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Managing the toll of sex work with bounded agency: Perspectives of ex-sex workers

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The present study builds upon qualitative narratives of ex-sex workers to explore if these women felt they had maintained a positive sense of self during involvement in sex work and, if so, how. Specific objectives were to identify strategies they used to protect their self-concept and better understand the challenges they faced in their efforts to keep sex work within their comfort zone. Fourteen participants were recruited in six different cities from the province of Quebec (Canada) and interviewed twice in 2016. Findings suggest that women were very aware of the effects sex work could have on their self-concept because of the stigma surrounding it, but also because of ambivalent experiences with clients and pimps. As a result, they used various strategies to protect their sense of self, the main one being the making and following of rules that govern sex work activities. Yet, our findings show that the protective quality of these self-concept protection strategies is limited, as women observed that they compromised with personal boundaries at various occasions during their pathways. They made strong associations between these compromises and a progressive fragilization of their sense of self.

KEYWORDS: Identity management, self-concept, sex work, women

If some studies have shown that sex work can have positive effects on the self-esteem (Benoit, Smith et al., 2018) and lives of women involved (Poppi & Sandberg, 2020), research also highlighted the variety of ways in which it can negatively impact their self-concept (Scull, 2015). Sex work is often conceptualized as dirty work, work that is tainted physically, morally, or socially (Grandy & Mavin, 2014). As a result, common themes in women's narratives of sex work include perceived stigmatization, fears of being discovered as sex workers, and degrading experiences with clients and managers (Benoit, Jansson et al., 2018; Grittner & Walsh, 2020). Negative attributions towards sex workers, if internalized, can lead to a devalued sense of self and feelings of shame (Carrasco et al., 2017; Huber et al., 2019; Sallmann, 2010). In general, the consequences of stigma for sex workers' sense of self have been well documented (Benoit, Jansson et al., 2018; Weitzer, 2018), and so is the fact that these consequences can persist long after cessation of involvement in sex work (Lanctôt et al., 2018; Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2000; Sallmann, 2010; Sanders, 2007).

Sex work is also conceived as emotional labour (Barton, 2007; Deshotels & Forsyth, 2006). Sex workers must constantly manage their emotions and that can involve suppressing feelings, such as disgust or anger (Wolfe et al., 2018). In addition, sex workers must perform in accordance with clients and managers expectations, often having to feign interest, intimacy, and pleasure (Grandy & Mavin, 2014). For Hochschild (1983) who introduced the concept, having to perform emotions that are neither coherent nor congruent with privately held feelings can lead to a perceived loss of identity. The "emotional dissonance" described by Hochschild (1983) as a consequence of emotional labour has been documented in qualitative studies of sex work. For example, sex workers report considerable confusion with regards to how they feel about sex work, sometimes feeling empowered and other times feeling degraded (Begum et al., 2013; Grandy & Mavin, 2014). Some studies have also highlighted that the performative aspects of sex work can lead to difficulties maintaining an "authentic" sense of self (Brewis & Linstead, 2000; Deshotels & Forsyth, 2006; Smith, 2017).

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Research has shown that women are aware of the risks of sex work for their sense of self (Grandy & Mavin, 2014). A few studies even suggested that sex workers might attribute more importance to protecting themselves from this type of risks than from health-related dangers and physical violence (Firmin et al., 2013; Gorry et al., 2010; Sanders, 2004). The strategies women use to maintain a positive self-concept, whether named emotional management strategies (Sanders, 2004) or stigma resistance strategies (Morrison & Whitehead, 2005), have been the object of a number of qualitative investigations (Grittner & Walsh, 2020). Important questions remain, however, with regards to temporality and whether such strategies can protect women's sense of self throughout pathways of sex work. The current study draws on the narratives of ex-sex workers to explore if these women felt they had maintained a positive sense of self during involvement in sex work and, if so, how. Specific objectives were to identify strategies they used to protect their self-concept and better understand the challenges they faced in their efforts to keep sex work within their comfort zone.

