

Addressing Underrepresentation in Sex Work Research: Reflections on Designing a Purposeful Sampling Strategy

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Abstract

Men, transgender people, and those working in off-street locales have historically been underrepresented in sex work health research. Failure to include all sections of sex worker populations precludes comprehensive understandings about a range of population health issues, including potential variations in the manifestation of such issues within and between population subgroups, which in turn can impede the development of effective services and interventions. In this article, we describe our attempts to define, determine, and recruit a purposeful sample for a qualitative study examining the interrelationships between sex workers' health and the working conditions in the Vancouver off-street sex industry. Detailed is our application of ethnographic mapping approaches to generate information about population diversity and work settings within distinct geographical boundaries. Bearing in mind the challenges and the overwhelming discrimination sex workers experience, we scope recommendations for safe and effective purposeful sampling inclusive of sex workers' heterogeneity.

Keywords

ethnography; ethics / moral perspectives: gender; men's health; marginalized populations: research design: research; access to participants; sex workers: social equality / inequality transsexuals: women's health: workplace; qualitative; purposeful sampling; Canada

Although qualitative research has played an important role in improving understandings about the interrelated structural, social, and individual processes that influence the health of people engaged in sex work, men, transgender people, and those working in off-street locales have historically been underrepresented (Bimbi, 2007; Bungay, Halpin, Atchison, & Johnston, 2011; Koken, Bimbi, Parsons, & Halkitis, 2004; Shaver, 2005; Shaver, Lewis, & Maticka-Tyndale, 2011; Walker & Taylor, 2010). Addressing this imbalance is vital. Failure to include all sections of sex worker populations precludes comprehensive understandings about a range of population health issues, including potential variations in the manifestation of such issues within and between population subgroups, which in turn can impede the development of effective services and interventions (Shaver et al., 2011; Singer, 1999; Vanwesenbeeck, 2013). Addressing imbalances in research inclusion (Meltzer & Childress, 2011) is also a social justice matter.¹ Research that privileges or silences specific groups of sex workers might perpetuate power imbalances and inequalities by impeding actions to improve the situation of all members of society (Ashford, 2009; Dewey & Zheng, 2013; Maher, Pickering & Gerard, 2013). This in turn can exacerbate marginalization and widen inequalities (Rugkasa & Canvin, 2011).

Health researchers have discussed the challenges of underrepresentation of sex work subgroups as method issues in sampling and recruitment. These discussions have contributed to the identification of many subgroups of sex workers as hidden or hard to reach (Benoit, Jansson, Millar, & Phillips, 2005). Although varying definitions exist, common characteristics of hard to reach populations include those having unknown or uncertain parameters, those who experience marginalization and stigma and therefore often times conceal their membership, and those who may potentially distrust researchers who they believe have contributed to stereotyping and unjust social policies and practices (Singer, 1999; Watters & Beirmacki, 1989). In an attempt to improve inclusion of sex worker subgroups, the procedures for finding and recruiting sex workers to address underrepresentation have evolved concurrently with methods for reaching

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members of hard to reach populations, including, but not limited to, snowball, chain referral, targeted, time location, and respondent-driven sampling with varying degrees of success (Bungay, Halpin, Halpin, Johnston, & Patrick, 2012; Johnston, Sabin, Hien, & Huong, 2006; Magnani, Sabin, Saidel, & Heckathorn, 2005). These strategies have been situated largely within quantitative epidemiological studies concerned with sexually transmitted infections, HIV, injection drug use, and potential for disease propagation within social networks. Less has been discussed within qualitative research that aims to understand the everyday experiences and concerns of those engaged in sex work as influential for health (e.g., Bruckert & Law, 2013; Handlovsky, Kolar, & Bungay, 2012). Furthermore, purposeful sampling defined as the strategic selection of information-rich cases that by their “. . . nature and substance will illuminate the inquiry question being investigated” (Patton, 2015, p. 265) is a hallmark of many qualitative designs (Carter & Little, 2007; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Few qualitative studies, however, include sufficient detail about the purposeful sampling criterion or related rationale, a common critique of qualitative research (Coyne, 1997; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003). A possible rationale for this might be because publications of research findings are regularly prioritized within academic communities over those focusing on methodology (Rugkasa & Canvin, 2011; Sanghera & Thapar-Bjorkert, 2008).

In this article, we contribute to the methods literature by describing the main issues involved in addressing underrepresentation of specific sex work subgroups. We draw specifically upon our experiences of designing a purposeful sampling strategy in a qualitative study examining the interrelationship between working conditions, regulatory structures, and the health of women, men, and transgender sex workers in an off-street sex industry. Foregrounding our work is a description of the state of current knowledge about sampling complexities inherent to sex work health research, and challenges to define and perhaps defend what can reasonably be claimed about inclusion. Building on this, strategies to address these inherent sampling challenges are detailed as a means to distilling how we might ensure greater inclusion of those underrepresented in sex work health research.

