

**Rethinking ‘Involvement’ in Sex Work:  
Examining Sex Workers’ Relationships with Sex Work**

by

Laura Aylsworth

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Department of Sociology  
University of Alberta

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## Abstract

Sex work discourse operates with multiple assumptions about what it means to be involved in sex work and, subsequently, what it means to no longer be involved. These assumptions combine to produce a one-dimensional categorical framework for thinking about sex work participation – in which sex workers are labeled ‘involved’ or ‘exited’ – that ignores the diverse ways sex workers make sense of and participate in their work.

This study uses the narratives of twenty-five women with experience in Edmonton’s street-level sex trade to engage in a critical rethinking of the meaning(s) and practice of sex work involvement. I bring participants’ lived experiences into a dialogue with current theorization around four guiding questions: 1) *What does involvement mean*, 2) *What does involvement look like*, 3) *What does it mean to exit*, and 4) *How can we best acknowledge the complexity of sex work involvement?* Findings reveal that sex work involvement is the product of multiple intersecting open-ended vectors that produce an infinite number of relationships with the sex trade. Vectors speak to elements like frequency and manner of participation, level of income dependency, and subjective interpretations of participation, which are themselves contextual and dynamic, with the result that the significance and practice of involvement varies among sex workers as well as over time.

Eschewing generalizations in favour of plurality, variability, and contradiction, this dissertation reveals there are unlimited ways to ‘be’ a sex worker and ‘do’ sex work. Accordingly, I advocate for a discursive shift away from categorical approaches that theorize ‘involved’ and ‘exited’ as distinct and stable categories, towards process-based methodologies that make involvement itself the focus of inquiry.

## **Preface**

This thesis is an original work by Laura Aylsworth. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Disrupting the discursive dichotomy: Listening to the voices of women in street-level sex work in Edmonton”, Pro00040366, August 1, 2014.

## **Acknowledgements**

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Finally, I offer my thanks to the many scholars whose own research endeavours shaped the methodological choices made throughout the research process.

## Table of Contents

<b>List of Tables .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>List of Figures.....</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Significance and Framing .....	4
Use of Language .....	5
Organization.....	7
<b>Chapter 1: Situating the Research .....</b>	<b>9</b>
Research Setting.....	10
Methodology .....	15
<i>The Exclusion of Experiential Voices</i> .....	16
<i>Critical Feminist Research</i> .....	22
<i>The Research Process</i> .....	26
<i>Limitations and Reflexivity</i> .....	37
Chapter Summary .....	40
<b>Chapter 2: What Does Sex Work Mean .....</b>	<b>41</b>
How We Currently Discuss Sex Work .....	42
The Value of Conceptual Disruption .....	48
How My Participants Understand Sex Work.....	53
<i>What Counts as Involvement: Working Conditions</i> .....	53
<i>What Does It Mean to Be Involved?: Emotional Embodiment</i> .....	73
Chapter Summary .....	93
<b>Chapter 3: What Involvement ‘Looks Like’ .....</b>	<b>96</b>
Temporal Conceptualizations of Sex Work Involvement.....	97
What Involvement ‘Looks Like’ For My Participants.....	102
<i>Diversity Among Sex Workers: Variations of Involvement</i> .....	103
<i>Diversity Across Involvement: Variations Over Time</i> .....	112
Chapter Summary .....	127
<b>Chapter 4: What Does It Mean to Exit? .....</b>	<b>130</b>
A note on language .....	133
How Exiting is Currently Understood .....	134
How My Participants Think About Exit and Post-Exit Participation .....	139
<i>A Single Act: The Difference Between a Hurdle and a Blockade</i> .....	140
<i>Re-immersion: The Default for Theorizing Post-Exit Participation</i> .....	151