SELF-CONCEPT PROTECTION STRATEGIES AND THE "TOLL" OF SEX WORK

Various strategies used by women to protect their sense of self during involvement in sex work have been documented. A first category of strategies involves information management or control of disclosure. It can translate into living a double life (Jackson et al., 2007; Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2000) or selectively disclosing involvement in sex work (Benoit et al., 2020; Benoit, Jansson et al., 2018). Another category of strategies relates to the way women present sex work and themselves. For example, women can positively frame sex work as empowering and validating (Dodsworth, 2012; Gorry et al., 2010; Harris et al., 2011). Narrative resistance or "othering" is another self-presentation strategy. To maintain a positive identity, women will favorably compare their sex work activities with those of other sex workers to deflect stigma (Lavin, 2017; Mavin & Grandy, 2013; McCray et al., 2011; Ronai & Cross, 1998; Trautner & Collett, 2010).

A few studies also discussed performative strategies with regards to interactions with clients. For example, sex workers can create a "manufactured identity"—a character constructed only for sex work—to capitalize on their body and to create a distance between sex work and real life (Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2000; Sanders, 2004, 2005; Trautner & Collett, 2010). A final group of strategies is for sex workers to elaborate rule and to set boundaries to determine the "amount of sexual and emotional contact they are willing to have with customers" (Barton, 2007, p. 581). Sanders (2004) similarly discussed "bodily exclusion zones", a strategy that consisted in refusing specific sexual acts, access to certain body parts, or demands of clients. Dahl (2013), for her part, suggested that sex workers follow codes of conduct based on what they feel are the right and wrong ways to act towards clients. Rule-making/rule-following allows sex workers to keep their sex work identities distinct from their "real" selves, as well as to ensure that they are comfortable with sex work activities.

All these strategies can be used by sex workers to prevent the negative impacts of sex work on their sense of self. However, research suggest that the protective quality of self-concept protection strategies is limited. In particular, studies indicate that sex workers experience considerable challenges with maintaining boundaries and following rules over time (Deshotels & Forsyth, 2006; Firmin et al., 2013; Jackson et al., 2007). The process through which consequences of sex work on the sense of self can appear despite the use of protection strategies is referred to as the "toll" of sex work, following Barton (2007) study of exotic dancers. Barton (2007) observed that the longer women danced, "the more the negative aspects of stripping began to outweigh the positive and the lower sank their self-esteem" (p. 583). To explain this toll, she pointed to an erosion of boundaries due to the various temptations and pressures exotic dancers face to stretch their personal rules past their zone of comfort (Barton, 2007, p. 583). Wesely (2003) also documented a process through which exotic dancers, over time, are likely to make more and more compromises regarding the services and access they are willing to offer to clients. As these body compromises accumulate, women increasingly struggle to justify and integrate their decisions to relax their limits into their self-concept, leading to "serious identity consequences" (Wesely, 2003, p. 497).

Exploratory findings with regards to the toll of sex work are mostly drawn from studies of exotic dancing. Nevertheless, these studies have made prominent a process of erosion of boundaries that can lead to consequences on sex workers' sense of self. The current study will contribute to our understanding of rule violations and body compromises, as well as their impact on the self-concept of sex workers. We will do so by analyzing the narratives of ex-sex workers that centred on their perceived ability to manage the risks of sex work. Drawing on their chronological narrations of their experiences of sex work, analysis will focus on how ex-sex workers tried to protect their sense of self, whether they feel they succeeded or not, and how they explained it.

Considering the focus of our study on possible stretching of rules and boundary compromises within the risky context of sex work, a perspective of "bounded agency" will guide our analysis. According to Evans (2007), "bounded agency" is a concept that situates the actions and decisions of individuals within the specific structural and social contexts in which they take place. Individuals are thus strategic actors "coping with and shaping their environment" and agency "emerges from processes of reflection, compromise and negotiation" (Tomanović, 2012, p. 3). Applying this concept to youth facing adversity and living in impoverished environments, Munford and Sanders (2015) recognized its potential to better understand how vulnerable people can exert control over the contingencies of their environment, despite limited options and resources. This theoretical framework calls for a thoughtful examination of the conditions in which women engage in sex work and how such conditions shape agentic practices. This perspective also allows for a more nuanced understanding of changes in ways sex workers manage risks over time as a process of reconfiguration of "women's sense of 'normal' and, within that, risk taking" brought on by social and structural forces (Footer et al., 2018, p. 331).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants and Procedures

The current study is part of a larger mixed-methods research on the consequences of sex work (Lanctôt et al., 2018), but relies exclusively on the qualitative data. Originally, 20 women currently or formerly involved in sex work were recruited in six different cities from the province of Quebec (Canada) and interviewed twice in 2016. Practitioners who work with sex workers or vulnerable women helped recruit participants by disseminating information about the project to former sex workers with whom they were in contact. On some occasions, women interviewed also referred us participants.

