



# The “Sociological Equation”: Intersections Between Street Sex Workers’ Agency and Their Theories about Their Customers

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## ABSTRACT

Street sex work is deeply stratified, embedded in power imbalances and inequities; workers are multiply marginalized, relative to customers, in terms of race, class and gender. At the same time, these imbalances should not be equated with worker powerlessness. In this paper, we seek to counter the existing limited and polarized conceptualizations of agency that dominate the sex work literature by providing an assessment of the ways in which female street sex workers seek to realize and exercise agency and enact strategies of resistance despite the violence ubiquitous in their work. We draw from worker narratives collected through individual and focus group interviews in five Canadian cities to highlight the nuanced and layered ways in which workers, collectively and individually, apply reasoning and argumentation to the risks represented by customers, as well as to other aspects of their working environment. Workers offered three significant theories related to which men buy sex on the street and why (some) men buy sex; we describe how they employ these to negotiate the conditions of their work, nesting our findings within a broader socio-cultural analysis of the risks workers experience as they navigate complex, highly politicized working environments. Finally, we show how workers appropriate hegemonic masculinity discourses as well as intersecting race, class and gender discourses to inform their rationales for choosing some customers over others, setting our discussion within existing literature on male sex work customers.

## Introduction

Service work is more than transactional; it involves a dynamic and complex social exchange between a worker and a customer. In the sex industry, the service encounter is deeply stratified, embedded in power imbalances and inequities; this is particularly true in street sex work, where sex workers are often multiply marginalized (relative to customers) in terms of race, class and gender and frequently beset by drug dependency and/or other health challenges (Duff et al., 2017; Krüsi et al., 2014). In Canada, street sex work continues to be commonplace, although many street workers supplement their income through online connections. Street sex work involves the exchange of sexual services for money or other goods including drugs or a place to stay. We use the term “sex worker” rather than “prostitute” to respect the perspective of participants in our research projects, who define their engagement in these activities as work.

The systematic review by Deering et al. (2014) confirms consistent evidence of disproportionate rates of violence, including lethal violence, directed at and experienced by sex workers. Street sex workers are particular targets (Kinnell, 2013; Sanders, 2016); most vulnerable are Indigenous (Lucchesi, 2019) and transgender workers (Nemoto et al., 2011). Rotenberg (2016) documented 294 *known* homicides of sex workers in Canada between 1991 and 2014, an average of more than 12 per year, though as Palmater (2016) points out,

the over-representation of Indigenous women in street sex work, combined with inadequate responses to disappearances of Indigenous women (especially if they are sex workers), suggests the actual figure is much higher. Although there are diverse sources of violence against sex workers, physical violence, including lethal violence, is enacted disproportionately by clients or those who purport to be clients (Deering et al., 2014). Studies of serial killers confirm that these men target sex workers (Brewer et al., 2006; Quinet, 2011), with Kinnell et al. (2001) noting that clients committed two-thirds of sex worker homicides. Despite the demonstrated danger that some customers represent, it would be inaccurate to equate power imbalances between workers and clients with worker *powerlessness*. Indeed, as we argue in this paper, a comprehensive understanding of the macro and micro-dynamics of the sex work encounter requires attention to the ways in which sex workers marshal their positionality in order to draw on and unsettle dominant discourses of gender and sex work so as to enable themselves to enact and realize the limited strategies of resistance that are available to them inside the sex work encounter.

Existing conceptualizations of agency that dominate the sex work literature are, in our view, both limited and polarized (Sanders et al., 2018); within the prohibitionist literature, agency is discussed primarily in the context of exiting, while within pro-sex work/empowerment perspectives, the effect of structural constraints on agency is minimized. Such polarization is underscored in the medical and epidemiological sex work literature (especially

studies of sex work in the global South) where sex workers, positioned as “vectors” of disease and public health risk, are accorded agency through an intensely responsabilizing lens (Choi & Holroyd, 2007; Strega et al., 2015; Wojcicki & Malala, 2001). When violence is the issue, workers are responsabilized through the “high risk lifestyle” discourse (Strega et al., 2014).

We find these polarized analyses to be neither nuanced nor always accurate. While we recognize in our work the very real physical, psychological and spiritual dangers of street sex work, we also recognize that workers are complex and agentic social actors who variably resist and are resilient to the structural conditions that shape their lives. Our aim here is to produce a nuanced assessment of agency in street sex work encounters through two lenses: an analysis of worker rationales for choosing some customers over others; and an analysis of how workers appropriate race, class and gender (masculinity) discourses to negotiate their work. By centering the narratives of street sex workers who were invited to comment on street sex work customers, violence, and risk management strategies, we bring into the literature a sense of how workers seek to mitigate risks of harm as they navigate their working environments.

## Literature Review

Recent scholarship that explicitly addresses the micro-dynamics of the sex work encounter emphasizes how workers perceive, experience and attempt to manage violence. We use the term violence in this paper to refer to a continuum of practices associated with hegemonic masculinity that encompasses unwelcome, sexualized and aggressive verbal and non-verbal actions through to physical harm, including sexual assault and rape. Armstrong (2017), who interviewed street sex workers in New Zealand, where adult sex work is decriminalized, noted that although less physical violence, and less lethal violence, is experienced than in jurisdictions where sex work is criminalized, workers are nonetheless subjected to violence from diverse sources including passersby, other workers, “minders” and clients. While describing “nuanced strategies” that American street sex workers deploy to avert violence, Oselin and Blasyak (2013) noted that the workers they interviewed were subjected to violence despite these strategies. In her qualitative research with Irish sex workers, three of whom had street experience, O’Connor observed that exercising agency and applying violence avoidance strategies are compromised due to the “coercive context” in which sex work is conducted: “it is implicit in the prostitution contract that his sexual needs are acquiesced to, and that there is always the underlying presence of the threat of violence if they refuse” (O’Connor, 2017, p. 6). Similarly, Lyons et al. (2017), who interviewed trans sex workers in Vancouver, Canada, posited that experiences of violence, as well as attempts to avoid such violence, are both shaped by socio-structural contexts. Noting the limitations of individual risk minimization strategies employed by street sex workers in South Australia, Leaker and Dunk-West (2011) advocated for a broader socio-cultural analysis of the risks workers experience. We heed these called by infusing our analysis with consideration of contextual factors.