<i>Abstinence Intentions: The Conflation of Desire and Intention</i> .....	156
Vectors and Dis-involvement: Alternate Frameworks for Conceptualizing Sex Work .....	179
<i>Vectors: Acknowledging the Multiple Dimensions of Involvement</i> .....	180
<i>Dis-involvement: Replacing Categorical Approaches with Process-Based Ones</i> .....	184
Chapter Summary .....	190
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>193</b>
Main Findings and Implications .....	194
Recommendations .....	197
Reflection .....	200
Final thoughts.....	201
<b>References</b> .....	<b>203</b>

## List of Tables

Table 1 <i>Transcription Notation</i> .....	35
Table 2 <i>Binary Classification of Participants' Sex Work Status</i> .....	45
Table 3 <i>Non-Binary Classification of Participants' Sex Work Status</i> .....	46

## List of Figures

Figure 1 <i>Edmonton Street-Level Sex Work Activity</i> .....	11
Figure 2 <i>The Multiple Vectors Shaping Relationships with Sex Work</i> .....	181



## Introduction

Nuanced understandings of sex work [...] are too often neglected in favour of polemics that are not grounded in the lived experiences of people in the industry (van der Meulen et al., 2013, p.1).

What does it *mean* to be involved in sex work? What does that involvement *look like*? Why does it matter? Scholarly, political, and popular discourse on sex work tends to operate with assumed shared understanding of the topics under consideration, with the result that foundational questions like these are rarely asked, let alone addressed in any substantive manner. As a result, researchers and politicians shape our knowledge about sex work, sex workers, and sex work status without ever specifying how they understand those labels, nor who and what those terms encompass. Consequently, despite the wealth of knowledge available on the subject of sex work, we still know very little about the multiple dimensions that comprise it, and even though we can access statistics about the sex work population, we have little sense of how they do their work. This, however, has not prevented the promotion of policies and practices based on this imperfect knowledge that have a direct impact on the lives of those involved.

A central impediment to more nuanced understandings of sex work, and the individuals who participate in it, is the categorical approach used to theorize sex work involvement. This approach uses the presence or absence of participation in activities involving the exchange of sexual activity for money as the sole determining factor for assessing sex work status. Any and all participation is categorized as ‘involved’, and only a complete absence of participation is considered ‘exited’. Although this binary framework simplifies discussions of sex worker status, it completely ignores the *practice* of involvement, or how people actually ‘do’ and make sense of

sex work. Listening to women involved in street-level sex work in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, narrate and make sense of their sex work experiences revealed a greater depth of knowledge about the complex and multi-dimensional nature of sex work than any research I have read. They taught me that sex work is much more than the exchange of sexual services for money, and involvement denotes more than the act of participation. Yet the many experiences and interpretations of those experiences that differ from the single homogenous representation offered by sex work discourse are sorely missing from scholarly, political, and lay conversations about sex work.

Rather than attend to the diverse relationships people have with sex work, sex work discourse is caught up in the competition between two prevailing perspectives about the nature of the sex industry – sex work as exploitation and sex work as work – with the result that researchers are coerced into “negotiat[ing] within the ever present binarized opposition” of existing sex work concepts, theories, and identities in their bid to prove once and for all the accuracy of their respective perspective (Szörényi, 2014, p.27). The result of this is the privileging of generalized claims about sex work and those involved that corroborate a particular narrative, at the expense of more nuanced knowledges and investigations that recognize the complexity of sex work and sex work experiences, but in doing so reveal diversity, contradiction, and plurality. Yet, a singular narrative can never fully account for the true diversity that comprises what it attempts to explain (Carline, 2011). It is only by attending to the complex, and sometimes even contradictory, experiential knowledge of those involved in the selling of sexual services that we can acknowledge the diverse, fluid, and contextual relationships they have with their work and bring that knowledge into the larger conversation about their work.