To minimize bias due to gatekeeping by practitioners and to diversify the sample composition, researchers held discussions with each interested practitioner to present our sampling inclusion criteria. Practitioners were instructed to refer women aged 18 years old and older, who had been involved in different forms of sex work (e.g., escorting, outdoor prostitution, nude dancing) and had been active as sex workers at least one year. Practitioners then approached potential participants with a general description of the study. Interested women contacted the research coordinator to learn more about the research objectives and what participation entailed. Women were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and confidential.

For the purpose of the current paper, an exclusion criterion was added: six women who were still active as sex workers at the time of the interviews were excluded from analysis. Indeed, since a majority of women ($n = 14$) in the sample had stopped sex work activities, this exclusion criterion rendered the women's stories more comparable. As indicated in Table 1, there is still variability with regards to how many years ago women of the sample ceased sex work. That is a limitation of the current paper. As previous studies have suggested, however, cessation of sex work must be conceptualized as a process involving considerable back and forth (Cimino, 2019; Matthews et al., 2014; Sanders, 2007). Four of the women interviewed had exited sex work less than a year ago, with one mentioning that she was considering taking clients while her children were away on vacation. The other three qualified their exit as uncertain or fragile, because it was very recent and dependent upon staying sober. In general, a majority of participants discussed the difficulties they faced when trying to exit sex work, as also suggested by the fact that they were recruited in intervention settings. While they were active as sex workers, women interviewed engaged in at least two forms of sex work, the most common being escorting and nude dancing. Seven of them were active as sex workers for a period of more than 10 years; four women were active between five to 10 years; and the last three for three to five years. Nine women reported having a pimp for a portion of their pathway as sex workers. Half of the sample had a high school diploma or less. All names in Table 1 are pseudonyms.

Interview Guide and Analysis

Interviews were semi-structured and focused on the period during which participants were involved in sex work. The interview guide facilitated a chronological narration of women's experiences of sex work and a more comprehensive exploration of their significance. Interviewers explored important events, persons, obstacles, and successes that punctuated participants' lives while engaged in sex work. Direct questions about the impact of sex work on their lives and themselves were also prepared, but in very open terms, allowing participants to discuss both the perceived downsides and benefits of sex work. Interviews lasted 1 h 30 min on average. Participants were given a $50 gift certificate

TABLE 1: First Names Attributed to Participants and Characteristics of Women Interviewed

	Age of Entry into Sex Work	Number of Years Since Cessation of Sex Work	Number of Forms of Sex Work Experienced	Country of Birth	Highest Level of Education
Julie	14	< 1	2	Canada	7th grade
Ariane	26	8	2	Canada	Undergraduate
Melanie	18	4	1	Canada	12th grade
Sylvie	15	25	4	Canada	Undergraduate
Veronique	17	4	1	Canada	11th grade
Odree	13	7	3	Canada	10th grade
Olivia	26	< 1	2	Canada	11th grade
Kim	26	1	3	Other country	12th grade
Josiane	16	< 1	2	Canada	9th grade
Kathy	14	< 1	2	Canada	9th grade
Caroline	23	2	1	Canada	12th grade
Ophelie	14	13	2	Canada	12th grade
Elisabeth	15	4	1	Canada	11th grade
Emie	14	12	2	Canada	11th grade

in compensation for the time offered, with the approval of the Ethics Committee at the Université de Sherbrooke.