While most street sex workers in Canada struggle with poverty or substance misuse or both (Ferris, 2015), the socio-cultural context of their work is most fundamentally framed by Canada’s colonization of Indigenous nations and people, and its sequelae, ongoing settler colonialism. The point here is only in part the disproportionate involvement of Indigenous women in street sex work, which Maryanne Pearce (2013) identified as 20% of all workers despite Indigenous people making up, as of the 2016 census, 4.9% of Canada’s population (Statistics Canada, 2017). More salient is the argument advanced by Sherene Razack in her detailed analysis of the murder of Indigenous sex worker Pamela George by two young middle-class White men: “Bodies that engage in prostitution and the spaces of prostitution are racialized . . . regardless of the actual race of the prostitute” (Razack, 2000, p. 129). The spaces that marginalized Indigenous women might occupy, including street sex work locations, are spaces in which “violence is naturalized” (Nagy, 2015, p. 186), whether or not the violence is specifically directed at Indigenous women; as Razack pointed out, “white women in prostitution are evicted from their race and do not enjoy its advantages in law” (Razack, 2016, p. 302). The naturalization of violence against Indigenous women and girls relies on longstanding stereotypes of Indigenous women as so sexually immoral, sexual promiscuous, and sexually available that it becomes impossible to imagine that they could be violated (de Finney et al., 2019; Hunt, 2016). Similarly, in their analysis of South African men’s narratives about paying women for sex, Huysamen and Boonzaier (2018) pointed out the discursive links that men made between dirt, disease, risk, and Black women’s bodies; these links perpetuate rationales for violence against racialized sex workers. These rationales and discourses accord not just with the views of some sex work customers, as reported by Klein et al. (2009), but with widely entrenched beliefs in what Razack (2016) has characterized as the “disposability” of bodies that occupy the “patriarchal and settler colonial context” (p. 299) in which street sex work takes place. In this context, it was possible for a Canadian jury to find Bradley Barton not guilty for inflicting horrific – and lethal – injuries on Cree mother, and street sex worker, Cindy Gladue, on the grounds that Gladue implicitly consented to the infliction of these injuries given the sex work “contract” between Gladue and Barton (Kaye, 2016).

It is challenging to sort out the relationship between gender, specifically masculinity, and violence from male customers directed at self-identified female street sex workers. Farley et al. (2011) concluded that the customers in their sample demonstrated a greater proclivity toward criminal acts, including but not limited to acts of physical violence against women. More recently, Farley et al. (2015) used quantitative and qualitative measures to arrive at the finding that men who buy sex are at an elevated risk of committing sexual aggressions, an observation that is connected to these men scoring higher than their non-sex-buying counterparts on measures of “hostile masculinity” (Ferris, 2015, p. 1). Razack (1998, 2000, 2016) contended that a specifically colonial masculinity is enacted through the violence directed at street sex workers, whether or not they are Indigenous.

In contrast to these perspectives, and consistent with Monto and Hotaling (2001), Monto and McRee (2005), and Atchison (2010) found that customers were no more likely than non-customers to support rape myths or to force themselves sexually on a woman. Klein et al. (2009), who studied more than 500 Canadian male participants in a prostitution offender program, reported similar results. Although they did not specifically inquire about violence, Durant and Couch (2019) reported that the nine Australian street sex work customers they interviewed engaged in ongoing, friendly contact with the workers from whom they bought sex. Nonetheless, the stratification of violence across sex work sectors suggests that consumers of particular forms of sex work may be more violent (Weitzer, 2005). In an early study, Lowman and Fraser (1995) found higher rates of physical violence directed at street sex workers than toward escorts, a finding confirmed by Farley et al. (2005) and by the *Stolen Sisters* reports (Amnesty International, 2004, 2009); these reports also confirm that Indigenous women, who are disproportionately represented among street sex workers, are particular targets.

### **Why Do (Some) Men Buy Sex?**

Findings that customers are disproportionately White and middle class are consistent across Anglo-American jurisdictions (Atchison, 2010; Birch, 2015; Groom & Nandwani, 2006; Huschke & Schubotz, 2016; Lowman & Atchison, 2006), suggesting that, when articulated with worker demographics, matters of race and class are salient in sex work transactions. Studies of customer motivation, beginning with Winick's (1962) early work, however, focused almost exclusively on the psychology of the customer, including their interest in particular sex acts (Atchison, 2010; Blevins & Holt, 2009; Faugier & Cranfield, 1995; Schrage, 1992). This includes their desire to fulfill socio-emotional needs through the purchase of sex (Earle & Sharp, 2008; Jordan, 1997; Milrod & Monto, 2012; Plumridge et al., 1997; Sanders, 2008). Some researchers have attempted to understand what men are paying for when they buy sex; Prieur and Taksdal (1993), Månsson (2006), and Milrod and Monto (2012) helpfully summarized the consistent findings of these studies. The five themes Milrod and Monto (2012, p. 794) outlined (following those first identified by Månsson, 1995) echo Monto's (1999) earlier findings: (1) the dirty "whore" fantasy; (2) wanting a different kind of sex than they can receive from non-sex workers; (3) seeing sex as a commodity or product for exchange; (4) seeking companionship or comfort; and (5) wanting a feminine or subservient woman. As Razack (2000, 2016) and others (Hardy, 2013; Månsson, 1995; O'Connell Davidson, 1998) pointed out, these discourses are infused with racial stereotypes about "the Other", specifically the "kind of woman" who sells sexual services.