This dissertation is my attempt to take seriously the experiential knowledge of my participants and explore the varied ways in which they make sense of their relationship(s) to sex

work. It uses interviews with twenty-five female-identified individuals with experience in Edmonton's street-level sex trade to improve understandings of what sex work involvement means to those involved and the multiple forms this can take in practice. Specifically, it explores four guiding questions, the answers to which directly challenge common assumptions about sex work involvement, including what it means to no longer be involved:

1. *What does involvement mean?* What is meant by experiential people (i.e. those with sex work experience) and non-experiential people (i.e. those without any sex work experience) when they refer to sex work? How do experiential people make sense of their own involvement?
2. *What does involvement look like?* How is involvement manifested in practice? How does the specifics of involvement differ between participants and across contexts?
3. *What does it mean to exit?* What is meant by experiential and non-experiential people when they refer to exiting? In what ways is exiting significant to those involved and what can it look like in practice?
4. *How can we best acknowledge the complexity of sex work involvement?* What conceptual framework enables researchers, policy makers, and service providers to acknowledge the diversity of lived experiences in sex work and relationships with that work?

By privileging sex workers' lived experience and their interpretive understandings of those experiences, even when they are incompatible with the frameworks offered by sex work discourse, I found that there are many dimensions to sex work involvement that result in it meaning and looking very different for participants based on subjective, material, and contextual factors. Sex workers are neither 'in' nor 'out' of sex work in a straightforward or stable fashion. Instead of a

binary as currently understood, their involvement is highly dynamic, the product of multiple intersecting vectors that produce an infinite number of relationships with the sex trade. These vectors speak to the numerous dimensions of involvement, including the frequency and manner of participation, level of income dependency, personal identity, and social relationships. Each of these vectors are themselves multifaceted and varied, deserving of a central placement in all future sex work inquiries.

### **Significance and Framing**

The literature on sex work has increased dramatically in quantity over the past two decades and become increasingly nuanced in its arguments regarding the nature of the sex industry and the status of those involved. However, despite the heavy attention paid to interrogating discursive use of concepts like ‘choice’, ‘consent’, and ‘victimization’, little attention has been paid to explicating basic definitional concepts (Green, 2016; Haak, 2019). Concepts demarcate ideologies, or ways of thinking about the world around us. They influence how we think about social phenomena and the interconnected relationship(s) that exist between and among them. Careless use of concepts ignores or misrepresents different perspectives and interpretations, enabling generalizations to be made about phenomena and populations and erasing those who do not neatly fit into dominant conceptual definitions. The likelihood of this distortion increases when experiential voices are silenced (McClelland, 2017; Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2012; Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002).

As a critical feminist researcher, I take seriously the interrelationship of knowledge and power. I am particularly interested in how concepts reflect assumptions about shared meanings and interpretations, and in so doing, make claims about what counts as knowledge and ‘truth’ (Mason & Stubbs, 2011; Stubbs, 2008). The language used to discuss sex work shapes how the issue is understood: what and who it is that we are talking about and our corresponding attitudes

to those involved, the nature and extent of perceived problems, and appropriate responses and interventions (Dodsworth, 2105). It is, thus, extremely problematic when this language is based on the situation of only a few and reproduces assumptions about shared meaning.

This dissertation is different from many other contributions to the sex work literature, in that I remain deliberately uninvested in presenting a coherent narrative about sex work or those involved. Instead, my objective is to initiate a larger conversation about the taken-for-granted nature of much of the sex work dialogue and demand linguistic accountability from scholarly and other commentators regarding precisely to what and who they refer when talking about sex work and sex workers. More specifically, I hope that future discussions will begin to explicitly outline how they understand ‘involvement’, how they define ‘exiting’, and the diversity of individuals participating under the sex worker label. I would also like to see future research projects ask participants to self-define their status and participation.

This dissertation is my attempt to be both accountable to the language I use and those I speak about. Bring both theory and lived experience into a dialogue, this is my response to O’Neill’s (2009) call to deconstruct the binary thinking that dominates sex work discourse and reveal the dynamic practice of sex work involvement and the heterogeneity, incongruity, and multiplicity that defines it.

## **Use of Language**

Although I ultimately argue for more nuanced conceptualizations of these terms in the body of the dissertation, I need to provide some parameters for the central concepts of this dissertation to ground the ensuing discussion. Accordingly, these definitions are deliberately under-developed at this stage, the significance of which increases as the concepts build on each other. I briefly note

the limitations of these definitions here, while engaging in a more detailed interrogation in the body of the dissertation.