All coding was done using QDA Miner, a qualitative data analysis software that includes an *inter-rater agreement* module for assessing coding reliability. Analysis first focused on the effects of sex work mentioned by participants, based on theoretically induced categories that emerged from a systematic review of the literature (Lanctôt et al., 2018). Regarding the possible effects of sex work on the self-concept in particular, we used four specific codes: (1) perspective on the self (all excerpts related to participants talking about how they saw themselves as sex workers and how they see themselves today); (2) others' perspective (all excerpts related to participants discussing how they were or could be perceived by others as sex workers); (3) perspective on other sex workers (all excerpts related to participants discussing how they compared to other women involved in sex work); (4) and perspective on sex work (all excerpts related to participants discussing the effects of sex work, their experiences, as well as the contexts and conditions under which they practiced). These codes helped us capture the various signs of anticipated or experienced stigma and self-criticism, if present (Turcotte & Lanctôt, 2019), as well as the self-concept protection strategies used. Drawing on the chronological life-story format of the narratives elicited, the analytical focus then shifted to the manners in which women discussed, situated, and explained the effects of sex work on their self-concept within their pathways of sex work.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the coding and the results, we employed a variety of tools in line with Lincoln and Guba's Evaluative Criteria (1985). The analyses were guided by principles of consensual qualitative analysis (Hill et al., 1997, 2005). All decisions regarding analysis were made by three members of the team—including the development and testing of the coding scheme. Interviews were coded by two raters who met on a regular basis to review each other's coding. Matrices were produced to better represent the intersecting impact of various codes. For example, the data related to effects of sex work on self-concept were crossed with data on characteristics of sex work pathways, psychological and physical consequences reported, and context of cessation. To achieve dependability (showing that the findings are consistent and stable), we interviewed participants on two different occasions to allow them to reflect on the different positive and negative effects of sex work in a trust-based context and from different angles. Finally, throughout the project, co-researchers were given opportunities to react to the content of the interviews, coding, analyses, and interpretations of the results. On four occasions, preliminary results were presented and discussed with an advising committee composed of stakeholders from various fields (representatives of government, and practitioners from community and institutional settings).

RESULTS

Ex-sex workers interviewed discussed various strategies they used to protect their sense of self while engaging in sex work. Some of these strategies focused on not being discovered as sex workers. Participants selectively disclosed involvement in sex work to only one or a few trusted friends. They also tried to choose forms and venues of sex work that allowed better control over who would see them engage in such activities. Veronique, for example, refused offers to do webcam sex work as she feared any family member could log in without her knowledge. Other strategies aimed to manage stigma through positive self-presentation as sex workers. Outdoor sex work was often presented as less respectable than nude dancing or erotic massaging by the women involved in the latter. A couple of participants also wanted interviewers to know they were not "prostitutes," but rather "sex workers" since their background and experiences did not fit with what they themselves called public stereotypes regarding prostitution. Such discursive resistance allowed women to emphasize how they had agency over their decision to engage in sex work, catered to a high-end clientele, and came from good families.

The most common strategy discussed, however, related to rule-making and rule-following. All 14 ex-sex workers interviewed mentioned principles, rules, and boundaries that guided their activities as sex workers. In general, this rule-making/rule-following strategy served to resist negative attributions and prevent self-stigma. In other words, making rules and setting boundaries helped women not to give others and themselves reasons to judge. This strategy was also perceived as a way to exert control over their activities as sex workers and to avoid ambivalent experiences that could negatively impact their self-concept.

Examples of principles, rules, and boundaries discussed during interviews include the strong importance that Odree and Veronique attributed to being and remaining independent sex workers throughout their pathways (i.e., in charge of advertising, capable of refusing clients, and sole beneficiary of the profits). Working without a pimp or without being managed by a third party was described as necessary for their self-image, as it mitigated some of the negative emotions they had about their involvement in sex work in the first place, as illustrated by Odree:

"At one point, others wanted me pimped because I was making a lot of money, but I always promised myself that if I ever started prostitution, it would be for myself, not for anybody else. It was hard enough, getting over the fact that I was doing that, I wanted to do it for me and not for anybody."

For Olivia, who mostly worked outdoors, showing respect to legitimate business owners was presented as very important for her self-image. She wanted them to know she was aware of the negative impact her presence could have on their businesses and be recognized for her consideration. This general principle translated into a myriad of interdictions she imposed herself including: not to dress "like a prostitute" to use her words, not to stand in front of businesses, not to pick up customers directly in bars, and to conduct negotiations with clients away from the street.

Rule-making and rule-following was mostly concerned, however, with what women were comfortable offering in terms of sexual services and contact with clients. Indeed, participants felt that such rules would help protect their sense of self as they would never engage in acts that made them feel bad about themselves. Melanie, Elisabeth, and Kim, for example, all got started

in sex work determined never to offer or accept penetrative sex as they felt it was too intimate for them to maintain professional and personal lives separate. In addition, participants also discussed what demands from clients they would refuse and it typically included all that was perceived as "disgusting" or "degrading", although women had different thresholds and definitions.