Researchers have attempted to theorize ways in which gender may be at play in sex work by contextualizing customer motivations within masculinity theories. In her work on gender and subjectivity, Hollway (1998) contended that hegemonic masculinities are centered on dominant biologically based and naturalized discourses of an insatiable male sex drive. The "insatiable male sex drive" discourse appears routinely when

customers discuss their motivations (Campbell, 1995; Huysamen & Boonzaier, 2015; Jordan, 1997). In Brooks-Gordon and Gelsthorpe's (2003) UK study on men arrested for "kerb-crawling" (i.e., soliciting street sex workers), customers (or attempted customers) commonly invoked discourses of uncontrollable desire and the need for sexual outlets as justificatory frameworks for their actions. Customer descriptions of what purchased sex does *not* involve suggest that these men view unpaid heterosexual sex as a commodity exchange or transaction. Some researchers (see, for instance, Huysamen & Boonzaier, 2015) theorize that men's transactional approach to (heterosexual) sex is itself an enactment of hegemonic masculinity. Drawing on Connell's (1995) idea that most men aspire to hegemonic masculinity, Huysamen and Boonzaier (2015) suggested that paid sexual encounters affirm one aspect of this idealized masculinity, the ability and entitlement to take (female) sexual partners and engage in their chosen (heterosexual) practices.

Finally, ongoing criminalization of sex work in Canada, including the new "Swedish model" law introduced in 2014, which criminalizes the purchase but not most aspects of selling sexual services, contributes to the coercive context that acts on sex worker agency. Vancouver street sex workers interviewed by Krüsi et al. (2014) enumerated several ways in which targeting customers limits their safety strategies. Because prospective clients expect workers to enter their cars quickly enough to avoid police noticing any negotiation, workers are forced to reduce or even eliminate screening strategies or recording of license plate numbers, a safety strategy employed by many street workers. Similarly, to avoid charges of stopping vehicle or pedestrian traffic and to otherwise minimize police attention, workers may displace interactions with prospective clients to more isolated and thus more dangerous locations. For street sex workers specifically, though, these concerns are little different from those imposed under the previous law, in which sex work itself was not illegal, but communicating for the purpose of engaging in it was; in both regulatory regimes, as Vanwesenbeeck (2017) noted, "sex workers have an amplified interest in remaining out of sight of authorities" (p. 1634). In other words, the current Canadian law, just as the previous law, impinges on the agency of sex workers to control their working conditions, including their ability to ensure safety. The criminalization of sex work has additional agency-compromising affects, as Vanwesenbeeck (2019) pointed out, citing Shannon et al.'s (2009) work demonstrating the connection between HIV/STI risk and criminalization, and Deering et al.'s (2014) finding that "the risk of violence was amplified up to seven times among sex workers with criminalization-related experiences" (p. 1633).

### **Method**

The data presented here are drawn from two sources: individual interviews with workers conducted as part of a research project examining street sex workers, their families, and transitioning out of street sex work (Strega et al., 2015), and focus group interviews with workers conducted as part of a study focused on male customers of street sex workers (Shumka et al., 2017). Our analysis of all interviews relied on a narrative

approach informed by Indigenous storytelling methods (Iseke, 2013; Thomas, 2015), a strategy intended to acknowledge and respect the significant proportion of Indigenous participants in both projects. Central to Indigenous storytelling is the requirement to contextualize knowledge through critical analysis of not only what we know, but how we have come to know it (Kovach, 2009). A narrative approach is particularly useful for a project interested in agency because, as Hulusjö (2013) pointed out, narratives are a critical site where agency emerges and is realized, because the narrator is an active participant in creating their story about themselves and their experiences. Narrative interviews encourage participants to not only frame and share their stories but also to set the terms of their telling. In the initial study, participants were invited to tell their stories about involvement in street sex work, to define that as they wished, and to choose what they wanted to speak about and in which order. Researchers worked with a list of topics but no specific interview guide, leaving them free to prompt participants. One such prompt asked participants to describe a “typical customer”. While this specific query was used in both focus groups and some but not all individual interviews, participants who did not receive this specific question also commented extemporaneously on their customers. Of particular interest in terms of customer demographics was the introduction of a corollary question asking workers how they arrived at their demographic observations, “How do you know?” While we initiated focus group interviews with an open invitation for participants to describe their street sex work experience, we then asked specifically about customers, including what participants thought motivated (some) men to purchase sex, and to purchase sex from street sex workers. Although this question was not asked of individual participants, discussions of men’s motivations appeared routinely in those interviews.