Consistent with other sources that define this concept (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2012; Canadian Public Health Association, 2014; Dalla, 2002; Department of Justice Canada, 2014; Murphy, 2010; Strega et al., 2014; Wahab, 2004), I use *sex work* to refer to the activity in which sexual services are exchanged for financial or other compensation. Nevertheless, my participants often drew on additional criteria when classifying a sexual exchange as ‘sex work’, with the result that not all sexual exchanges were recognized as constituting ‘sex work’ because of the importance of additional variables. *Involvement in sex work* denotes participation in the prior mentioned sexual exchange. It is typically understood in categorical ways as either present or absent, with the result that an individual is ‘involved’ or has ‘exited’, respectively. However, this binary categorization ignores the variations of participation that exist under the involved umbrella.

The term *sex worker* subsequently refers to individuals who are involved in sex work – i.e. a person who participates in the sexual exchange. Yet, this concept is typically an externally imposed label based on the categorical approach for sex work involvement classification. The sex worker identity is not necessarily determined by an individual’s participation in activities commonly defined as sex work, nor does identification with that label necessarily cease simply because their participation did. *Exit* denotes the absence of involvement. However, since involvement is an umbrella category that encompasses a range of dimensions that include, but are not limited to, participation, exit is far more complex than this definition allows.

Lastly, *discourse* refers to ‘language in use’, or ways of understanding and talking about a particular subject (i.e. sex work and sex workers in the case of *sex work discourse*) and how this thinking and talking creates particular ‘truths’ about the subject being discussed that subsequently

produce material and symbolic effects for that subject. As I later emphasize, discourses are imbued with and reproduce power inequalities regarding whose voices are heard, what knowledge is deemed legitimate, and the corresponding implications.

## **Organization**

I organize the dissertation as follows. I use Chapter One to contextualize the research by discussing the research setting, Edmonton, Canada, and detailing the research process, including the various methodological choices made throughout. I then use the following three chapters to address the aforementioned guiding questions. For each chapter, I first interrogate how the issue is currently conceptualized in prevailing sex work discourse and then challenge these representations with participants' narratives, offering experiences and insight that demand new theorization.

In Chapter Two, I probe what is meant by sex work involvement. I begin by reviewing current definitions for sex work, and then identify the dominant framework used to conceptualize sex work status: a binary. As part of this, I unpack the assumptions made about sex work involvement, and thus sex worker identity, in sex work discourse. I then explicate participants' understandings of what sex work is and what involvement means, and how their own participation is and is not consistent with these understandings. Identifying the various additional variables used to assess whether or not participation in a sexual exchange 'counts' as sex work or not, and the multiple motivations that contribute to subjective assessments of involvement, I explain how sex work is more than a label describing a specific activity, with the result that involvement is transformed from a dichotomous status category to an umbrella of diverse relationships.

I continue the interrogation of involvement in Chapter 3 by asking what involvement looks like. I consider how the practice of involvement has been described in research and policy and

reveal how the form, frequency, and significance of my participants' involvement exposes inadequacies in common conceptions. Whereas involvement is typically taken to denote a full-time state of participation, I demonstrate how the specific participation of a particular sex worker can differ not only from the participation of other sex workers, but also itself over time and in response to changing contexts.

I reflect on the complexity of lived involvement exposed in the previous two chapters to question the significance and role of exiting in Chapter 4. I re-invoke the involvement binary that informs dominant sex work discourse to demonstrate how the current emphasis on exiting in research and policy assumes a particular form of exiting that may not be relevant to all of those involved because of the differential attitudes about, intentions towards, and feasibility of this outcome. Consequently, I advocate for alternate frameworks to the dominant binary to acknowledge the complexity of sex work involvement and the variety of work styles and motivations contained within. Proposing that involvement be recognized as the intersection of multiple vectors in accordance with the assorted dimensions of involvement, I recommended the concept 'dis-involvement' as a replacement for exit. Unlike exit, which has a singular meaning, dis-involvement acknowledges changes in the practice and significance of involvement that take additional forms than abstinence, reducing the normative lens used to scrutinize sex worker's actions and contributing to more nuanced understandings of the practice of sex work.