To begin, we first address the recommendation by many scholars that it is important to provide a precise definition of sex work and the related context of interest when discussing research methods and findings (Bruckert, 2012; Bungay et al., 2011; Carter & Little, 2007; Maher et al., 2013). For our research purpose, we defined sex work as the adult exchange of direct physical contact sexual services for monetary gain (Weitzer, 2012). We conceptualized off-street sex work as that in which the negotiations for, and provision of, sex for money

exchanges occurred in areas minimally visible to the public (e.g., escort agencies, brothels, bars, and bathhouses) in contrast to the highly visible street-based marketplace where sex workers and clients make initial connections in outdoor spaces (O’Doherty, 2011a). We also recognized the substantial heterogeneity in how off-street sex workers’ activities are coordinated and the varying degrees of governance and autonomy they have concerning the sexual services provided, their clientele, fees charged, and their work settings (Benoit et al., 2005; Bruckert & Law, 2013; Bungay et al., 2013; Handlovsky et al., 2012). Furthermore, because our work was a critical qualitative research design, we were interested in sex workers’ actions and experiences *and* the influential social and structural contexts in which these were situated (Carspecken, 1996). We did not engage with the binaries of agent–victim debates that have plagued sex work research in examining context (Bruckert, 2012; Bungay et al., 2011). We conceptualized sex workers’ agency as a process embedded in historical, structural, and social contexts in which “. . . their capacities are activated in different ways depending on specific, variable contexts” (Showden & Majic, 2014, p. xiv). We recognize that these conceptualizations of sex work, off-street, and agency are not universally accepted and that there are many other activities (e.g., exotic dancing, performing sex for videos or webcams) that might be included (Weitzer, 2012). We apply our definitions in this article as those drawn from the literature, shared among study team members and research participants throughout the research project, and as congruent with our study scope, questions, and design.

Current Knowledge About Inclusion in Sex Work Research

Knowledge about sampling in sex work health research and strategies to promote greater inclusion of specific subgroups has developed primarily through researchers’ retrospective accounts of their experiences in three inter-related topics—understanding why under representation occurs, related consequences, and strategies to address exclusion. The heterogeneity of sex worker populations and activities in which they engage, for example, has been identified as contributing to confusion in conceptualizing what constitutes sex work and identifying who therefore is identified as a “sex worker” (Bimbi, 2007; Johnston et al., 2006; Shaver, 2005; Vanwesenbeeck, 2013; Weitzer, 2012). Sex workers come from diverse gender, ethnic, and class backgrounds. They engage in varied activities, provide an array of services, and work in an assortment of locales. Thus, subgroups emerge within the population, making understanding of population characteristics extremely difficult. Consequently, researchers struggle to identify and recruit samples that reflect the

true diversity of sex workers' characteristics, experiences, practices, and concerns (Singer, 1999; Watters & Beinacki, 1989).

Other features of the off-street sex industry have also been noted to influence underrepresentation. High degrees of mobility between cities and countries among off-street sex workers make it difficult to locate and recruit people (Johnston et al., 2006). The limited physical spaces where off-street sex workers aggregate as a group further challenge recruitment, a situation exacerbated by the increasing use of the Internet to facilitate sex work over the past several years (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011; McLean, 2013). Internet-based business models in Canada and other parts of the world (e.g., Thailand, Vietnam, the United Kingdom, and the United States) have become increasingly common among a diverse range of sex workers affording them virtual privacy and anonymity in undertaking the work of advertising and making initial connections with their clients (Ashford, 2009; Johnston et al., 2006; Kolar & Atchison, 2013; Minichiello, Scott, & Callander, 2013; Veena, 2007).

The diverse legal contexts in which sex work occurs have further exacerbated the hidden and hard to reach nature of sex work groups, wherein many sex workers (off and on street) go to great lengths to hide their activities from mainstream society to avoid discrimination or arrest (Benoit et al., 2005; Bowen, 2014; Bowen & Bungay, 2015; Bruckert, 2012; Koken, 2012; Orchard, Farr, Macphail, Wender, & Young, 2013; Pheterson, 1993)—circumstances which may impede their willingness to engage as research participants and potentially exacerbate underrepresentation. Furthermore, the fluidity in which sex workers may move between sex work and other paid work activities throughout their life course (Bowen, 2014) presents additional barriers to ascertaining how to locate those engaged in the industry.

In her commentary on methodological challenges of representation among sex worker subgroups and related consequences, Shaver (2005) noted sampling among highly visible sex worker groups that engaged in the street-based marketplace has dominated North American health research. This research, although important, may have inadvertently afforded this subgroup a dominant voice amid excluding sex workers operating outside of this setting. This is especially problematic given recent estimates in several industrialized nations that 80% to 90% of sex workers work in off-street settings (Hanger & Maloney, 2006; Weitzer, 2012). Men and transgender sex workers have attracted relatively little research attention which in turn limits the reach of policies and services specific to their needs (Ashford, 2009; Bimbi, 2007; Koken et al., 2004; Walker & Taylor, 2010).