### **Participant Selection and Ethical Issues**

Recruitment began once formal institutional ethics approval had been received. Participants in both studies were invited through sex worker support and advocacy agencies the researchers were familiar with and to which the researchers or their previous work was known. Agencies were located in five major cities in western Canada. Participation was limited to self-identified women over the age of 18 who worked on the street or who had street sex work experience within two years prior to study commencement; no other constraints were imposed on participant selection. All interviews took place in private rooms within the recruiting agencies, and the researchers contracted with agencies to ensure that support workers were available post-interview. All participants received a 50 CAD honorarium, with child care and transportation costs reimbursed on request. Seventy-five self-identified women participated, 60 individually and fifteen in focus groups. Consistent with other studies of sex work in Canada, racial disproportionality was marked: 60% of participants identified as Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit or Métis). Another 33% identified as White (census = 72.9%) and 7% as visible minority, non-Indigenous (census = 22.2%). Seven participants self-identified as transwomen. Participant age was recorded for 61

participants, and ranged from 19 to 52 years of age, with two-thirds of the sample between 30 and 44 years of age. Eighty-four percent ( $n = 63$ ) volunteered information on their “age of entry”; of this group, 65% ( $n = 41$ ) described commercial sexual exploitation (they solicited and received money or goods from strangers in exchange for sexual services) as children (46%,  $n = 19$ ) or youth (54%,  $n = 22$ ) prior to engaging in sex work as adults. Alternatively, some participants did not begin selling sex until their late thirties or early forties. Length of street sex work experience varied from two to more than 30 years.

Individual and focus group interviews were transcribed by confidential transcribers. The individual interviews were entered into NVivo 8, a qualitative data management program, which facilitated the organization of the data into nodes, allowing us to look at interview excerpts aligned with various nodes. For the current article, nodes related to “masculinity” were expanded for further analysis, supplemented by a keyword search of individual interviews using terms such as “client”, “customer,” and “john”. The focus group interviews were read and reread with an analytical schema derived from Riessman’s (2008) thematic approach to narrative analysis, recently used by Huysamen and Boonzaier (2015) in their analysis of interviews with South African sex work customers; analysis also took into account Fraser’s (2004) recommendations for analyzing stories line-by-line. From Fraser’s perspective, all narratives are political as well as personal, meaning that researchers must “retain an awareness of social conditions as they consider how culture, and social structures, surface in the stories participants and researchers tell” (Fraser, 2004, p. 182). Analysis must therefore include consideration of the relationships between participant narratives and hegemonic or dominant discourses. Given our research interest in male customers, in the analysis presented here we were particularly interested in where masculinity discourses were embedded or resisted within participant narratives and how these were expressed directly, implicitly, and through silences. Taking account of contextual factors facilitated our analysis of connections between workers’ stories and the structures (such as gender, class, and race relations) in which they are embedded. As Williams and Elliott (2010) contended, this step is essential for researchers concerned with inequalities.

## **Findings**

### **Workers Explain How/Why They Choose Customers**

Street sex workers’ perceptions of which men purchase sex correlate with the demographic data cited earlier by Atchison (2010) and others: workers described customers as predominantly middle class, middle aged, married, and White. The overall tone in which these observations were offered suggests that for most participants, these ascriptions represent idealized images with which they had little lived experience. For example, workers arrived at class designation by noting customer apparel (including the brand of watch worn), vehicle type, and language use, which one worker noted as “prim and proper”. In both individual and focus group interviews, all participants from one site where particularly high levels of lethal violence



against sex workers have been documented, noted that lawyers and police officers were regular customers, though some participants in other jurisdictions mentioned this as well. Class designation, however, is vulnerable to the conditions of inequality in which street sex workers operate: one worker defined middle class as “having a house and money”, suggesting that any man not contending with poverty and homelessness might be seen to fit this category. Mary,<sup>1</sup> a 39 year old White woman, noted,

I don't think about money. Like, you know, they're not going to be down there if they don't have money.

Some participants noted that class and gender are implicated in the differential burden of stigma they bear in the sex work transaction, even as they resist that stigma in their analysis. Alice, for example, a 52 year old White woman, commented:

Never the johns, never ... oh well ... oh no it's the johns, heaven forbid no. It's ... it's the girls ... it's the girls, it's us ... We're the dis ... we stand on the corner, we sling our ... we risk our lives but it's not them. It's not the johns. It's us, we're standing on the corner, we're making them look bad. But yet they have a nice fifty-thousand-dollar vehicle but yet we're standing out there with our fuckin' [thrift store] coats and um ... [thrift store] shoes but yet they drive around and don't get trouble.

Stigma is also resisted through practices of resignification, whereby the focus is on the exchange between two subjects, even while the conditions of that exchange are acknowledged as inequitable. Simone, a 35 year old Indigenous woman, told us:

[...] we're doing a business deal basically, if you want to look at it that way. And um ... you're not any better than I. You ... you're down there with me, or you're ... we're right along the same lines ... Because you have a car doesn't mean anything, you're asking me for something and I'm asking you to pay for it ... So um ... I think there needs to be um ... I think they need to be brought down just a little bit more. I mean if you can't bring us up, then bring them down and ... and put us all together and say you know ... and I think maybe that would kind of help with the killing ... You know? Um ... yeah.

Workers' perceptions of clients as predominantly middle-aged may have to do with the youth of some participants, and/or that most workers in our studies had been commercially sexually exploited from a very young age. For example, Louise, a 38 year old Métis woman, commented:

Thirty, White. I don't know I ... usually it was like the older guys. You know like at [the] time to me thirty was old though right? So, like it ... most of the guys that picked [me] up was ... they were between thirty and fifty.

Adrienne, a 29 year old White woman from the same city, told us:

Middle aged White guys, yeah. Usually in the ... I ... I notice most of them seem to be in the forty-three, forty-five range ... I don't get too many that seem to be thirty or younger ... But I don't ... and I don't seem to get too many that are ... I'd say sixty and above either. I'd say right in between that gap.

Similarly, Deidre, a 23-year-old White woman from a different city, told us:

Um they're usually White business people I've noticed. A lot of them are in business suits ... And uh they're in late twenties, early thirties, some of them. But most of them are like in their forties, late thirties, early forties.

