
Female University Students Working in the Sex Trade: A Narrative Analysis Les étudiantes à l'université travaillant dans l'industrie du sexe : une analyse narrative

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ABSTRACT

This research examined the narratives of 4 female Canadian university students working in the sex trade. Factors that resulted in students being both receptive to sex work and sustained by it, as well as variables that finally led to their exit from sex work, were identified. The study highlights the relevance of this topic to the field of counselling psychology. The benefits and consequences of working in the sex industry, as well as educational, psychosocial, and career implications, are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

L'objectif de cette recherche est d'explorer le récit de 4 étudiantes canadiennes à l'université travaillant dans le commerce du sexe. L'étude identifie les facteurs qui rendent les étudiantes réceptives au travail dans le commerce du sexe, les soutiennent dans l'industrie, et les incitent à y sortir. L'article souligne la pertinence du sujet dans le domaine de la psychologie du counseling. Les avantages et les conséquences de ce travail, ainsi que les implications éducatives, psycho-sociales, et professionnelles y sont présentés.

Female university students working in the sex trade constitute a growing phenomenon (Sinacore & Lech, 2011). The literature indicates that the primary reason students work in the sex industry is financial. Sex work helps alleviate the financial burden caused by rising tuition and changing grant structures (Chapman, 2001; Dolman, 2008; Roberts, 2010). In a study of undergraduate students at a London, UK, university, results indicated that 16.5% of a sample of 315 undergraduate students endorsed a willingness to engage in sex work in order to finance their studies “with 11% indicating they would work as escorts” (Roberts, Sanders, Smith, & Myers, 2010, p. 145). Additionally, in an exploratory cross-sectional survey conducted in Southwest London, Roberts, Bergstrom, and La Rooy (2007) surveyed 130 students and asked whether they knew any friends involved in the sex industry. More than 10% reported knowing students who had worked as strippers, lap dancers, erotic massagers, or escorts to financially support themselves. Over 6% reported knowing students who worked as sex workers.

Similarly, a qualitative study conducted by Haeger and Deil-Amen (2010) found that all the interviewees among the 8 student sex workers in a southwest city in the United States remained in the sex industry due to the advantages afforded by the “money-to-time ratio” (Haeger & Deil-Amen, 2010, p. 6). Though the financial reality of female students is undeniable, little attention has been given to (a) why certain female students turn to sex work over other means of making money; (b) the implications of becoming a sex worker; and (c) the economic, educational, and psychosocial realities of these women.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES RESULTING FROM SEX WORK

Research on psychological challenges resulting from working in the sex industry has indicated that sex workers often suffer from symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (Farley et al., 2003). Roberts et al. (2007) point out that sex workers are confronted with many dangers, such as drugs, violence, and health hazards, that are not typical in other types of employment. Moreover, research indicates that sex workers make more money if they agree to sex without a condom and that they risk physical abuse if they insist on protected sex (Raymond, Hughes, & Gomez, 2001). Additionally, student sex workers report having more money and time to complete their studies but this does not necessarily result in higher academic achievement. In fact, some students report a lack of academic motivation while others report dropping out of school altogether because they can make more money in sex work (Dolman, 2008; Milne, 2006). Poor academic performance has negative implications for students’ future aspirations, personal relationships, and mental well-being (Hodgeson & Simon, 1995). Furthermore, students report contending with negative stereotypes and having to manage the cognitive dissonance they experience between their sense of identity and beliefs on the one hand, and their actions of engaging in sex work on the other (Haeger & Deil-Amen, 2010). The field of counselling psychology in general, and university counselling services in particular, is uniquely positioned to provide education, awareness, and outreach with respect to psychological effects of sex work for students, as well as a safe and confidential outlet should students wish to seek therapeutic intervention.

CANADIAN CONTEXT

For the most part, studies examining the phenomenon of student sex workers are being conducted in the United Kingdom (e.g., Cusick, Roberts, & Paton, 2009; Roberts, 2010; Roberts et al., 2007; Roberts et al., 2010). As described by Sinacore and Lech (2011), there is a dearth of information about university student sex workers in the Canadian context. A study by Lavoie, Thibodeau, Gagne, and Hebert (2010) that reported on the buying and selling of sexual services among secondary students in the province of Quebec may give insight into the issue. That is, within a sample of 815 high school students, 4% bought and 3% sold sex, with a higher number of females selling sex and more males buying sex. Given

these percentages in high school and the sexual nature of university campuses, one can anticipate that there will be the same, and potentially higher, percentages of university students selling and buying sex.