Researchers' have continued to develop purposeful sampling strategies in their attempts to address underrepresentation. Partnering with sex work advocacy and

support service organizations has been reported to help include sex workers who may not be visible in street locales (Benoit et al., 2005). Although this strategy may be important for research that emphasizes experiences of sex workers who may be in crisis, these organizations traditionally provide services to women and may not reflect the diversity of other subgroups' experiences or needs (Benoit & Shaver, 2006; Walker & Taylor, 2010). Researchers have also drawn from lists generated with the aid of police arrest databases but as noted by several commentators, this strategy may narrow recruitment and potentially skew findings detailing sex workers' experiences (Shaver, 2005; Shaver et al., 2011). Ultimately, purposeful sampling in qualitative research is driven by the research purpose, questions, and study design (Carspecken, 1996; Patton, 2015). In sex work and health research, however, there is growing evidence that sampling practices have had serious consequences for the state of knowledge about sex work and health. Sampling practices have contributed to the exclusion of sex work subgroups and perpetuation of sex worker stereotypes often times espousing a homogeneous group comprised primarily of women many of whom are street-involved, in crisis, and victimized by male violence (Shaver, 2005; van der Meulen, Durisin, & Love, 2013). Thus, we describe our efforts toward purposeful sampling to contribute to advancing sex work health research methods and addressing underrepresentation and potential marginalization of subgroups of people working in the industry.

The Study

The information for this article was drawn from the SPACES (sex, power, agency, consent, environment, safety) study, a 3-year ethnographic project aimed at investigating the interrelationships between the working conditions of an off-street sex industry in the City of Vancouver (hereafter referred to as Vancouver), British Columbia, Canada, and the health of men, women, and transgender sex workers. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board, and recruitment and data collection occurred from 2012 through 2014. The research team included academic researchers, and an advisory committee comprised of eight experiential community experts who were former or active sex workers; held an array of health, research, and social service positions; or were active in advocating for the health, safety, and human rights of sex workers locally and internationally (see Bowen & Bungay, 2015). We employed a critical ethnographic research design as outlined by Carspecken (1996). Carspecken identified that critical qualitative research designs are informed by an assumption that many aspects of contemporary society are unfair and unequal and as such research aims to change this—thus

an appropriate approach to address working conditions, power relations, inequity, and justice as influential for health among sex workers in an off-street sex industry. Congruent with the critical qualitative tradition, social action and its patterns, subjective experiences, and social and structural conditions influencing actions and experience were the focus of the research endeavor. Ethnographic data sources included documents (e.g., legal policies, municipal bylaws), observations, and interviews (Carspecken, 1996). A full discussion of all data collected, research instruments, and analysis is beyond the scope of this article (see www.spacesstudy.com). We instead focus our discussion on the strategies employed to develop a purposeful sampling strategy, the underpinning rationale for our decisions and actions, and the outcomes of our efforts to recruit people often underrepresented in health research that could provide rich information about their experiences and perspectives on health and safety in an off-street sex industry.

Designing a Purposeful Sampling Strategy

To aid us in developing a purposeful sample that would address issues of underrepresentation, we drew from the qualitative methods literature (e.g., Carspecken, 1996; Patton, 2015) and recommendations put forth by sex work organizations and scholars (e.g., Bowen & O'Doherty, 2014) regarding enhanced inclusion. We additionally drew upon Schensul and LeCompte's (2013) recommendations for overcoming sampling bias in ethnographic research: (a) define the target group precisely for the purpose of the research, (b) collect data from a broad range of locations, (c) eliminate categorical prejudice, (d) locate hidden or hard to reach members of the target group, and (e) ensure the accessibility or ease of recruiting for the segments of the population. Although our work was about improved inclusion in research versus bias (defined by Schensul and LeCompte as any factor or influence that distorts research findings in a particular way) per se, we found their strategies informative as a beginning point to help articulate our concerns about who would be invited to participate and what we could realistically accomplish within the scope of our project. Within the ensuing discussion, we present our activities as a series of steps undertaken in a process of continuous reflection and refinement to determine the best approaches to purposeful sampling for our study.

Step 1: Establish the Study Locale

Carspecken (1996) noted that identifying the study locale, defined as a specific geographical region and its social systems (e.g., the external conditions such as law, politics,

and economy that influence individuals' actions and experiences), is a central feature of the ethnographic study design. Our study locale was the Vancouver, a local context comprising groups of women, men, and transgender sex workers. Vancouver has an estimated population of 640,915 people that represent different religions, abilities, sexualities, ethnicities, and cultural groups from all over the world and Canada's Aboriginal communities (BC Stats, 2014). Vancouver has 21 distinct neighborhoods including some of Canada's most economically affluent and poorest settings. It has been reported as the most expensive city to live in North America and has one of the highest crime rates in the country (Statistics Canada, 2013). Vancouver has extensive tourist and business industries with the international airport serving more than 19 million passengers per year (YVR, 2015). Sex tourism (traveling for sexual activities including paying for sex) is part of the city's tourist industry (Bungay et al., 2011). Previous research by Bungay and colleagues (2013) and Remple, Johnston, Patrick, Tyndall, and Jolly (2007) alluded to a burgeoning off-street sex industry in Vancouver, although there has been little research detailing the operational features of these businesses as influential for sex workers' health.