Workers derived marital status from seeing wedding rings, from men mentioning that they were married or, on occasion, men speaking to their wives on their cell phones during the sex work interaction, as Jeannine, a 21 year old Métis woman, described:

Interviewer: So, um and right away when I asked you about a typical guy you said married.

Jeannine: Well, they would always have their ring but if you asked them they would tell you. You know? But those are usually the sweetest ones, right? They don't want to get caught, they don't want no trouble and they just have to have whatever, and just be done with it, right? They don't want the wife to know, they don't want nothing, right?

Family status was arrived at from information shared by customers, and when workers saw car seats, sometimes occupied, in customer vehicles – a circumstance that workers universally found repugnant, as is evident in these focus group comments:

Families, you see the baby car seat in the back. (Samantha, 36, White)

I was picked up by a guy who had their kid in the back a couple times. (Chris, 37, Indigenous)

Aww, me too, man. I almost smoked the guy in the face, yo man, I was like, “What's wrong with you, man?” (Georgina, 27, Indigenous)

I was giving him head and I looked back and there's a fucking kid there. (Brenda, 24, White)

Individual interviewees made similar comments, as evident in this exchange with Tracey, a 30 year old Indigenous woman.

Interviewer: A baby in a car seat?

Tracey: Yeah, a baby in a car seat in the back. I said, “You know what, drop me off. I'm keeping your money, this is very sick”.

Perhaps taking their conclusions as obvious, workers did not report on how they discerned customer race, thus by implication positioning customers within the understood if unspoken entitlement narrative of White masculinity, the “any man/every man” discourse noted in some sex work studies. The dominance of this discourse is illustrated when Davina, a 24 year old Indigenous worker explained that her customers, who she had previously identified as White,

[...] could be your grandpa, it could be your uncle, your brother, it can be any guy, any guy that's a guy, pretty much.

At the same time, workers like Lauren, a 34 year old Indigenous woman, noted exceptions to the disproportionality of White men among their customers.

Mostly White guys ... yeah. The odd Native guy and Asian ... mostly always White though.

In all but one of the study sites, participants commented on the occasional presence of “high profile Aboriginal men”

<sup>1</sup>All participant names are pseudonyms.

amongst their customers, suggesting the rarity of such appearances. Others reported that they exchanged sex for money or other goods with customers who are street-involved themselves, and whose relationships with workers are varied and variable: men as friends; men with whom workers share drugs or other material goods; and men as occasional romantic and/or sexual partners (including husbands).

Our findings demonstrate how hegemonic masculinity discourses inform worker perceptions of customers and interact with the agency that workers believe they exercise when they choose customers. For example, Jeannine commented that she perceives some men's access to social power as a protective factor:

Jeannine: I find them [middle aged men] safer. Out of any of them I find say White guys the safest. And they got more respect [...]

Interviewer: And they treat you with more respect, you think?

Jeannine: Yeah, I find, yeah, they're not so ignorant.

When discussing factors they identified as particularly salient in choosing customers, all participants were attuned to the possibility of violence; many perceived younger men to be "cheap" and unpredictable. There is some support for these perceptions in the research literature; Klein et al. (2008) found that older men and those with more education endorsed fewer rape myths. As one focus group participant noted, street workers must quickly make informed decisions about whether potential customers are safe or not because workers have, as one participant noted, "Five seconds to survive". Christine, a 45 year old White woman, commented:

[...] well you know, girls can pick and choose who they go on dates with. Like they don't have to go in any car that starts ... or stops on you.

Louise had a similar view:

I wouldn't go with the younger guys, 'cause I don't trust them. I ... I wouldn't trust the young guys ... I don't know I just ... I ... I would get the gut instinct I guess, either to go with them or not ... and I always followed my gut. I didn't care how much money he was flashing at me or whatever it was 'No, hell no I'm not going with you ... "Go get the next girl down there or somethin"'. Right?

Creese (2014) has pointed out that dominant constructions of Black masculinity in Canada are inseparable from processes of racialization and racism in America that construct Black men as hypermasculine, hypersexual, and prone to violence. The statements above thus draw on and reflect hegemonic discourses around race and masculinity in Canada (Collins, 2005; Cooper, 2005; Slatton, 2016); within these discourses, violence can be associated with Black masculinity but only rarely with White masculinity, even though White men are the actual authors of most violence directed at workers. Masculinity discourses of racialized men featured in workers' descriptions of their decision-making processes, though it is important to note that workers acknowledged to researchers that they were referencing dominant discourses. While apologetic and sometimes defensive about the racist connotations of their beliefs, workers such as the three cited below grounded their beliefs in their experiences.

I would agree with that one [most customers are White], yeah, they are. I always have this fear of going with Black men or East Indian men ... because it's like, you know, I have, like, once or twice and the only result that came out of it was a bad date. I'm not racist like I said, maybe I'm just stereotyping here. But East Indians they don't pay enough, Black men are just fucking too aggressive. And Chinese men are just, I don't know, cheap. (Eva, 33, Indigenous)

I'm not racist but that's just like it's scary, like especially like uh Hindus they carry knives all the time because I got a knife cut once. (Belle, 42, Indigenous)

[They are] White, I won't do dates with Black ... And I will not do dates with East Indians, I've tried but I couldn't ... But they're just so cheap and they're just ... ahhh ... White they're ... I don't know, I just ... I tend ... [Inaudible] they're quick, but no ... I like ... I tend to go with Asians or Whites 'cause I ... I'm ... I was married to an Asian so I know that they're quick. So ... and they're not cheap. (Lorna, 39, White)

These narratives reflect workers' interactions with both hegemonic and marginalized masculinities as they attempt to order and make sense of these masculinities in ways so as to mitigate the risks of violence that customers may represent. As we see in the above comments, as well as comments in the next section, objectifying these men casts them, and the heterosexual arrangements in which they participate, as stereotypes. When workers gloss over the specifics of their customers, they are strategically positioning themselves as subjects, a process of resignification that undermines and shifts the rhetorical power associated with these men.