RATIONALE FOR THIS STUDY

The goal of this study was to explore female student sex workers in Canada and present Canadian-specific case studies describing their experiences in sex work. In addition, the research examined psychosocial and financial factors that contribute to female students entering sex work as well as the implication of student sex work on student wellness, academic achievement, and career development. The research questions were as follows:

1. How do female university students who have worked in the sex trade describe their experiences before, during, and after working in this industry?
2. How has working in the sex trade influenced how they view themselves and their academic and career development?

METHOD

This study employed a social constructivist epistemology. This paradigm includes the notion that multiple truths exist (Ponterotto, 2005), and therefore it does not foster the idea of universal, context-free principles of human nature (Duffy, 1985). The constructivist researcher accepts the idea that it is through sharing multiple views and honouring differences and contexts that one comes to understand the human situation more fully (Ponterotto, 2005). Thus, for the purpose of this study, the social constructivist lens required the researchers to listen to the experiences of university women working in sex work such that the participants' narratives could be revealed.

The study utilized a qualitative narrative approach. This method was appropriate, as the researchers were interested in the story of how participants came to be employed in sex work as students and how they exited it. The procedures for implementing a narrative method include focusing on a small group of individuals, gathering data through the collection of their stories in interviews, analyzing the stories for process and content, and chronologically ordering the meaning of those experiences (Creswell, 2006; Riessman, 1993). In addition, the stories were situated within participants' personal experiences (e.g., sex work, family, school), socioeconomic status, culture (e.g., racial, ethnic), gender, and history (e.g., time and place).

Procedures

After approval was secured from the University Research Ethics Board (REB), participants were recruited through advertisements placed in public places and word of mouth. To be eligible for the study, participants had to have engaged in

sex work while enrolled as university students. Additionally, they were to have already exited sex work to ensure that the full range of their experience, including the decisions to enter and leave the sex industry, could be explored.

After recruitment and signing informed consent, participants were asked to partake in a 1-hour narrative interview. During the interview they were asked to describe the process of entering, working in, and leaving the sex industry. They were also asked to explore the academic, social, psychological, and occupational aspects of the process. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Upon completion of the analysis, the transcripts were constructed into individual stories. The re-storied interviews were sent to the participants for feedback and to ensure accuracy.

In addition to interview data, the researcher kept field notes, that is, personal reflections through journaling as recommended by Thorne (1997). Field notes were compiled immediately after the contact with the participant in order to help the interviewer reorient herself during various phases of the study, such as the planning, analysis, and write-up (e.g., Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Participants

Initially, the researchers intended on interviewing 5 to 7 female university students who were former sex workers, but recruitment turned out to be extremely challenging. Recruitment resulted in the researcher being contacted by 15 women who were interested in participating in the study. From these contacts, 12 interviews were scheduled but only 4 were completed. The remaining 8 either cancelled or did not show up. This difficulty in collecting data from sex workers may reflect a fear of being found out and the taboo associated with working in the sex industry. The challenges of recruiting participants for this study are consistent with the challenges reported by Roberts et al. (2007). Consequently, this study reports on the narratives of 4 women, described below using pseudonyms.

Rose is a 26-year-old Caucasian woman. She has dual American-Canadian citizenship. She identified herself as queer and single. At the time of the interview, she was a full-time student, pursuing an undergraduate degree in fine arts at a university in the province of Quebec. She also worked at an artist centre and, in the sex industry, she worked as both an erotic massager and a private escort.

Lily is a 23-year-old Caucasian woman born in New Brunswick, Canada. She resided with her family until she moved to Quebec at the age of 17. She identified herself as straight and single. At the time of the interview, Lily was a first-year undergraduate student, pursuing a double major in religion and sociology at a university in Quebec. In addition, she was working part-time at a café. In the sex industry, she worked in the areas of cybersex and erotic massage.

Daisy is a 25-year-old Caucasian woman born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. She identified herself as heterosexual/bisexual/uncertain and married to a male. At the time of the interview, Daisy was a graduate student in philosophy, which she began in September 2010 in British Columbia. She worked as a teaching assistant and part-time as a student coordinator on campus. She began in the sex

trade by working in strip clubs and later also became involved in webcam work to supplement her income during times that she did not travel.