Step 2: Define the Target Group

To ensure adherence to our ethnographic design and research aims, we further refined that the target group including the sites (e.g., spatial and temporal areas where people interact; Carspecken, 1996), experiences, perspectives, and actions would allow us to address the study's central features of concern in our locale (Bruckert, 2012; Carter & Little, 2007; Maher et al., 2013). We decided that the experiences of women, men, and transgender adults who provided direct physical contact sexual services for money in an off-street industry were key topic areas and would include traditionally underrepresented subgroups of sex workers. We refined our definition of off-street according to the empirically derived classifications, in-call and out-call (Bruckert & Law, 2013; O'Doherty, 2011a, 2011b), which significantly influenced our purposeful sampling approach. In-call settings provide specific physical spaces for the purpose of providing sexual services, for instance, massage and beauty parlors, bathhouses, and apartments. Out-call settings are those in which the sex worker travels to accommodate the client's location and include escort venues (e.g., hotels), bars or dance clubs, and many Internet-based venues. Sex workers in in-call and out-call settings experience varying degrees of independence in managing their work-related activities and incomes. Independence may be complete or heavily reliant on third parties (e.g., managers, employers, booking agents) to determine fees, services, and clients

(Bruckert & Law, 2013; Bungay et al., 2013; Lewis, Maticka-Tyndale, Shaver, & Schramm, 2005). Sex workers who work independently or contract their services through a third party often advertise and connect with clients through the Internet or in hotels, bars, and clubs (O'Doherty, 2011b).

We also had to consider federal and municipal regulations as organizational features of concern (e.g., social systems) within in-call and out-call settings and how these regulations influenced purposeful sampling. Although it is illegal in Canada for a third party (e.g., manager) to benefit from sex work, it is not illegal for sex workers to engage in providing sexual services in their homes or other premises as long as they do not benefit from the sex work activities of another person (Criminal Code, 1985, s.286.1–s.286.4). Despite the legal statutes, in-call and out-call settings can and do operate as both unlicensed and licensed businesses (O'Doherty, 2011a). Licensed businesses are often registered within municipal business registries for nonsex work purposes and are subject to a wide range of municipal, provincial, and federal legislation and regulatory policies that govern licensing and business operations and the legal rights and responsibilities of managers and workers (O'Doherty, 2011a). Preliminary evidence indicates that because of the surreptitious nature of the industry, there are, however, minimal public health policies or regulations that govern sex work–related practices within these settings to ensure a safe work environment (Handlovsky et al., 2012). Unlicensed businesses operate without any type of business regulation. They can be operated by an individual sex worker working alone or functions similar to a managed business model (O'Doherty, 2011b). Although we know very little about the operational features of licensed and unlicensed businesses, there is some evidence that the sex industry, not unlike other industries, is stratified by class, race, and gender with those who “. . . are defined by others as white or can enact whiteness often occupying the better paying jobs and in safer working conditions” (van der Meulen et al., 2013, p. 19). And there is conflicting evidence regarding the frequency of women's versus men's dependence on employers compounded by the limited studies that are inclusive of comparisons between men and women within the target samples (Bimbi, 2007; Vanwesenbeeck, 2013).

We thus defined our purposeful sample as men, women, and transgender people, 19 years of age and older who engaged in sex work in Vancouver. We additionally identified that the sample would be inclusive of sex workers within in-call and out-call settings that operated as licensed or unlicensed businesses and captured the diverse levels independence workers had in controlling their activities. The focus built on our research in off-street settings (Bungay et al., 2012) and responded to

recommendations to more fully account for the complexity and diversity of the working conditions affecting sex workers' health and safety outside of a street-based context (Bernstein, 2007; Remple et al., 2007). Furthermore, refining the study group (e.g., sites, experiences) helped us to address what Schensul and LeCompte (2013) referred to as categorical bias or the exclusion of people based on characteristics such as gender or location of their work.

Step 3: Locating Hidden Members

After defining our study group, we used a series of ethnographic mapping strategies, with demonstrated effectiveness for locating and recruiting hard to reach groups (see Peterson et al., 2008). For our purposes, we defined ethnographic mapping as the process of determining the geographic distribution of sex work venues in our particular locale using multiple data sources (e.g., lists of information, key informant interviews, previous knowledge; Watters & Beirnacki, 1989). To avoid perpetuating categorical bias within our sampling and recruitment strategies, our first mapping task was to increase our working knowledge of the degree to which sex work businesses operated within regulated (e.g., licensed) and unregulated businesses in Vancouver. This led to the development of a comprehensive list of the varied locations that comprised in-call, out-call, licensed, and unlicensed settings.

Locating licensed settings. We used multiple data sources, including existing and verifiable lists, advisors' expert knowledge, and direct observations, to build a list of licensed settings that could ultimately help inform a purposeful sampling approach (Watters & Beirnacki, 1989). Our verifiable data sources included the publicly available City of Vancouver's (2015b) Open Data Catalogue, which, at the time of the study, was updated daily and contained information about active, pending, and inactive businesses licenses within the City, all of which expired annually on December 31. All licenses were regulated through the enactment of City bylaw 4450 (City of Vancouver, 2015) that outlines the specific regulations that apply to different business types and the fee schedule for licenses. On October 28, 2013, we accessed the city catalog and extracted all cases ($n = 60,216$) of individual licenses administered January 1, 2013, to October 28, 2013. We specifically extracted the license number, license category, business name, address including postal code, and the date the license was issued.