### **Masculinities and Motivations**

As noted earlier, hegemonic masculinity discourses naturalize a biologically based male sex drive that must be, and deserves to be, satisfied. This in turn leads to the normalization of sex as a purchasable commodity. A variation of this narrative normalizes the purchase of female companionship. The corollary implication is that, given its biological basis, men are entitled to satisfy these drives, even though referencing biology as a compelling driver diminishes men's agency. These contradictions or tensions were also present in how workers drew on hegemonic masculinity discourses to understand the motivations of men to buy sex.

While workers were clear and consistent across all study sites about which men attempt to buy sex on the street, as well as which men they prefer to sell sex to, their narratives about men's motivations were more varied. Almost all workers interviewed offered theories of why men buy sex, though few of these were specific to the purchase of sex *on the street* as opposed to other venues. Three significant explanatory narrative strands were evident; these narratives both reflect and depart from other findings on customer motivations. In deploying these narrative strands, workers may not actively resist the conditions of their work but do actively resist pejorative interpretations of it.

One strand, nested within descriptions of the ordinariness of their customers, is the "any man, every man" naturalization of male sexual entitlement detailed earlier. A second strand has to do with men forced to turn to sex workers because they are not getting sex, or not getting the type of sex they desire, from

their romantic partners. Interestingly, this narrative strand engages with tropes around hegemonic masculinity and femininity in different ways. On the one hand, the implication that men who are “satisfied” at home will not feel compelled to purchase sex incorporates gendered notions about labor and “wifely duties”.

You know for whatever reason these White men aren’t getting it from their wives or they’ve been cut off or whatever and regardless it doesn’t really matter. (Belle)

Uhm ... lonely. Perverted ... Some of them I think it was like fetish ... Wives ... weren’t getting ... undersexed maybe, oversexed (laugh) ... (Janet, 33, White)

On the other hand, while most workers associated hegemonic masculinity with most customers, a counter story appeared equally strongly in participant narratives: men who purchase sex feel shame about doing so, with this shame inextricably linked to their own belief that “real” (hegemonic) men do not need to purchase sex. Drawing on their experiences, workers also theorized that hegemonic masculinities interact with hegemonic and subjugated femininities. For example, workers believed that men see sex workers as “the kind of woman” from whom they can purchase (or in some cases take) fantasies, including pornography enactments, as Rachel, a 32 year old White woman, described:

Some of them come out here not knowing what they want. They’re at home, they’re watching these fucking sick pornos, they have a wife that’s not putting out, they’ve got kids and fucking whatever else on their plate, right, they’ve got all these stresses and then they come out thinking, okay, there’s a woman, I know she’s gonna take my money for sex and I can do whatever I want with her, I can fucking do whatever I want to her ‘cause I pay her to let me do whatever I want to her ...

Customer violence – including verbal and physical assaults and intimidation – are ubiquitous in street sex work: it was noted in both individual interviews and in focus groups. In one group, one woman’s estimate that about 20% of her clients were violent met with general agreement except from a transgender participant, who estimated that half of her customers were violent. The examples participants offered simultaneously describe the conditions of their work and imply a refusal to find these conditions acceptable.

I’ve had a lot of bad dates and a lot of times I got raped and taken to the friggin’ [location], and knives at my throat, thrown out cars naked. Not knowing where I am. Just craziness, you know. (Christine)

[...] they were all laughing and calling me dirty, you know. I remembered them humiliating me in the party, saying that ‘You’re a whore, you sell yourself, and that’s degrading. (Rosanne, 46 year old Indigenous woman)

The third strand we call the *public service narrative*, as it posits that there are negative consequences, albeit “natural” ones, when men’s sexual needs are unfulfilled. In this narrative, workers position their work as a service that reduces rates of rape and child sexual abuse, as Stella, a 38 year old White woman, does in this excerpt:

Stella: Obviously, they need the release. They need the release. Obviously, they aren’t getting it anywhere else ... Right. Whether it be just the pleasure or the physical release ...

Interviewer: So, do you think it’s necessary, like, do you think sex work is necessary in the world?

Stella: Yeah, I do. You know what, if we weren’t out there, can you imagine what these people would be doing to others?

### Discourses of Femininity

It seems probable that devalued femininity discourses are over-represented among customers of street sex workers, given that these workers are disproportionately Indigenous or otherwise marginalized women. The statistical picture of urban street sex work in Canada, particularly in western Canada where the study sites were located, is clear: most workers are Indigenous, most customers are White (Razack, 2000; Strega et al., 2015). In their research with street sex workers, Shannon et al. (2009, p. 195) reported that workers see themselves as so devalued as to be “disposable”. Nagy contended that violence is “naturalised in the ‘degenerate’ spaces that marginalised Indigenous women might occupy, such as zones of prostitution, while white male violence is enacted as entitlement to that space and the bodies in it” (Nagy, 2015, pp. 186–187). Similarly, Razack (2016, p. 302) pointed out that:

Race and gender, operating through each other, mark colonized and racialized women (although not exclusively) as being disposable and available for consumption in prostitution. We could also say that women so marked are all automatically racialized; white women in prostitution are evicted from their race and do not enjoy its advantages in law.