Violet is a 28-year-old Caucasian woman born in Canada. She identified herself as heterosexual and single. At the time of the interview, Violet was a full-time student, pursuing a degree in education. She indicated that she had not discontinued sex work, which included employment as a lap dancer, a stripper, and later a private escort.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the interviews consisted of reorganizing the narratives in order to provide the links between events from the information provided by the participant and organizing them into a temporal framework (Arvey, 2002). The first step focused on story content by taking note of the events, images, and themes that emerged from the interview. Narrative events were then placed in a temporal order. Next, during each stage of the analysis, the researchers strived for narrative coherence, thematic clarity, and plot development. That is, the researchers placed the narratives in a logical order such that themes were identifiable and the story was clear. During thematic analysis, themes within and between the narratives were identified. Finally, narrative events were once again placed in a temporal order and the content of each narrative was clarified. In order to bracket the researchers' subjective stance and interpretation, an analysis of the researcher's field notes and journal entries was incorporated as part of the member checking procedures (Morrow, 2005).

Further, Shenton (2004) described four major criteria in qualitative research with respect to trustworthiness of data: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. *Credibility* refers to making an effort to confirm that the findings reflect the reality of the participants. To ensure this, adoption of a well-established method is recommended. In this study, the researchers adopted a narrative approach, which was deemed appropriate as they were interested in the story of how the participant came to become involved in sex work as a student and how she exited it. Moreover, credibility requires that opportunities for full participation be provided. Credibility is also established through *triangulation*, which refers to comparing data gathered from a variety of sources to ensure consistency.

In this study, data came from the audiotaped transcripts of the individual interview sessions, field notes (e.g., description of participants' interaction and behaviours, verbal and nonverbal behaviour, pacing, description of contexts), as well as our own reflections and journaling. Other options to ensure credibility in the study included allowing the participants to participate voluntarily and withdraw at any time freely, and *iterative questioning*, which includes clarification of responses, elucidating contradictions, and rephrasing to ensure accuracy of interpretation. Credibility is also facilitated through *reflective commentary*, as recommended by Shenton (2004), which requires researchers to dialogue with each other about their biases and experiences throughout the research process in order to help them be aware of their prejudice and assumptions.

To facilitate possible transferability of the data, adequate information regarding the context, sample, procedures, and design is recommended (Shenton, 2004), while dependability was facilitated through a detailed description of the research design and procedures. Finally, in order to improve confirmability, the researchers kept a detailed audit trail of how the data were gathered and on what basis the recommendations and implications were placed (Shenton, 2004). In this way, researchers could verify their final analysis.

RESULTS

Data analysis resulted in the following themes: (a) factors of entry into sex work, (b) factors of sustainability, (c) exiting factors, (d) educational and academic goals, (e) career development, and (f) consequences.

Factors of Entry into Sex Work

All 4 participants identified factors that led them to sex work. Lily indicated that the primary factor influencing her decision to work in the area of cybersex was that she was from a province outside of Quebec and could not find a job because she did not speak French. She found herself unemployed, with no money and little prospect of finding a job so the sex industry became a viable option. She then saw a “cute” advertisement in a local newspaper advertising webcam work. Lily pointed out that the advertisement for sex work targeted students, using language such as “high salary, perfect for students.” These advertisements enticed her to take a webcam job: “I found an ad for webcam work, and the ad was written really cute and stuff. So, I had taken up a job with a webcam company and I didn’t find it really bad.” As a webcam sex worker, Lily participated in private chats with men who paid \$5 a minute. The men could see Lily but she could not see them, and they would ask her to perform sexual acts combined with erotic talking.

While Lily entered sex work due to lack of employment, Rose identified a negative work experience as the primary impetus for her working in the sex trade. Rose worked as a waitress for about three to four years while attending university; she often took extra shifts and prioritized work over school. Rose described enjoying the work but realized that it was “sucking away [her] time” while offering little in terms of future prospects. In addition, in her fourth year at the restaurant, a new manager was hired who treated the workers poorly. In the end, it was not the heavy workload or the small earnings that led Rose to quit her job, but rather the negative work environment created by the manager. After leaving the restaurant, Rose began working at the university; however, the work atmosphere was marred with abuse of power and a great deal of stress, which negatively impacted her studies. Given these negative experiences, the prospect of being self-employed became more appealing. As a result, Rose looked for work that provided her more freedom, and she started working as an erotic massager. She elaborated on the freedom and flexibility that sex work affords:

It gives me that ultimate freedom of, when you're in crunch times, with school, you get these crazy crunch times that are really insane so I decided to take a month off and just do my work and succeed in my school, which is what I'm here to do, and then I'll work harder when I get out of school. Like the semester is gonna come to an end. I'll have free time, and I'll make the money back that I didn't make this month.