We employed a series of procedures to identify which licenses were issued to businesses providing sexual services under the guise of municipal regulation for nonsex work businesses. Drawing upon previous empirical work (Lowman, 2001) that examined municipal regulation of

Table 1. Definition of Licensed Business Types for Sex Work Businesses.

| License Category | Definition |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Dating service | Any person carrying on the business of providing information to person desirous of meeting other persons for the purpose of social outings |
| Social escort service | Any person who carries on the business of providing, or offering to provide, the services or the names of persons to act as escorts for other persons |
| Health enhancement center | The use of premises to enhance health through therapeutic touch techniques but excludes fitness center, beauty and wellness center, and personal training center |
| Body rub parlor | Includes any premises or part thereof where a body rub is performed, offered, or solicited |
| Beauty and wellness center | The use of premises to improve beauty and wellness through styling, cutting, or chemical treatment of hair and through skin and body treatments, including pedicures, manicures, facials, microdermabrasion, electrolysis, waxing, laser, hydrotherapy, antiaging, skin rejuvenation therapy, aromatherapy, stone therapy massage, and relaxation massage, but excluding fitness center and personal training center |
| Social escort | Any person who, for a fee or other form of payment, escorts or accompanies another person, but does not mean a person providing assistance to another person because of that other person's age or handicap |
| Therapeutic touch technique | Includes but is not limited to shiatsu, reflexology, biokinesiology, hellework, polarity, reiki, rolfing, and Trager approach |
| Steam bath and massage parlor | Any building or premises wherein a charge is made in consideration for any Turkish, Russian, vapor, sweat, salt, or sauna bath |
| Acupuncturist | Any person who pierces any part of a client's body with needles as a means of treating disease or pain |
| Esthetician | Listed but not defined in bylaws |
| Other | Not defined to protect privacy and confidentiality |

Source. City of Vancouver (2015a).

sex work in the City and our working knowledge of the local industry (see Bungay et al., 2012; Bungay et al., 2013), we first searched the city catalog data set for four business license types that have been publicly identified as being associated with operating a commercial sex business: (a) dating service, (b) social escort service, (c) health enhancement center, and (d) body rub parlor (defined in Table 1). We extracted the data for each of these four licenses using the same attributes from the initial city catalog. In consultation with the advisors and through our fieldwork observations in various neighborhoods, we identified and extracted data for four additional license categories where sex work possibly occurred.

We used several strategies to verify whether sexual services for remuneration were provided by any of the businesses in the eight license categories. We Google searched each business for web-based advertisements, reviews (e.g., client comments on the services, setting, or sex workers), recommendations, or testimonials about the business that verified sexual services had been exchanged for money at that establishment since 2012. Next, we searched three online sex industry community forums where clients post reviews and comments about sex businesses and sex workers. We further searched classified sections of publications and online advertisements that list off-street settings in our locale dating back to January 2012 using the same search strategies to

locate business name, reviews, advertisements, and recommendations.

Finally, we searched Craigslist—Vancouver therapeutic section on five separate occasions over a 4-week period. The majority of businesses do not advertise their name on Craigslist. We then conducted a reverse search of addresses or phone numbers listed on advertisements to retrieve the postal code and cross-referenced these details with the city catalog to confirm if these were licensed businesses. In reviewing the forum and advertising sites, we further identified five business types that were not included in our initial eight data subsets. As three of these categories could be easily identified and were never before publicly known to be associated with sex work, we aggregated them as Other (Table 1) to protect setting anonymity (Morse & Coulehan, 2015). We subjected the five businesses to the same search and verification strategies noted above. Screen shots for all webpages were taken, dated, and archived for future reference for those licensed businesses with verified sex work. We extracted the data for each licensed business verified as a sex industry establishment into a separate Microsoft Excel data set and included all attributes of the original city catalog.

We calculated descriptive statistics for (a) the total number of licenses issued to verify sex work businesses, (b) frequency of sex businesses per license category,

Table 2. Verified SIB and Licensing Fees Paid.

| License Category | License Issued (n) | Verified SIB Licenses (n) | Fee per SIB License (CAN) ^a | Total Fees Paid for Licensed SIB per Category |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|--|---|
| Beauty and wellness center | 327 | 17 | \$307 | \$5,219 |
| Therapeutic touch technique | 159 | 0 | \$129 | 0 |
| Acupuncturist | 159 | 9 | \$129 | \$1,161 |
| Esthetician | 152 | 7 | \$129 | \$903 |
| Health enhancement center | 109 | 39 | \$242 | \$9,438 |
| Dating service | 13 | 0 | \$157 | 0 |
| Social escort service | 5 | 4 | \$1,168 | \$4,672 |
| Social escort | 5 | 2 | \$157 | \$314 |
| Steam bath and massage parlor | 1 | 0 | \$261 | 0 |
| Body rub parlor | 0 | 0 | \$9,888 | 0 |
| Other | 3 | 3 | \$129–\$164 | \$422 |
| Total | 933 | 81 | n/a | \$22,129 |

Note. SIB = Sex Industry Licensed Businesses.

^aThe fee amount per license category was obtained from the City of Vancouver Open Data Catalogue (<http://data.vancouver.ca/datacatalogue/businessLicence.htm>).