It is thus not surprising that some workers offered sociological insights that tied purchasing sex services directly to Whiteness, as in this analysis by an Indigenous worker:

Belle: You know, I’ve done countless tricks over the years you know and some I’ve forgotten ... some I don’t remember but I always remember that man ... He was a balding middle-aged White guy. And again, I hate to use the race but again you look at the stats and most of the sexual exploiters are White, middle aged, White guys ... It’s like it’s a fact ... It’s a given. You know for whatever reason these White men aren’t getting it from their wives or they’ve been cut off or whatever and regardless it doesn’t really matter. It’s like I bumped into lots of men, lots of men, like I think the majority who picked me up are married ... They’re wearing a wedding ring ... It’s like I’ve even had tricks where I’ve been busy doing my deed and their wives call and he’s, it’s like they’re actually conversing with their wives while I’m doing my deed ... And I’ve done it. It’s like while I’m going down on them in my mind I’m thinking does his wife even have a clue ... Does his wife even have a clue what he’s into and what he does? It’s in that moment where I put it all into perspective and I make that sociological equation ... And I try to put the pieces together. And it’s in those moments when I realize you know that for some reason again White people in quotations, “White people”. Just it’s like not only do they conquer and divide but they actually exploit on a far-reaching scale. Big time.

Sex work customers enact a conundrum of hegemonic masculinity: while “real men” don’t pay for sex, they have a sex drive that must be satisfied by whatever means. In considering how this contradiction plays out amongst street sex work customers, we keep in mind that masculinity is performed

not only in relation to women but also in relation to other men, even if those other men are not present. Customers do not talk directly with workers about the shame of buying [having to buy] sex but workers deduce it through their analysis of what underlies men's fears about being seen and/or getting caught. For example, when focus group participants were queried about whether customers would be more likely to speak to a male or female researcher, they were adamant that all interviewers must be women, because a man would not want another man, even a researcher, to know that he paid for sex. While men might worry about the negative consequences that might ensue if women knew they were buying sex, other men knowing is seen to engender much different feelings, as this focus group exchange demonstrates:

Alison (25, White): [They would not want] to [talk to] another guy, no.

indy (33, White): Paying for sex, or whatever?

Alison: "I don't do that".

Diane (37, White):

Yeah, more macho trip there. I think [they] would rather a female too, yeah.

Interviewer: Oh, that's so interesting. I hadn't figured that out when you asked that question, but of course, what would come off as ... he wouldn't want another man to-

Selena (28, Indigenous): Knowing that he's paying for sex.

Interviewer: That he paid for sex.

Selena: He can't get it out [inaudible] now.

Interviewer: Oh, okay, that's so interesting.

Diane: Oh yeah, it would turn into a lot of different things, very, very fast.

An exception to this threat to masculinity appears to be when men buy sexual services together and in the course of that degrade, humiliate and assault the worker, with various types and levels of participation from the other men who are present (Nagy, 2015; Razack, 2000).

## Discussion

Any consideration of how street sex workers analyze their customers and theorize customer motivations necessarily leads to questions about worker agency, questions often confounded by the polarized terms of feminist debates about sex work. Our analysis of the sex work literature demonstrates that abolitionists and those characterized as radical feminists diminish the possibility of agency for sex workers while pro-sex work feminists inflate it. Both rely on a Western-feminist, neoliberal, understanding of agency as an intentional exercise of power and choice. We align our discussion here with those who question this dichotomy, such as Westerstrand (2011, as cited in Hulusjö, 2013), who criticized the individualization of the debate, as well as those who have sought to understand agency within historical and non-Western contexts. Mahmood (2005), following both Foucault (1978) and Butler (1993,

1997)), for instance, drew on the notion of the paradox of subjectivation, whereby "the very process and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent" (p. 17). Within this understanding, agency is not just "a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 18). Thus, rather than view the sociological equation in which sex workers are positioned as solely an imposition of norms that constrain, this equation provides sex workers with the necessary grounds by which they become wholly realized subjects; subjects who hold the socially mediated capacity to act.

Workers in our research challenged disposability narratives that can render the lives of street sex workers meaningless, for example, in Stella's description of her work as service work; in the public service narrative we describe, workers position themselves as serving a protective function in society by providing an outlet for hegemonic masculine entitlement. Within this framing, they both recognize the structural constraints within which they exist and reframe their position within this structure as vitally important. At the same time, we noted that agency expressed in these ways may not result in agency realized, a point that Bay-Cheng (2019) has made with regard to young women's sexual agency. Like Bay-Cheng, we suggest that the reasoning around decisions made in a context in which the capacity to act is constrained is an exercise of agency even when the conclusions arrived at through that reasoning cannot be enacted; discursive agency is agency within the limits of subjectification (Butler, 1997). As Youdell (2012) noted in her discussion of young women's agency as raced-nationed-religioned subjects in education, constrained subjects "can still deploy discursive performatives that have the potential to be constitutive" (p. 201).

The workers we interviewed exercised their agency discursively in a multitude of ways including their refusal to recognize the conditions of their work as reasonable or acceptable, as evidenced in their reactions to customers with sometimes-occupied child car seats in their vehicles, even while they experienced themselves as unable in certain regards to ameliorate or change those conditions. Similarly, their resistance to the notion that they bear responsibility for the risks of violence to which their working conditions subject them is a particularly notable exercise of agency, given the widely circulated "high risk lifestyle" discourse that responsabilizes marginalized victims of violence and ill treatment rather than those who perpetrate it. Such responsabilization discourses (Strega et al., 2014), invite street sex workers to understand themselves as agentic rather than passive subjects vis-à-vis the risks of violence. As Sibley noted, while "occupational hazard-awareness is required for any form of employment", in sex work the ability to act on it is dependent on where workers are positioned within the sex industry, and how one is positioned within broader structures of power and domination (Sibley, 2018, p. 1463). We also concur with Moorman and Harrison (2016), who pointed out that members of marginalized groups are unequally tasked with the burden of maintaining their own safety.