As a newcomer to the province, Daisy turned to sex work because she "didn't have a way to support [herself]" and needed to support her spouse who was immigrating to Canada. She worked as a stripper as she did not want to take on employment while pursuing full-time studies. She did not have a student loan but had previously accumulated debt. Daisy described that the anonymity she had in a new province helped her to get started in sex work. In addition, she stated that her open and positive views on nudity and sexuality "contribute[d] to some extent" to turning to sex work. As a stripper, Daisy travelled within the province and worked mainly during school holidays, which she described as "good enough to pay for a good chunk of my expenses for the month." Daisy began webcam work as a way of supplementing her strip/dance work during the times that she did not travel, but soon found both to be "tedious" and "annoying." She found it "hard to make money" due to rampant availability of porn on the Internet, "felt really forced and uncomfortable," and as a result stopped webcam work.

Violet entered sex work after ending a long-term romantic relationship and moving to a new province where she began working for minimum wage. She found her job to be "below [her] experience level" and "demeaning." She took notice of men who found her attractive and indicated "a lot of men were hollering at me on the street" and she reasoned that she "should be getting something for it." Like Lily, Violet described reading "a lot of ads in the back of a newspaper" advertising training for dancers. She pursued one advertisement titled "Will Train Dancers." Soon after, Violet quit her minimum-wage job and began work as an exotic dancer where she lap danced in different cities. She later advertised for private escort work through Craigslist.

Factors of Sustainability

The participants spoke in detail about the factors that influenced their decisions to stay in the sex trade. These factors were both psychosocial and financial. The psychosocial factors included the development of friendships and support networks, feelings of empowerment, a sense of independence, and being a student. Both Lily and Rose discussed how the friendships and support networks they developed as a result of being a part of the sex industry were key to their decision to continue to participate in sex work. When discussing the webcam work, Lily stated:

I stayed there for just a little bit over a year because it ended up being really fun. They had all kinds of cool parties, and the boss and the manager were really fun women, and they had set it up as an environment with all the other

girls working there that were just fun and very comfortable, and relaxed. So, I got used to it.

Rose discussed how her support network helped her to stay in sex work. She stated, "I don't need to go elsewhere and go outside and look for support because I have these, really sex-work positive group of people who are willing to hear me out and, are interested and, present, just really supportive." Daisy described her husband as having an increasingly supportive attitude toward her dancing, and this support helped to sustain her in the sex industry. She stated, "He'll come see me at work all the time. He'll see like five shows in a day. It doesn't bother him. Sometimes he—as much as often if I have to travel, he'll come with me."

Lily and Rose discussed feeling empowered by sex work. Lily described feeling like a "super feminist," in that she experienced having "power over men when [she] would get them to give [her] a larger tip by flirting." Rose discussed feeling empowered because she was providing companionship whereby she believed she served as a "healing element" in the lives of some of her clients. Rose elaborated on the positive aspects of sex work, describing it as intimate labour that can be rewarding, because being a sex worker involves fulfilling another's desires and providing physical closeness, companionship, and perhaps healing for the client. As Rose states:

Fulfilling somebody's need and desire and, and sort of forbidden lust or whatever it is, and I feel like it offers a real healing element. And I do know that with certain men that I've seen, uh, they've gotten a lot out of it. And they've really appreciated it. It's because people are really lonely. And it's because, you know, it's also companionship. It's not just sex. It's also just like companionship and having, and having someone close to you, that physical closeness that so many people crave.

Thus, both Rose and Lily experienced a sense of importance in their work that they found personally rewarding, while Daisy and Violet described enjoying dancing and performing on stage. Violet described dancing on stage as "fun to dance to music and pick out [a] costume." She stated that it made her feel youthful. Moreover, Rose, Lily, Daisy, and Violet discussed independence and flexible hours as an important element that sustained them in sex work. In this regard, Daisy states, "It's flexible so if I'm busy, I don't have to work. I can just choose not to work. And usually when I want to work I can find work."