Finally, I conclude this dissertation by providing a summary of the research, outlining recommendations for future policy and research on the sex trade, identifying areas for future research, and offering some concluding thoughts.



## Chapter 1: Situating the Research

When I arrived in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada to begin my PhD program, several communities boasted signs that boldly declared “This community does not tolerate PROSTITUTION” and encouraged residents to report johns to the Edmonton Police Service. I soon learned that sex work, and those involved, were frequently identified as undesirable and “a major problem for the citizens of Edmonton” (Edmonton Police Commission Task Force on Prostitution, 1999, p.15; also Boyle Street/McCauley Planning Coordinating Committee, 2017; City of Edmonton, 2010, 2012, 2018(a), 2018(b), n.d.(a), n.d.(b)). Yet, despite the frequent reference to sex work and those selling sexual services in the abstract in local discourse, rarely was there any true discussion of those involved. This exclusion piqued my interest: who are the subjects of this discursive focus and what is the nature of their work?

In this chapter, I set the foundation for the dissertation by discussing the research setting and research process. I begin by situating the research. I briefly discuss the street-level sex trade in Edmonton and the larger social and political context in which it operates. I then outline the project’s methodology, starting with the methodological framing and the importance of privileging marginalized voices. After this, I summarize the research process, beginning with securing access, then discussing my choice of methods, manner of participant recruitment, and interview process. I provide an initial introduction to my participants and elaborate on the data analysis. Finally, I reflect on the limitations and my influence as researcher. This chapter reveals how my methodological choices throughout the research process directly shaped the resulting knowledge and its contribution to the wider literature. As I will elaborate in the ensuing chapters, the insight gained from respecting my participants as legitimate speakers disrupts foundational assumptions about what sex work is, means, and looks like, and calls for researchers to remain accountable to