In general, all ex-sex workers interviewed discussed different rules and principles they had to protect their self-concept while involved in sex work. Findings suggest, however, that it is very difficult to maintain boundaries over time. How women explain these rule and boundary transgressions is rather revealing of the forces at play, as they often reported experiencing a progressive desensitization with regards to sex work and increasing pressures to relax their rules.

Rule-Breaking in Context: Understanding Sex Workers' Decisions to Compromise with Boundaries

All ex-sex workers interviewed recalled times when they made compromises and stretched their rules. This relaxing of rules can take many forms. Some participants noted that their decisions to change sex work location or venue meant they had to lower their standards as well. That is the case of Josiane, who had to considerably reduce her prices and accept more clients in the last two years of her pathway, following a move to a more disadvantaged neighborhood. Other participants recalled periods during which they were more susceptible to accept clients that looked dirty or smelled, although women found them "repugnant." The most common boundary compromises discussed, however, regarded participants' decisions to offer services and tolerate behaviours with which they were not comfortable.

In general, rule and boundary transgressions were concentrated during specific phases of sex workers' pathways, rather than dispersed throughout involvement. Ex-sex workers interviewed used expressions such as "spiral of degradation," "loss of soul," and "degeneration" to qualify these more negative stages of their lives as sex workers. At other times, they felt that they had managed to better respect their boundaries and "stay true" to themselves. Hence the importance of context to better understand women's decision-making. Drug and alcohol use, as well as economic needs, are important factors that contribute to compromises. Some participants interviewed developed serious substance abuse issues and lived in precarious conditions while engaging in sex work, such as Julie, Sylvie, Odree, and Olivia. All four recalled more difficult periods during which they worked outdoors, charged only the minimum to clients, and accepted unprotected sex, although it was a rule of theirs to not do so.

The pressures of working in more structured settings, such as exotic clubs and massage parlours, mostly because of the competition between sex workers and the fees that must be paid to managers, can also influence women's decisions to relax their rules. Kim, in particular, gave many examples of the ways in which this type of environment exerted pressure on her to stretch her limits, especially as a black woman. She noted that some of the biggest clubs and massage parlours in her city only allowed one or two black women at a time, forcing them to compete with each other

for the "opportunity" to work there. She also felt she had to allow customers more access to her than other white dancers to convince club managers of her "added-value" and to be able to come back to dance. Therefore, during the time that she worked at these clubs, she allowed customers to touch her more than she was comfortable with and tolerated their derogative attitudes towards her, which made her feel disgusted.

Some of the compromises with rules and boundaries reported by women, however, appeared to be mainly the results of changing attitudes towards the risks of sex work for their sense of self and a lessened sensibility to its effects. A couple of participants recalled phases during which they were "partying," having fun as sex workers, and making a lot of money. During those times, they started to feel like they could offer services to clients that fell outside of their original limits with little or no consequence. For instance, Elisabeth was an exotic dancer who had strict rules about how little contact she wanted to have with costumers. Yet, she temporary decided to practice sex work in clubs that had cabins for dancers to discreetly offer more sexual services to clients. She attributed this decision to "denial" and "trivialization" of the consequences it would (and did, according to her) have on her sense of self, since she was only focused how much more money she was making. Veronique had a similar discourse. She described a process of desensitization through which she moved from less "intrusive" or less visible forms of sex work (naked waitressing, erotic calls) to exotic dancing, erotic massages, and finally escorting. Escorting, in particular, was a form of sex work that she never wanted to engage in at the beginning of her pathway, because of fears to be discovered and moral objections. At first, she attributed her decision to engage in escorting to financial problems. She eventually specified that she mostly practiced as an escort at times when she felt strong enough to risk transgressing this rule, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

"One or two times a year, when I was really in trouble, I would go online and look for horny men willing to pay for sex... but that was it, once or twice a year when I was really in trouble ...I don't know how to explain it. Well, I wasn't really in trouble, but those were moments when I felt particularly in a partying mood, 'capable,' and so I tried to profit from that feeling and save some money for the future - a little safety net, you know? I was sleeping around anyway, why not get paid, you know?"