Further, being a university student served a significant role in Lily, Rose, and Daisy's work in sex work. For Lily, being a student was in conflict with her being a sex worker, as her boss and co-workers did not understand her decision to go to school or why she would be interested in working outside the sex industry. She recounted their remarks as follows: "Why do you even do that [go to school]? Why would you even consider, to work for minimum wage, you're making so much money here and you're having fun?" Similarly, Daisy described trying to

reconcile tension between “I am an entertainer and objectifying myself” and her student identity. She states:

I have met only one other person that was a student ... I find it really difficult to identify with most of the other people when I'm working and I just wonder why me? Why am I here? And I really don't fit in at all.

On the other hand, Rose indicated that being a student offered a “buffer against self-judgement” because “I don't have to define myself, I'm a student.” Violet stated that she kept school and sex work in “separate spheres” to be able to engage in both roles.

In addition to mentioning psychosocial factors, all 4 participants spoke in detail about the financial benefits of sex work. Lily indicated that initially she was not making much money working for the webcam company because they only provided her with limited hours. As a result, Lily and a co-worker decided to pursue working in erotic massage.

We didn't have any idea what it was, neither of us were comfortable to have sex, to earn money, we didn't mind to be naked, and touching, but just no, no sex. So, we thought try it. And, yeah, once we tried that, it was fine. We didn't like the job, but we didn't hate it. But, we made so much money, and we became so addicted and so dependent on having so much money all the time.

Lily reported making between \$600 and \$1,100 a night. With this money, she was able to afford school, live comfortably, and take expensive vacations. She stated that financial factors impact a student's decision to enter the sex industry, and remain in it for the duration of their studies. In addition, she indicated that the small amount of money that students receive in loans is not sufficient to meet their financial needs. Lily reported that she met many university students who echoed this sentiment:

You know, my friends have said to me student loan gives you just like \$600 per month or something or maybe it's depending on the person but, you know, and all they've said, like that I met that were doing sex work ... were doing this because we don't get enough money from student loan to live, and if we worked a normal job, they take a part of their salary. So they're, like, this is like under the table, so we don't have to give it to anybody. So you know I was scared of, like, you know, if I'm in university, I don't want to get into this situation or also the situation like people I know who finish university are, like, in their jobs and, like, suffering because they can't pay, like, all their student loans anymore. So, I thought, this is like ... it [sex work] sounded like, you know, the only logical choice.

Violet described a similar perspective to Lily, and stated that she required other sources of income to supplement her student loan to cover her living expenses while a full-time student. Violet reported she enjoyed making “lots of money” as an escort without accruing student debt. Daisy described sex work as a “safety

net” and “just knowing that it’s there, knowing that if ever I get in a tight spot I can just pick that up.” Thus, for all 4 participants, the social rewards paired with the financial benefits were key factors in their decisions to stay in the sex industry. Moreover, having an independent schedule and flexible work hours served as sustaining factors.

Exiting Factors

There were a number of factors that resulted in Lily and Rose moving away from or ultimately leaving the sex industry. These factors were psychosocial, relational, customers pushing the boundaries, and future aspirations. The predominant psychosocial factors identified by Lily and Rose included feelings of low self-esteem and depression. Lily described a strong sense of self-loathing and depression, as indicated in this passage:

I didn’t want to work anymore. I was so disgusted and, yeah. I felt like, sometimes, like, you know, you feel like, I’m such a whore, what am I doing? ... and, when, like before, I stopped doing it, um, I was like really depressed a lot, like, I didn’t wanna go anymore but I was, like, you know, like, so used to it and so used to this job and the money that I kept going but I was depressed and I didn’t wanna go, and I had to go to smile to people and shake their hand, and I was, like, hey, “I’m” whatever fake name I was using and just, like, you know, like, leaving the room as fast as I can and, uh, all the time feeling like, like bad.

Additionally, Rose indicated that the social stigma attached to sex work resulted in her reconsidering this choice. Rose went on to say, “I think the major reason that I really think about giving it [sex work] up is because of the social stigma.”