(c) licensing fees, (d) number of businesses with more than one license, and (e) number of employees. We extracted geographical details and spatially mapped the locale of these establishments to identify geographical neighborhoods for targeted recruitment. We confirmed a total of nine different business categories (described as subtypes in the bylaw) where sexual services for money occurred in the city (Table 2); five appeared to be in-call, two out-call, and two were not specific. Within these nine categories, 81 licenses were issued to 70 different businesses identified by the business trade name. The 70 businesses were situated at 62 unique locations identified by City street addresses in 16 of the 21 city neighborhoods. The most commonly held license type was Health Enhancement Center. No body rub parlors or dating services were identified—a finding that illustrated changes in the types of licensed businesses since Lowman's (2001) earlier work in 2000. Calculation of the total number of employees was infeasible as these data were missing in 15 of the cases. Of the 66 licenses that included employee numbers, 20 reported zero employees, and the remaining reported a range of one to 38; six of which included eight or more employees. Previous empirical work (Bungay et al., 2013), field observations, and conversations with advisors verified that women were the main group engaged in sex work in licensed settings.

Locating unlicensed settings. Unlike licensed businesses, there was no publicly available data source from which to begin to locate unlicensed in-call and out-call, off-street sex work settings rendering the people involved quite hidden within our research context. Earlier work identified that web-based advertising played a crucial role in connecting sex workers and clients in unlicensed off-street settings with varying degrees of independence

among sex workers (Ashford, 2009; Cunningham & Kendall, 2011; McLean, 2013). Although we knew that some sites existed that did not use Internet or any form of advertising, the limited information available about sex workers in unlicensed contexts and the dearth of empirical considerations about how to recruit in these settings contributed to us using web advertising as a fruitful starting point. We began by ascertaining appropriate web search strategies that would allow us to capture the diversity of unlicensed locations from which to purposefully sample and recruit.

We undertook a series of key informant interviews with people with expert knowledge of the target population and of the organization and operations of unlicensed sex work, an appropriate ethnographic method (Carspecken, 1996). Our initial key informants included several advisors. They shared important information about common websites and facilitated interviews with other key informants who hosted advertising websites relevant to our locale. They helped us to understand the nature of online advertising including the degree to which online advertising captured the range of unlicensed settings relevant for our study purpose. Together, we identified eight websites that offered detailed advertisements or ads for a range of sexual service providers and services. These sites represented diverse subgroups categorized as men, women, transgender, or transsexual sex workers. One site advertised only men in sex work; one advertised on behalf of gay men, transgender, and transsexual sex workers; and the other six were inclusive of all genders. We employed consistent search strategies within each site that limited our search to the same geographical boundaries used for the licensed venues and permitted us to search for men, women, transgender, and transsexual sex workers. We limited inclusion of advertisements to unlicensed venues by cross-referencing

Table 3. Sample of Daily Web Advertisement of Unlicensed Businesses.

| Website ^a | Number of Individual Sex Workers Posting/Day |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Website A: Gender inclusive | 116 |
| Women | 108 |
| Men | 4 |
| Trans | 4 |
| Website B: Gender inclusive | 86 |
| Women | 65 |
| Men | 7 |
| Trans | 14 |
| Website C: Men only | 24 |

^aWebsites were identified by letters versus actual name to protect privacy.

the advertisements against our licensed venue database. No new licensed settings were found during this activity.

We visited each of the eight websites 2 times per week over a 4-week period in November to December of 2013. We collected data using a predesigned extraction strategy that permitted us to calculate the number of individual advertisements posted on a single day and the self-identified gender identities of the individuals advertising. We did not search beyond publicly accessible information and did not access any information from areas within these websites that had closed membership defined as requiring an individual user account (Wilkerson, Iantaffi, Grey, Bockting, & Rosser, 2014), as per the conditions of our certificate of ethical approval. For those sites that permitted people to post their advertisement more than once in a 24-hour period, we reviewed all postings for duplicates and removed duplicates in our final daily tallies. We also purposely selected 75 open membership individual ads from these websites for men, women, and transgender sex workers. These sites were further analyzed to determine the types of information provided in advertisements about services provided, health and safety information, pricing, and work location (i.e., in-call and out-call), the results of which are detailed separately elsewhere (Kille, 2015).

In keeping with the iterative nature of gathering information about the off-street settings of interest, we identified that most off-street advertising for individual sex workers occurred on three websites, with substantial duplication on the five other sites. We therefore narrowed our mapping to these three sites. The average number of posts varied minimally between the days that they were searched, with the men only site having the least amount of individual advertisements on any one day (Table 3). It appeared that out-call settings were the most common locations among the advertisements although it was difficult to fully verify this without obtaining an individual membership for these advertising websites.

Step 4: Recruitment Accessibility and Feasibility

Upon completion of the aforementioned activities, we were faced with a plethora of details about sex work sites and people from which to finalize our purposeful sampling and recruitment plans that would support engagement with some of the most hidden members of sex work groups. It was not feasible to study every setting and the experiences of every sex worker, and we needed to make some strategic decisions about how to best purposefully sample to capture the richness of the organizational and operational features of a very complex and large off-street sex industry. Revisiting our study aims assisted us to determine next steps.

Gender inclusion and examination of the interrelationships between gender and health among men, women, and transgender sex workers in a shared local context were central features of concern. Our ethnographic mapping activities illustrated that it appeared more likely that men and transgender people were situated in unlicensed off-street locations while women were located within licensed and unlicensed venues. Therefore, members of the investigative team and advisory decided to purposefully sample with people engaged in sex work in unlicensed settings. We also decided to purposefully sample a small subset of women sex workers within licensed settings. Although population estimates for people engaged in sex work are not well documented, there is corroborative evidence that more women than men engage in sex work (Vanwesenbeeck, 2013) and as such further exploration of women's experiences in regulated businesses was warranted.