For various reasons, all ex-sex workers reported rule transgressions. Their narratives highlighted the challenges and difficulties they faced as they tried to set limits and boundaries that would allow them to be comfortable with their involvement in sex work and protect their sense of self. They reported being intimidated by clients' constant attempts to get sex workers to lower their prices and accept their requests for various services. Many women interviewed had pimps for portions of their pathways that were expecting them to make a precise amount of money each night. Working in proximity with other sex workers that offered more access for less money also had an impact on decisions to relax some rules. Yet, when discussing the effects that sex work had on their self-concept, women mostly blamed themselves. Indeed, ex-sex workers interviewed

made a connection between their decisions to compromise with their rules and boundaries and a fragilization of the sense of self that, for some, persisted even years after their exit from sex work.

The Insidious Impact of Compromising with Boundaries on Sex Workers' Sense of Self

Women interviewed observed that despite their efforts, sex work nevertheless negatively impacted their sense of self to various degrees. Some participants mentioned feeling dirty and shameful every time they remembered or thought about some of their more difficult experiences as sex workers. They also reported an impaired self-image in relation to how clients had treated them that led to difficulties being around men or dealing with their attention outside of sex work. For other women, however, disgust had turned inwards. They emphasized how they eventually became incapable of looking at themselves in the mirror. Self-loathing was often accompanied by a feeling of not knowing who they were or what they liked anymore.

Ex-sex workers interviewed established clear associations between their weakened sense of self and the compromises they made with their own boundaries and rules. Thinking back about their pathways as sex workers, they chose to emphasize that they had not successfully managed their boundaries throughout involvement in sex work, over the difficult experiences they lived as sex workers. From their perspective, the fact that they had transgressed their rules and limits at times was the equivalent of disrespecting themselves or "selling out." Since that part of their pathways was under their control, it was described as worse than how clients or pimps acted towards them.

Kathy explained it well when she discussed how compromises with boundaries and rules implied "putting a price on your limits as a sex worker." She reflected that when she accepted to perform in ways that went against her rules, she also established what amount of money would be sufficient for clients to do whatever they wanted to her, including literally to spit on her. That was the part of her pathway she regretted most as it made her feel disconnected from herself and incoherent. Odree compared her decisions to compromise with boundaries to "self-maltreatment" and expressed that she was more ashamed of that than getting involved in sex work in the first place. Kim's discourse was similar, but she rather highlighted how her decision to violate her rules (and getting paid for it) made her feel like she was becoming the stereotype she wanted to resist in the first place:

"ah (sign) … it is going to sound simple, but I accepted to perform certain sexual services and now I'm thinking 'never again' would I go through that again.' Each time I felt like my energy was leaving me and I thought 'never again.' I know that I did not wish for that. And even if I only did it a number of times that I can count on my fingers, just what little I did, it took some of my energy.

It's like I could do domination, I could do any other service, as long as there was no penetration I was ok. But the times that there was … that I accepted penetration… either because the client was offering a higher price or because I was partying or I was on this and that … it took my energy. It took me away from myself; it took all of my principles. Those times, I felt like a whore."

For participants, the impact of such transgressions on the self-concept was insidious. They rationalized that each decision to compromise with boundaries represented a small deviation from what they felt was acceptable. Like Veronique, participants justified these transgressions by noting that it was better to get paid for it than to do it for free or that they were strong enough to deal with the consequences, if there were any. In addition, women mentioned that they overlooked the negative emotions these compromises brought on, especially about themselves. They were, therefore, less vigilant about the risks of sex work for their self-esteem and self-concept in general. This process was often described as a progressive disconnection from their emotions that made them lose "control" over their pathways as sex workers. They only realized they had to stop relaxing their rules once they recognized that their self-image was impaired.