Further, relational factors were reported to be significant in the decision to leave the sex industry. Lily kept her sex work a secret from the man she was dating; she felt uncomfortable with the dishonesty, that “I was not just sharing my naked self with whomever I was dating, it was also for money.” Eventually Lily told him the truth. He seemed to be “okay with it” and on one occasion asked her to help him with his rent. Yet Lily was uncomfortable with his acceptance:

I thought if I ever come into this situation again, I don’t want to date anybody that knows about it or that is okay with it. ’Cuz if I think, if somebody on the other side is okay with their girlfriend to do that, like, doesn’t fit for me. It wasn’t right that I should do it. But I think it’s also, I didn’t agree that somebody should accept. I wouldn’t accept somebody who’s doing it, so I wouldn’t want to accept somebody who accepted me doing it. I think it’s best to only do this kind of work if you’re completely unattached.

Echoing this sentiment, Rose indicated that if she were to enter into a committed relationship, she would immediately discontinue sex work. Due to the stigma associated with sex work, Rose indicated that she has chosen not to share her work with many people in her life because she is afraid it would result in misunderstandings and a breakdown of relationships, as she states,

I just know that I have so many relationships that would become false, because people would treat me as a stereotype or treat me or just sort of think of me differently. And I don't want to have to deal with that. I just want me to be who I am and for people that interact with me as if, you know, I work a nine-to-five and sometimes, I really wish that I did work a nine-to-five, 'cuz I really don't want to have to deal with that stigma. But in terms of the labour, sometimes I enjoy it, and sometimes I really don't, but it's work.

Though both describe sex work as “just a job,” they were concerned that it would compromise the integrity of their relationships and be viewed by their partners as a form of “cheating.”

Both Lily and Rose indicated that disrespect from their customers with some “pushing the boundaries” resulted in their reconsidering sex work. For example, Lily described a sense of powerlessness when clients disrespected her boundaries:

I would never want anybody to touch me, like between the legs, and I always made that so clear and there would be the odd person who ... would sneak it or do it. After you're mad and you're complaining to the other girls, but actually on the inside, you feel hurt a little bit and you feel dirty.

Educational and Academic Factors

None of the participants discussed any negative effects of sex work on their academic goals. Instead, they indicated that they had more time to study and that the flexible hours allowed them to adjust their schedule to make allowances for exams and other academic activities. For example, Rose states:

I don't feel like I'm gonna make a career out of it at all. I do feel it's very specific to my time in school, actually, and maybe right out of school. But I'm looking into starting a business. I have a year left of university. And it, it just really because with university you're making your own schedule, it's really helpful to just be able to make your own schedule in your work as well. Then you can just work around it. Then you can have, four days straight till you know get your whole paper groundwork done, and you can just really focus all your energy on it. For me, I really like to work in that sort of intensive way, and so it [sex work] really frees me up to do that.

Career Development Factors

Lily reported sex work having a negative effect on her career development. She discussed not having any legitimate experience to put on her résumé and lacking work experience or skills that would make her competitive in the job market. As previously discussed, this lack of experience was an impetus for her leaving the sex industry. Moreover, she reported that co-workers in the massage parlour were not supportive of her trying to pursue a career outside of the sex industry, making it difficult for her to pursue her occupational interests. Similar to Lily, Daisy

also described taking on part-time employment that she called a “typical student job,” to build her résumé so as to not compromise her career development. Daisy further reported fearing that if students and professors were to find out about her sex work she would be judged as not being a “true scholar” or “academic.”

Rose described how the stigma of sex work can be damaging to one’s career. To counteract this possibility, she took a job at an art centre, which she calls her “public job.” She states, “I work in an artist centre at the same time, which pays me about \$9 an hour, because I wanna have an official job because it’s easier to tell people.” At the same time, she reported that working in traditional jobs stifled her creativity and negatively affected her career development as a fine artist. She described sex work as a place where she could remain creative, and she suggested that, at times, it even enhanced her creativity. She states, “You can be quite creative in it [sex work] as well.”

Consequences

As previously mentioned, participants described the personal benefits of sex work such as empowerment, helping others, and feelings of agency. At the same time, participants identified some consequences of working in the sex trade. That is, Lily talked in detail about how difficult it was to leave sex work. In order to do so she started to focus on her academic career and became more religious. She grew up in a Muslim family but “wasn’t religious before ... it was when I got ... closer to my religion ... I wanted to become more practicing.” Lily was experiencing dissonance between her beliefs and behaviour, as she describes it, “because I had this idea in my head and believing in something but I was doing the opposite.”