A multimethod recruitment plan was implemented to ensure that our study was accessible to the diverse subgroups situated in a range of locations. Location data were triangulated with advisors' expert knowledge on the industry and their insights for respectful community engagement. We put up posters in public places in neighborhoods where we knew licensed businesses operated. These posters included contact details that linked people to a study blog that detailed information about the study and the investigative team. People could then privately email, text, or phone the lead investigator or project manager to discuss the study and their participation. Banner advertisements were posted on popular advertising and networking websites offering the same information as the posters. Key informants that were embedded in diverse social networks posted recruitment advertisements on our behalf in virtual and physical settings with closed membership. We presented at several organizations that provided online and face-to-face advocacy and support services to sex workers and left recruitment materials that they later distributed. We also presented at community forums led by sex

workers and allies concerned with legal changes in sex work law underway in Canada at the time of our study. Each step in recruitment was documented, keeping field notes of how people responded in physical and online settings, and the effectiveness of the recruitment strategies to capture the diversity of the industry we were seeking to explore.

As our study unfolded and we began to interview men engaged in sex work, we learned that many men were more hesitant than others to participate primarily because of mistrust in the research process. Consequently, we relied more heavily on snowball sampling whereby participants recommended or referred potential participants to researchers that they knew could provide rich information about their experiences and perspectives (Patton, 2015). This strategy was effective in recruiting men within this subgroup as the credibility of the project and those doing the interviews built. The likelihood that we were embedded in a social network and perhaps missing experiences of people who might not have shared similar characteristics with members of this network remains a concern. In the spirit of qualitative research, however, we took this opportunity to learn more about the organizational features of the industry. We learned, for instance, that men who provided sexual services to men used an array of communication technologies to connect with potential clients (e.g., mobile dating applications) or connected via word of mouth—a situation that gave rise to a new study currently underway that is examining the role of information and communication technologies in the industry.

Eighty-two people who self-reported engaging in sex work in the previous 6 months participated in the study. The participants worked in an array of predominantly unlicensed in-call and out-call locales and self-identified as being from diverse racial groups (e.g., Aboriginal, Asian, Black, White, and mixed ethnicity). Ages ranged from early-20s to mid-60s (see www.spacesstudy.com for detailed description of participant demographics and data collection strategies to gather this information). Although we aimed to purposefully sample according to in-call and out-call, this divide became less relevant as many of participants engaged in both sites. Thirty-three men, 42 women, and seven people who identified as transgender or transsexual women provided rich descriptions of the everyday conditions and organizational features of their work. We engaged in fieldwork in three licensed and five unlicensed settings and are currently preparing a detailed report of our recruitment and fieldwork activities.

Ethical Considerations

Addressing ethical issues associated with locating, identifying, and recruiting hidden and hard to reach members

of the population was also important to support participation feasibility. We needed to ensure participant confidentiality not only as research participants but as people engaged in sex work activities to prevent them being outed (e.g., made public) for their engagement in sex work (Bowen & Bungay, 2015). We also needed to provide assurances that we would limit our intrusion in people's lives and not disrupt their work activities. To these ends, we conducted fieldwork and interviews in locations and at times deemed appropriate by participants. Nobody was required to sign consent or provide their birth names. Consent was obtained verbally. We ensured that no personal identifying information was retained as part of the interview process, removed any identifiers from original data or reports generated from the study, and avoided the use of pseudonyms that could be linked in any way to their identity (Morse & Coulehan, 2015). The list of sex work businesses was encrypted and password protected, and only available in its completed form to the lead investigator.

Discussion

Our discussion detailing our sampling decision-making processes illustrated that determining a purposeful sampling strategy that could help address underrepresentation in sex work research was complex and time-consuming. The benefits made these efforts worthwhile. The ethnographic mapping activities identified and verified licensed and unlicensed businesses and contributed to improved understandings about the gender nuances of different settings. Combined with the knowledge gleaned from expert advisors and key informants, we developed a rich and contextualized understanding of organizational features of the industry that have been absent from empirical accounts in our locale. Our detailing of the logistics in developing a sampling strategy demonstrated, for instance, that previous estimates of hundreds of licensed businesses operating in the city (see Remple et al., 2007) may be inaccurate and that unlicensed businesses predominate, particularly among men and transgender sex workers. These findings illustrate the complexity of ethnographic projects. Ethnography is rarely straightforward (Carspecken, 1996). Purposeful sampling for sites and interviews requires substantial time understanding the local context, especially when researchers aim to address underrepresentation. Furthermore, the use of multiple data sources and the practice of reflecting on the outcomes of our activities as they were occurring allowed us to modify our activities to gain new sources of data and to gather useful and accurate information about sex worker subgroups and settings. These practices ultimately led to a comprehensive recruitment strategy to capture “information-rich cases” (Patton, 2015, p. 265), the hallmark of purposeful sampling.