The gradual impact of boundary compromising is best represented by Émie and the "spiral of degradation" she felt she was caught in. Indeed, at first when she started accepting clients' demands for sexual submission, she felt her compromises with her boundaries made her more appealing to clients. She thought she was perceived by clients as willing, open-minded, and cool. She was focused on how she was earning a lot of money and developing a positive reputation among clients, but less so on how that made her feel about herself. Yet, without realizing it, these boundary transgressions were slowly chipping at her self-esteem:

Émie:	Let's just say that at the time, I thought that I was going up the ladder, but really, I was falling down. And I was going down in this spiral of degradation because of all these small decisions. […] While it was happening, I felt like I was moving up. I was getting more cash. I was different. I was doing things the others refused. Even though I was the youngest, I was still down for it, you know? I perceived myself as someone willing and ready for action. And that for me was hot, you know?
Interviewer:	what do you mean when you talk about degradation?
Émie:	well at the level of self-respect. Can we agree that if you allow someone to hit you with a fireplace poker, you do not respect yourself, you know? You're letting him hit you with a metal bar for cash? (signs) […] My self-respect was below zero, can we agree on that?"

All women interviewed reported temptations and obstacles to relax and stretch their rules regarding sex work. On various occasions and for different reasons, all participants recalled decisions they made to relax and stretch their rules. These decisions, since they tended to accumulate in specific phases of women's pathways, brought on a mix of shame, guilt, and anger that eventually impacted their sense of self to various degrees. In

general, the data collected during interviews pointed to the duration of some of the consequences for the sense of self reported. Melanie, for example, indicated that it took her 18 months after cessation of sex work activities to be able to get out of the house and face the judgement of others. Sylvie noted that she needed more than a decade of shame before she started discussing her past involvement in sex work with others. Veronique, for her part, reported that she was no longer able to get out of the house without make-up on and was terrified of male attention. For these women, therefore, forgetting the past, but mostly forgetting themselves was a long and difficult process.

DISCUSSION

The present study draws on the narratives of ex-sex workers to explore how these women tried to protect their sense of self during involvement in sex work, whether they feel they succeeded or not, and how they explained it. Findings show that ex-sex workers interviewed were very aware of the risks of sex work for their self-concept. Indeed, they used a variety of strategies to avoid being discovered and to protect their sense of self, similar to those reported in the literature (Abel, 2011; Benoit et al., 2020; Benoit, Jansson et al., 2018; Grittner & Walsh, 2020). The most common strategy discussed involved setting a series of principles and rules to guide sex work activities and to determine how they should behave as sex workers. This rule-making/rule-following strategy allowed sex workers to set boundaries with regards to what they were willing to offer clients or to accept from them.

Yet, our findings show that the protective quality of these self-concept protection strategies is limited, as women observed that they compromised with personal boundaries at various occasions during their pathways. They made strong associations between these compromises and a progressive fragilization of their sense of self. A common arc in their narratives was identified. Participants first equated boundary compromises with being disrespectful to themselves, which made them vulnerable to shame, guilt, and anger. They then described a process through which decisions to relax their rules, each representing a small departure from what participants were comfortable with, eventually accumulated and impaired their self-concept

The contribution of the current study is twofold. The first is that the paper documented further the erosion of boundaries of sex workers described by Barton (2007), but by considering the conditions in which women made these decisions to compromise and on how they rationalized them. Previous studies on stigma and the toll of sex work sometimes appear to suggest that it is up to women to resist negative attributions and keep sex work activities within their zone of comfort. Compromises with regards to rules and boundaries are, therefore, viewed as decisions mostly motivated by financial gains. There have been calls recently for more nuanced assessment of sex workers' decision-making and practices that consider the structural and social constraints they must negotiate (Benoit et al., 2017; Bungay et al., 2011; Nestadt et al., 2020). The perspective of "bounded agency" seems promising in that regard, for it focuses on how women manage the

risks of sex work, while simultaneously recognizing the difficult conditions in which they sometimes practice.

The current study adds to this discussion by documenting the various reasons behind participants' decisions to compromise, including economic needs and drug dependency, but also pimps' expectations, competition between sex workers, clients' attempts to negotiate prices and women's evolving sense of the risks of sex work for their sense of self. It also suggests that decisions to compromise with rules and boundaries can be the results of an accumulation of circumstances and events on which women exert varying degrees of control. Since at least one study showed how quickly boundary compromises can start occurring in pathways of exotic dancers (Footer et al., 2018), future research should aim to investigate how self-concept protection strategies can change throughout involvement in sex work. Additional studies should also try to better understand the conditions and contexts in which women can set rules and boundaries that will protect their sense of self during their whole pathway of sex work.