As indicated earlier, Lily described feeling increasingly “bad” about sex work. She observed women in their 30s and 40s who had little recourse but to come to work, as they did not have experience beyond working in the sex industry. Lily expressed that she did not want to be “35 and doing this job.” She was aware of the gaps in her résumé and her lack of experience in work outside the sex industry. The idea of a future career outside the sex industry propelled her to look for jobs in order to build her résumé.

Leaving sex work and the lucrative lifestyle that it provided was not easy for Lily. She indicated that the “worst thing, I think, about the money is the effect it has after. Now that I’m not doing it, I have so much trouble to get used to working in a café for \$9 an hour.” Earning minimum wage has forced Lily to learn to budget and adapt to the demands of a job without the independence and flexibility accorded her in sex work.

Lily alluded to a sense of guilt and a need “to repent.” She describes:

I started working in a café for minimum wage and I would get so dirty, they asked me to clean the bathrooms. It was so bad, I looked at it, like, I had to suffer after all the years of having everything so easy.

However, she also reported that one of the positive effects of leaving sex work was a freedom from secrets. “I don’t have secrets anymore and like all the people, like

my friends, will come to visit me at my work or something, and yeah, I like this aspect.” Violet, who is still involved in escort work, also described consequences of sex work. She indicated that she found the “hustling” and “rejection” involved in lap dancing “really harsh” and “by the end of that, I found myself morbidly depressed, crying a lot and stuff.” So she discontinued lap dancing and “began looking on Craigslist for more personal encounters.”

Rose, on the other hand, explained that she has “a lot of passion” for the issues surrounding sex work. She elaborated on the complexity and diversity of sex work and the various organizations available worldwide that advocate for and inform the public about sex work. Rose spoke at length about the public’s misunderstanding of sex work, and the ways in which it “demonized” and “vilified” women who engage in it, resulting in blaming the victim if something goes wrong. She states, “If you’re gonna sexualize yourself like that, you’re gonna put yourself out there, then you were asking for it.” At the same time, Rose spoke about the hypocrisy of these judgements: “It’s their husband’s neighbour will be going out, getting some [sex] somewhere.”

As previously reported, Rose elaborated on the positive aspects of sex work; however, she was careful not to portray sex work as easy or simply pleasurable. Rose described sex work, particularly erotic massage, as “physically laborious,” and escort work as “emotional labour.” In addition, Rose spoke about the risks associated with sex work, pointing out that by virtue of being “sexualized” or “hyper-sexualized,” the work makes women susceptible to acts of violence. She suggested that this is particularly true in the erotic massage parlours. In cases of violence, the workers rely on each other for support and help. For example, they would alert a friend or colleague about a client who appeared “sketchy.” Rose indicated that the workers supported one another to manage the risks. Violet expressed similar sentiments as Rose and described herself as a “sex work advocate.” She said that she “would like to see the laws reformed,” stating:

I just didn’t really see the difference between sex work and other jobs. There’s a service ... I just didn’t really see a distinction ... I don’t see why prostitution is made criminal. I know it’s not actually illegal, but there are sort of laws in place that make it difficult to practice safely.

Additionally, Rose discussed the health risks associated with sex work. “There is no 100% safe sex, so you know, I just really hope and pray to whomever that I don’t get really bad luck in this scenario.” However, students pay for health coverage through their fees. “As a student, that is really okay for me because I have health and dental through university. The dental for me is covered in university, which is phenomenal, you know, so I have a bit more flexibility.”

DISCUSSION

Consistent with the literature (Chapman, 2001; Dolman, 2008; Haeger & Deil-Amen, 2010; Roberts, 2010), students in this study indicated that the pri-

mary reason for entering the sex industry was financial, yet this study parts from the literature in that it found that financial factors alone did not make students turn to sex work. That is, although participants in this study entered the sex trade for financial reasons, pursuing sex work was a last resort and they pursued it only after they had exhausted other options for employment. Participants in this study indicated that an inability to get a job for a range of reasons (e.g., new to the province, language barriers) and abusive work environments were important factors that influenced their choices to work in the sex industry. As well, they reported that employers of sex workers specifically target students with their advertisements, suggesting that this work is ideal as it offers high wages and flexible hours. Thus, in order to understand why students are working in the sex trade, it is important to consider factors other than solely financial ones that make them inclined toward this kind of work.