It is also important to comment on the contributions of using a social justice lens in explicitly strategizing to address underrepresentation of subgroups of sex workers. Internationally, most ethical research guidelines include statements about justice in research participation defined as the need for researchers to adhere to the principle of inclusion. This principle directs us to avoid exclusion of participants on the basis of individual attributes such as gender, age, or sexual orientation (Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR], Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada [NSERC], & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [SSHRC], 2014; Meltzer & Childress, 2011). There is, however, often little information included in these guidelines about inclusion logistics or meaning beyond the level of individual characteristics. Social justice is concerned with marginalization and exclusion among groups within society (Carspecken, 1996). We applied this understanding to develop a purposeful sample that took into consideration individual and group characteristics, including gender and diverse working conditions and settings. Furthermore, in keeping with a critical qualitative design, our use of a social justice lens advanced our understanding of contextual features of an off-street sex work industry before we could purposefully sample (Meltzer & Childress, 2011).

The eight advisory members' contributions illustrated several important features about the relationship between researchers and advisors and its significance for the development of a purposeful sample that included sex worker subgroups frequently underrepresented in health research. Sex work communities and advocacy organizations have noted that, historically, researchers using quantitative and qualitative methods have "used" advisors as conduits for entry into the field with little acknowledgment of the contributions of advisors in the overall research endeavor (Bowen & O'Doherty, 2014). Our findings support assertions that sex worker advisors are knowledge experts about many facets of the sex industry and make valuable and important contributions to the overall study design and implementation (Bowen & O'Doherty, 2014; Bruckert, 2012; Dewey & Zheng, 2013; O'Neill, 2010; van der Meulen et al., 2013). The advisors influenced how we made decisions about purposeful sampling by sharing their knowledge and expertise about the industry, its organizational features, and the diverse settings, where sex work businesses operate amid being instrumental in reaching potential study participants who might have been otherwise overlooked. The diversity in experiences and knowledge among the advisors' helped us to ensure that we moved beyond an individual social network associated with any one community member, permitting us to tackle issues of underrepresentation more comprehensively (Benoit et al., 2005; Benoit

& Shaver, 2006; Bowen & O'Doherty, 2014; Shaver, 2005).

We do not suggest that our experiences are the final say on purposeful sampling in sex work research, and we identified some limitations in our process. Ethnographic mapping, while useful for determining characteristics of an off-street sex industry and those working within, does not guarantee completeness of understanding about the diversity of off-street sex work subgroups and locations. Determining the locations for people working in unlicensed settings remains a concern that requires further investigation to determine strategies to locate and recruit within this context, especially for transgender sex workers. Furthermore, it was evident that some people, particularly men, were reluctant to participate despite our best efforts to recruit them. These experiences illustrate the importance of ensuring that purposeful sampling strategies are integrated with strategies to promote accessibility that are specific to subgroups of sex workers' unique issues and needs. Given that we did not set out to determine why people may or may not take part in research, we would be cautious about making definitive claims about recruitment in what we report here. Instead, we follow the recommendations outlined in qualitative research reporting guidelines to reinforce the necessity of describing all aspects of methods including sampling (O'Brien, Harris, Beckman, Reed, & Cook, 2014). We also highlight that in all research, it is important that researchers are transparent about whose experiences are missed and acknowledge the limitations of what we can infer from the data that we have collected (Thorne, 2008). Researchers tackling purposeful sampling in sex work research must continue to more fully grapple with the strengths and limitations of our research activities that go beyond simplistic statements of limited sample size or convenience samples within research publications and presentations if we are to generate insights into appropriate and meaningful purposeful samples in sex work health research.

Conclusion

Although much has been written about purposeful sampling in qualitative research generally (e.g., Coyne, 1997; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Patton, 2015), the logistics are infrequently described, especially in qualitative health research with sex workers. Furthermore, scholars have commented on the importance of a transparent sampling logic captured in an auditable record of activities and decision-making processes that are driven by the research purpose, questions, and study designs (Carspecken, 1996; Thorne, 2008). As noted previously, however, these details are often not provided within the empirical literature (Carter & Little, 2007). In this article, we contribute

to advancing knowledge about purposeful sampling in sex work research. We further note that issues of underrepresentation remain a pressing concern in sex work health research. The consequences of underrepresentation for marginalization of subgroups of sex workers are severe. Several sex work organizations and researchers have reported that sex work underrepresentation has contributed to societal- and research-based misinformed assumptions of homogeneity of experiences and needs, and homogeneous public health initiatives that fail to address the diversity of concerns and experiences, and limited the contributions of research in informing health promotion initiatives (Benoit & Shaver, 2006; Maher et al., 2013; van der Meulen et al., 2013). Although there remains a pressing need to further develop effective sampling techniques to capture breadth and diversity among sex worker groups and overcome underrepresentation among specific subgroups (Benoit et al., 2005; Maher et al., 2013), these sampling techniques must include detailed and logical explanations and understandings of the contextual features of the sex industry within which the research is situated. This understanding of context is vital if research is to generate enhanced recommendations to address the factors that negatively affect health and safety in the array of circumstances in which sex work occurs (Maher et al., 2013).

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Note

1. For the purpose of our study, we defined underrepresentation as the inadequate representation of people or subgroups of people that comprise the overall population of interest (i.e., sex workers). Underrepresentation might be noted when the numbers of people or subgroups are disproportionately low or absent in research that is relevant to their life circumstances (Meltzer & Childress, 2011). Exclusion is the process whereby underrepresentation occurs.

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