The second contribution of the current paper is to highlight the shame, guilt, and tendency to self-blame of ex-sex workers, who perceived their decisions to relax their rules and to compromise with boundaries caused a gradual weakening of their sense of self. Many participants of our sample were victimized by pimps or clients during their involvement in sex work (sometimes more than once). These experiences could have also affected their sense of self. Yet, they chose to focus on the role they felt they played in allowing negative effects on their self-concept to manifest. This finding is interesting because it sheds light on a process through which women can internalize negative attributions about sex workers. Ex-sex workers were indeed very hard on themselves. They expressed they had disrespected and mistreated themselves by not behaving according to their rules and ideals as sex workers. As a result, they concluded that they had not fared any better than negative societal images of "prostitutes" and "whores", as they called them. This rule-making/rule-following strategy can, therefore, be a double-edged sword for the sense of self of sex workers, if they do not respect their boundaries and limits.

Now, what can we do with this information to support sex workers? One promising avenue is to target shame and self-stigma to minimize potential consequences on help-seeking and mental health for sex workers (Blakey & Gunn, 2018; Huber et al., 2019; Rayson & Alba, 2019; Treloar et al., 2021). To do so, it must be recognized that women can blame themselves for selling sex, but also for not living up to ideals about sex work. Interventions that foster self-compassion, in particular, have been gaining attention for their uses and positive effects among individuals who are highly self-critical (Luoma & Platt, 2015). Self-compassion includes being kind and understanding toward oneself in the face of perceived personal failings, relating to the experiences of others and not just one's own to gain perspective, and being mindful of negative thoughts and emotions (Neff, 2003). For intervention, this would mean that practitioners and sex workers address empowering and exploitative aspects of women's experiences in a non-judgmental manner, so that

women can develop a more balanced evaluation of what constitute personal successes/failures in the specific contexts of sex work. It would also translate into practitioners helping women relate to the experiences of other sex workers and be aware of over-identification with negative thoughts and feelings.

Another necessary condition is to recognize how the marginalization of sex workers constrains their agency and their ability to exert control over their sex work activities. Therefore, efforts to improve sex workers' capacity to maintain boundaries cannot be limited to helping women navigate stigmatizing and degrading situations. Notably, manipulation, coercion, and violence perpetrated by some clients must be addressed, including through educational programs targeting stereotypes with regards to sex work and women who engage in it. At the same time, the violence experienced by sex workers is a reflection of vulnerabilities embedded in structural factors, such as poverty, housing instability, and discrimination (Nestadt et al., 2020). These vulnerabilities require larger structural interventions to reduce the power imbalances that threaten sex workers' agentic practices and self-determination.

Limitations of the study should be noted. The most important being the use of practitioners working in community settings to recruit participants. While researchers and research coordinator guided the practitioners with regards to sample diversification, the latter were the ones disseminating information about the study to potential participants. This recruitment strategy impacted the sample composition in significant ways. Indeed, all participants had reached out to community organizations for help since that is where they were recruited to participate in the study. Their experiences as sex workers were perhaps more negative than those of ex-sex workers that did not seek help. There is also considerable variability in terms of how many years ago participants exited sex work. A second major limitation of the current study is its focus on the narratives of ex-sex workers only. This limits the transferability of our findings to active sex workers. In addition, ex-sex workers had the advantage of hindsight to think about their pathway as a whole and to (re)interpret the effects of sex work on their lives and on themselves.

On a personal note, as Hammond and Kingston noted (2014), conducting research on sex work is a challenging endeavor. The perspectives are very polarizing and the words used carry a lot of weight. In the current study, we tried to walk a fine line by 1) first and foremost, staying true to the definitions and words of women interviewed; 2) keeping in mind that one cannot isolate the impact of sex work on the self-concept from other effects discussed in narratives of sex work; 3) but also allowing for the possibility that the recruitment strategy might explain why participants felt they had not been able to protect their sense of self. After two years of analysis and discussions among co-researchers, one key impression that emerged from the data echoed Barton's (2007) observation that there appears to be a "hegemonic quality to the toll of stripping inattentive to the nuances of individual experiences" (p. 593). We do hope that future research among a larger sample composed of currently active sex workers involved in a wide range of various sex work activities will show that the erosion of personal codes and the ensuing consequences on sense of self can be prevented. As suggested by Benoit and colleagues (2018), a more comprehensive investigation could distinguish between aspects of the self-concept and analyze the effects of sex work in a life-course perspective.

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