In addition to factors influencing their entry into sex work, this study identified factors that sustain students in the sex trade. Other than the financial benefits, participants in this study discussed factors such as developing a social network, support from other sex workers, flexible hours, and feelings of independence and empowerment as important variables that kept them in the sex trade. Though the results indicated that there were financial and social benefits of working in the sex trade, the benefits came with a cost. Consistent with the literature (Farley et al., 2003; Haeger & Deil-Amen, 2010), the women in this study reported that sex work left them vulnerable to violence, sexually transmitted diseases, low self-esteem, and depression. Likewise, they felt judged by society and believed they needed to keep their sex work a secret. This secrecy left them increasingly vulnerable to feelings of social isolation outside of their network of sex workers.

Furthermore, the participants in this study did not identify any academic consequences for their work. They did, however, identify that co-workers would pressure them to leave university because they would not find another job as lucrative as sex work. Thus, students may be at risk of dropping out of university if they are working in the sex trade, but further evidence is required to support this conclusion. Lastly, working in the sex trade compromised participants' career development, in that they were unable to build their résumés in ways consistent with their future aspirations. As such, students working in the sex industry could represent a major loss of potential to both the individuals involved and society, which needs bright young people in a range of occupations.

Implications for Future Research

Student sex work is an understudied phenomenon that warrants attention as there are limited studies being conducted in Canada. For the most part, the studies that do exist have been conducted in the United Kingdom and have focused primarily on the financial reasons for students choosing sex work. Given the differences in the Canadian and United Kingdom university systems and fee structures, Canada-specific studies are needed. Moreover, it is important for researchers to consider other reasons in addition to financial factors why female students enter

the sex trade. In this light, this study identified financial as well as other benefits to being a sex worker, such as increased time for studying, feelings of empowerment, and personal independence. As well, student sex workers are potentially at risk for a range of challenges (e.g., violence, disease, psychological challenges, attrition). Yet, given the small sample size of this study, the extent of students working in the sex trade and the related benefits and consequences is unknown. Thus, future research is warranted to examine the extent or range of the phenomenon of student sex workers in Canada. A more comprehensive analysis of the risks and benefits to students working in this industry is needed. Further research needs to explore what services are necessary to increase social support and safety for student sex workers. Moreover, although this study focused only on women, additional research is needed to examine the experiences of other university students (e.g., men, trans people) working in the sex trade. As well, given the regional differences in Canada, it may be important to address this topic on a national scale.

Implications for Counselling Practice

University counsellors need to be cognizant of the fact that students are working in the sex industry. Counsellors need to examine their own biases about sex workers so they can be open to hearing the stories—both the benefits and challenges—faced by these students without prejudice. As well, counsellors need to understand the consequences of sex work and be aware that these students are potentially at risk of violence, sexually transmitted diseases, low self-esteem, depression, and attrition. Thus, counsellors may need to help sex workers to develop strategies to increase their safety and take care of their physical health. Further, given the stigma attached to sex work, counsellors may be among the few people outside the sex trade to whom the client has reported their sex work. Therefore, counsellors may be an important resource to reduce the potential social isolation that student sex workers may face due to the stigma attached to it. As well, counsellors need to be aware of the fact that advertisements distributed by the sex industry specifically target students. Counsellors are in a position to develop ways to educate students about these advertisements, the sex industry, and the risks therein. Finally, counsellors can be advocates for student sex workers to ensure that these students can access other student services on campus without stigma (e.g., medical care).

CONCLUSION

This study addressed the existing phenomenon of students working in the sex industry in Canada. It also identified factors that contribute to students' entry into sex work, and the variables that sustain students in it or lead to their exiting from it. While students are targeted by the sex industry through advertisements, participants in this study identified financial factors as contributing to their entering the sex industry. Additionally, this study identified benefits to working in the sex industry such as flexibility, social support networks, and feelings of empowerment. At the same time, this study identified student sex workers as a university popula-

tion potentially at risk of violence, health-related issues, and attrition. Counsellors working with sex workers need to be aware of the stigma attached to this work and not assume there are solely negative implications connected to it. At the same time, counsellors need to be cognizant of the factors affecting student sex workers' health and well-being, and need to facilitate student sex workers' ability to access and benefit from university services.

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