy received a large sum from a client and Debbie received \$25,000 from clients specifically to exit. Excluding clients has been mentioned in sex work studies such as Huysamen and Boonzaier (2014) and doing so dismisses scholars such as Sanders (2008), Atchison (2010), and Benoit et al. (2014) whose research findings explicate the close relationships sex workers have with regular clients. With the exception of Law (2011) and Bowen (2013), the role of clients in transition remains an underexamined aspect in exit studies. As clients are now criminalized under the PCEPA they will be difficult to study; however, transition programs must support sex workers in determining their social capital through exploration of the roles of *all* of the relevant people in their lives.

Nine participants spent time in isolation to reflect upon their states of being and to do some self-care. For two participants, this time away was funded by their clients and they stayed alone in apartments for weeks and the others found respite at detox and treatment programs. Debbie isolated herself and made a plan for her life. She lived in seclusion for so long that she was shocked when she finally went outside: "I remember walking like out the doors after 3 weeks and I walked outside and the fresh air hit me and I'm like holy fuck." Participants explained that this time spent contemplating sex work and reflecting upon their lives and goals without having to worry about money and rent was instrumental to their transitions. Richard reflected humorously upon his monthly government income for an illness he did not have: "I was on disability for mental illness which I never had . . . so \$1000 a month cheque!" In order to enjoy some time to contemplate his next steps, he went along with the misdiagnosis. Richard was not proud of having to deceive others in order to obtain the resources to leave sex work, but saw it as a necessary evil. Sex workers deceiving others to obtain the resources has been identified in literature (Bowen 2013; Crago and Arnott 2009). Exit programs can design in opportunities for respite and negotiate adequate financial support for transition.

## DUAL-LIVES

Fifteen participants had experience living a dual-life—working simultaneously in both square work and sex work. Dual-life participants contribute to theorizing about exit because their existence illustrates that there are many ways to *be* a sex worker. They challenge binary understandings about sex work. They transgress upon the border between stigmatized labor and conventional work. Five participants were actively engaged in either open or clandestine duality at the time of interview. Jolene and Donna shared information about their sex work with most people they encountered; however, Veronica, Teresa, and Candy concealed their sex work to avoid stigma. Candy stated, “I have one or two people that know . . . I trust them explicitly.” In spite of stigma, these participants felt that both kinds of work offered opportunities, and their ability to negotiate roles in both fields was due to their skill sets and dispositions. Veronica believed that policymakers should be inclusive of those who live dual-lives: “It’s not as cut and dry as I’m in or I’m out . . . it’s pretty fluid and as far as people who try to understand this they should provide resources and create policies, but there has to be room for everybody on that spectrum.” My nascent definition of duality accounts for this fluidity absent in extant literature. Participants in Sanders (2007) took breaks from sex work to address burnout and frustration with the work. Donna implemented a different strategy to stay in sex work: “I can just handle one day . . . I work a Saturday and I don’t have to work for another couple weeks.” Donna struck a balance between working just enough in sex work to get the income she needed to live well, but not so much that it would make her frustrated with the work.

All Dual-Life participants stated that the main reason for duality was that they benefited from income made in both sex work and square work. Candy earned about \$4,500 a month, with 60 percent of her income coming from square work. Unlike the concept of *yo-yoing* (Sanders 2007) where off-street workers moved in and out of sex work due to structural issues, participants who lived dual-lives did sex work to address financial shortfalls but worked in both fields because they believed that this was the best way to engage in sex work. Teresa explains, “I want to have medical plan, sick leave, vacation pay . . . I want that option in my life.” Teresa enjoyed employment benefits not yet offered to sex workers and profited from making money at a faster pace in sex work. Dual-Life participants also identified challenges to holding square jobs. Jolene stated that the downfall to holding a square job is the low pay: “I work a lot in [square job] but of course that doesn’t pay very well.” Participants who lived dual-lives were always mindful of the income they could have made in sex work while working their square jobs.

Elements that supported duality included having a conventional job with flexible hours and managing information to avoid stigma.