Even when workers self-responsibilize through the prism of the individualized risk reduction mandate that operates as



a key governing strategy in neoliberal democracies, they realize agency through theorizing their work, analyzing both customer characteristics and their motivations in the service of mitigating those risks. They appropriate and resignify hegemonic masculinity theories, albeit that most would not describe their ideas as such, to create and circulate cautionary tales within the street sex work community, and deploy these discourses strategically in resistance to what Vanwesenbeeck (2019) called “whore stigma” (p. 1633). Resignification occurs, for example, when Simone characterizes the interaction between a worker and a customer as a “business deal” in which, despite class differences, “you’re asking me for something and I’m asking you to pay for it” (p. 13). Similarly, when workers describe the stigmatizing beliefs customers hold about sex workers, as Rachel does (p. 19), or the kinds of behavior those beliefs entitle customers to, as Rosanne does (p. 19), they simultaneously resist those beliefs. Most importantly, the nuanced narratives workers offer about how they entered street sex work, why they remain in it and what they have done in an attempt to survive it or leave it, demonstrate their ongoing resistance to pejorative narratives surrounding their identities.

A focus on whether individual women choose to enter sex work or not, and/or control the terms of their work, obscures the material ways in which the ability of workers to exercise agency is complicated by their gender, race, and class positions, especially as these contrast and interact with customer positionalities. As we explain, street sex workers operate within a particular set of discursive and material conditions that both enable, and foreclose, differential capacities to act. But as Jean noted, structural constraints on sex worker agency do not “necessarily imply that the individual has no capacity for agency” (Jean, 2015, p. 52). Under patriarchy, all women’s choices are constrained; intersectional factors such as race, class, and ability impact the nature and extent of these constraints, leading Schotten (2005) to call for sex work theorists to account for stratifications within the sex work industry as well as within the positionalities of those who enact it as either customers or workers. Similarly, Weitzer (2012) proposed as an analytical strategy that he called a “polymorphous” paradigm capable of recognizing diverse histories and the influence of socio-economic factors. Writing from our location in a colonized country still imbued with a colonial mentality, we believe it necessary to attend particularly to these implications for agency.

For Indigenous street sex workers, as well as workers spatially marked as such by where they work, the convergence of gender, race and class create structural vulnerabilities; as Sanders (2006) noted more than a decade ago, risk is not the same for all sex workers. Since the days of the pass system, Canada’s colonial practices have regulated where Indigenous women’s bodies “belong” and how they may be treated. Similarly, Edelman (2014), writing in the American context, described how geospatial exclusionary practices compromise the safety efforts of racialized, trans street sex workers. Strolls are in effect places of legal abandonment; within the boundaries of these “spaces of the exception” (Pratt, 2005), efforts to exercise agency are restricted.

While the sex work debate about agency focuses primarily on the exercise of a woman’s choice to enter into and/or remain in sex work, a few theorists such as Hulusjö (2013, p. 55) have examined these “interrelated structural and agentic aspects” of selling sex.

Drawing on the work of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, Hulusjö analyzed sex worker narratives to understand how workers “not only narrate their prostitution experience but also explore it and attempt to make sense of it. In this work, they narrate themselves as subjects of rational action” (p. 55). At the same time, we note that the “rational actor” subjectivity is a valorized subjectivity that discourses and structures encourage workers to adopt, even as external factors constrain their ability to enact it.

As McMillan et al. (2018) pointed out in their discussion of the links between sex work language choices and HIV transmission, “[a]gency is always circumscribed in some manner”, leading them to argue for a “framework in which choice is conceptualized as a matter of contextual complexity and not imbued in notions of victimhood and culpability” (p. 1524). While clearly constrained within a coercive and stratified context, the workers we interviewed engaged or attempted to engage in many of the agentic activities documented by other researchers. Hubbard (2004) and Sanders (2005) described workers joining forces to protect themselves as a community; all the workers we interviewed were attached to peer-led sex worker social service agencies and many described their attachment to street families. Similarly, participants detailed risk management strategies similar to those described by Sanders (2005) and Bernstein (2007), including: client management during encounters; client screening; rule setting; and information sharing among workers. Like the workers interviewed by Sanders (2004), our participants applied demographic and/or characteristic criteria to screen clients, and to attempt to mitigate risk, though in our analysis we locate these criteria within masculinity discourses. But, reflecting the gendered client/worker hierarchy in sex work, in Canada these safety efforts by sex workers are now complicated by client risk management strategies, particularly safeguarding their anonymity, adopted in the wake of recent changes to Canadian sex work laws (Sterling & van der Meulen, 2018).

We recognize and respect the efforts of street sex workers to exercise agency; as our analysis demonstrates, workers engage in both practical and analytical activities to protect themselves from the injuries (physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual) associated with their work. Similarly, as we describe, they engage in resignification practices that enable them to position themselves as subjects, which is itself agentic. That said, the well-documented ubiquitous nature of violence, including lethal violence, directed at street sex workers (García-Del Moral, 2018) leads to the conclusion that agentic activities are of limited efficacy in ensuring safety. It may be, then, that those we interviewed provided narratives of agency that inaccurately reflect the conditions of their lives, perhaps in an attempt to adopt a valued subjectivity or avert responsabilization for the violence to which they have been, or will be, subjected. Inevitably, the material and discursive conditions of colonialism, wealth inequality, misogyny and racism in which workers are embedded structure their narratives as well as their lives.

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