Additionally, those who lived dual-lives believed that they had the skills to establish themselves in employment in both worlds. Veronica stated, "I thrive in either place (laughter)." But Donna split her time between academic settings and strip clubs, each setting required different parts of her personality in order to meet the expectations of her roles: "I can go back and forth. Even though it's very difficult." Donna explained that at university, education was valued. At the strip clubs, Donna felt that revealing that she was intelligent was detrimental to her sex industry work and negatively affected her self-worth. In addition to expanding availability, Shaver et al. (2011) transition programs ought to accommodate duality as they can support Donna and others in developing strategies for the challenges they are facing in both fields. Sex-Work-Maybe participants and those who lived dual-lives may find little benefit from attending transition programs that deny or reject the ways that they include sex work in their lives. Transition programs need to accommodate those who may return to sex work and those who live dual-lives.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Past studies examining transition from sex work to square work have identified a wide range of individual, interactional, and structural factors helpful to understanding what influences the decisions of people who leave (Baker et al. 2010; Benoit and Millar 2001; Brown et al. 2006; Dalla 2006; Hedin and Månsson 2004; Koostra 2010; Månsson and Hedin 1999; McIntyre 2002; Mayhew and Mossman 2007; Millar 2002; Sanders 2007; Shaver et al. 2011; UKNSWP 2008). In these studies, with the exception of UKNSWP, for the most part sex work is presented as a purely harmful activity the sex workers struggle to remove themselves from. Theorists, excluding Sanders (2007), draw mainly from the experiences of street-based workers to create models like those seen in Hedin and Månsson (2004) and Baker et al. (2010). These models organize factors, map exit, and depict involvement as pathology and reentry as failure on the part of sex workers who posed challenges to those willing to help them leave. Sex-Work-No-More, Sex-Work-Maybe, and Dual-Life participants faced all of the factors and challenges identified by sex workers in other studies; however, they all positioned themselves differently in relation to sex work. Sex-Work-No-More participants understood their involvement as a necessity and their retirement as final. Sex-Work-Maybe participants who had comparable sex work experience saw their transition out as temporary. Returning to sex work for this group would be considered as their exits were and represented an opportunity to diversify income. Dual-life participants took up positions at the intersection of sex work and square work. They balanced the risks and benefits of employment in both fields. For them, sex work is not something one is ever fully in or out of, instead the intensity of involvement in either type of work was situational and fluid.

In this study sex work was not framed as purely harmful, thereby making room for participants to discuss more openly whether sex work was an option for them in the future. These mundane sex workers filled gaps in knowledge about transition and they discussed the following: (1) if they would return and under what circumstances; (2) spending time in isolation; (3) the people who supported them, which included clients; (4) sexiting and its concealment; (5) their use of deception to mitigate the effects of stigma and to access resources needed to transition; and (6) the challenges and benefits of engaging in sex work and square work simultaneously.

Sex work and square work jointly and severally offer benefits and challenges to those who have transitioned out or who live duality. Insights for transition programming can be drawn from all three participant groups highlighted here. Unfortunately, the enactment of the PCEPA will likely reduce transition from sex work as research demonstrates that criminalization is a barrier to exit (Dalla 2006; Koostra 2010; Krüsi et al. 2014; Sanders 2007; Scoular and O'Neill 2007). The social rejection and stigmatization of sex workers that exists among street-based workers in Vancouver (Gratl 2012; Lowman 2013; Oppal 2012) is not unique to the most accessible sex workers. My participants shared extraordinary accounts of stigma and humiliation during periods of transition. They continuously engaged in stigma-avoiding activities during duality and posttransition. We reproduce the structural inequities and interactional experiences that cause sex workers to experience stigma and social rejection when we exclude them from policy development and in the naming of harm and design of interventions. A gestalt approach is needed to acknowledge that continuums of support for transition require integration of resources from several provincial and federal ministries. Government funds should go initially toward hearing the unmediated experiences of active and former sex workers as well as those who live dual-lives in the formulation and later evaluation of transition supports. Individuals who engage in sex work are disparate in terms of their financial, emotional, and educational needs. Canadian transition programs may include the following: age-appropriate and culturally relevant gendered supports, financial literacy, housing, personal and career exploration and entrepreneurialism, and opportunities for seclusion and contemplation identified in studies of transition (Baker et al. 2010; Benoit and Millar 2001; Bowen 2013; Dalla 2006; Koostra 2010; Law 2011, 2013; Millar 2002; Rickard 2001; Sanders 2007; Shaver et al. 2011; UKNSWP 2008). Inclusion of a broad spectrum of Sex-Work-No-More, Sex-Work-Maybe, and Dual-Life sex workers is needed to design transition supports that remedy the intended and unintended harms that may emerge as a result of the ill-informed PCEPA. Sex workers serve as our barometer, their quality of life reflects our values and priorities. We have been forewarned; we do not have to look back in history very far to

see that sex workers pay for our ignorance and our delayed or nonexistent responses to the harms against them. They pay, with their lives.

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