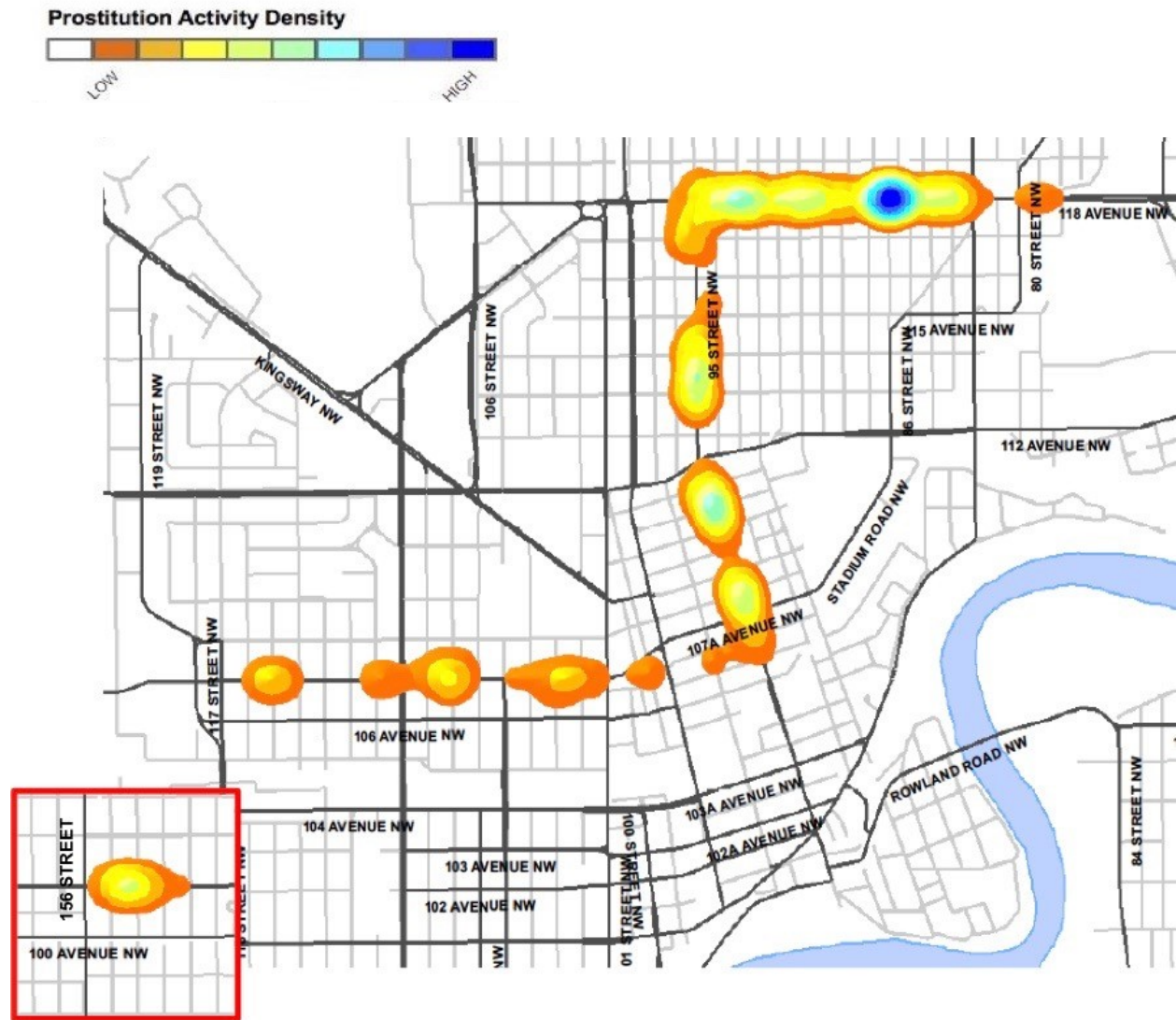
the assumptions they make about the subject matter and whether their assumptions are consistent with those of their research subjects.

### **Research Setting**

Edmonton Alberta is celebrated for many things, including housing Canada's largest mall (the West Edmonton Mall), supporting the Edmonton Oilers hockey team, and functioning as the hub to Alberta's oil and gas industry. Less celebrated, but still commonly known among those who work in this area, is Edmonton's reputation for Canada's largest street-level sex trade stroll. It is difficult to accurately capture the size of sex work strolls and the number of workers involved for many reasons, including the heavy stigmatization and penalization of both the acts and actors involved which leads to efforts to reduce their visibility and the absence of crime statistics to assist with enumeration, especially following the legislative shift towards penalizing clients rather than workers (see Bill C36: *Protection of Communities and Sexually Exploited Persons Act*). Nevertheless, at its peak, Edmonton's street-level sex trade stroll was estimated to span a one hundred block area and retain approximately five hundred sex workers (Harding, 2018; Nowlan, 2007). The stroll was particularly concentrated along several major roadways, including 118 Avenue, 95 Street, and 107 Avenue. Figure 1 (below) provides a visual representation of Edmonton's sex work stroll during this time derived from community reports and police data.

**Figure 1**

*Edmonton Street-Level Sex Work Activity*



*Note:* Altered from Edmonton Police Service (2008).

Edmonton's street-level sex trade is shaped by the socio-economic climate in which it operates. At one point, the city, as well as those working the stroll, enjoyed an economic boom from high oil prices and the accompanying surge of migration of people employed in the oil and gas industries. Alberta's economy swelled in the 2000s and Edmonton's prosperity hit a high in 2014 (Ryan, 2013; Staples, 2018). As the largest city in proximity to Alberta's oil patch, Edmonton

was frequently the destination for oil patch workers with disposable income seeking recreation on their off days, including sexual services from those working Edmonton's strolls. Several of my participants referenced benefiting from this boom and influx of clients. This made Edmonton's stroll a lucrative place to work for many street-level sex workers, who quickly learned how to maximize their profits. As one research participant describes:

Ask any girl when Fort Mac<sup>1</sup> gets paid, she'll be able to tell you. She'll tell you when the cheques hit their accounts, you know. [...] Stony Plain<sup>2</sup> would be like block to block to block to block with girls. And I used to get a laugh out of them because they'd jump in with all the party guys and I'd wait, because I always knew about a half hour after all the party trucks pulled in, the supervisors pulled in. They're the ones that'd get the nice hotel rooms, take you to dinner, don't mind paying good. I'd only do one date a night when it was Fort Mac payday because I'm not stupid, that guy just got 20 grand in his pocket, you know? (Cat)

The same conditions that financially benefited workers were, however, also said to have negative effects on the communities that housed the stroll. As workers tended to concentrate in particular areas (see Figure 1), the street-level sex trade quickly became synonymous with the negative activities it was thought to bring about. This is evident in the definition of 'prostitution-related activities' offered by the Edmonton Police Commission Task Force on Prostitution (1999):

Includes a wide range of activities, such as communicating for the purposes of prostitution; the buying and selling of sexual services; *the exploitation of street prostitutes and people*

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<sup>1</sup> Fort McMurray is located in Northeast Alberta and is considered the heart of Alberta's oil patch.

<sup>2</sup> Stony Plain (104 Avenue) is a major road that continues to form a central part of Edmonton's stroll.

*under 18 by pimps; the traffic noise, litter, trespassing on private property, and the harassment of citizens that results from these activities.* (p.10, emphasis added)

This concentration of workers was, in part, the result of them purposefully congregating. Sex workers believed that working communally enhanced their safety, because some would act as “stats keepers”, recording information such as license plates and worker activity. As another participant explained:

It was just our way of knowing what was out there, keeping stats. You know you have to know the vehicles, you have to know the license plates, [and] the make. What kind of guy? What did he look like? You know you’re looking out for yourself and for others and that’s how we keep it safe. [...] You don’t go out there with a pen and piece of paper and start writing stuff, but you know you keep an eye on what’s happening. (Freddie)

In the communities affected, however, this concentration was associated with the lack of safety for residents. The street-level sex trade was frequently conceptualized as a “threat”, in tandem with crime and drugs, to residents and businesses, who began developing plans to divest themselves of the stroll (City of Edmonton, 2010, 2012, n.d.(a), n.d.(b)). Multiple dispersal activities were introduced to disrupt the stroll and deter customers and sex workers, including the abovementioned Report-A-John signs. Police also participated in undercover sting events, often at the request of residents and in partnership with service organizations (see Nowlan, 2007). Additional dispersion tactics included modifying streets to disrupt traffic flow in known stroll areas. The street-level sex trade subsequently dispersed across the city, although participants indicate that it continues to be concentrated in a few areas of the initial stroll: 107<sup>th</sup> avenue, Stony Plain, 95 Street (between Jasper Avenue and 118<sup>th</sup> Avenue), and 118<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

Dispersion activities not only displaced sex workers, but also disrupted the segmentation that previously defined Edmonton's strolls. Like other sex work strolls, Edmonton's street-level sex trade was formerly segmented into high track and low track areas. According to research participants, Edmonton's high track was located in the downtown core, close to the hotels, and populated by workers who "look more cleaner, put together, more professional" (Samantha Cookie). In contrast, workers on Edmonton's low track were often defined by their addiction, as "really hurting for the next hoot or the next needle or whatever" (Monique), and frequently provided their services in cars or back alleys. This segmentation was also highly racialized, with the high track comprised of mostly white workers and the low track frequently associated with Indigenous workers. In addition to the high and low tracks, Edmonton's street level sex trade also contained an area known as 'Tranny Alley', a specific area of the stroll reserved for transgender workers. The explicit designation of this area enhanced safety for transgender workers, who had greater confidence that clients coming to this area deliberately sought transgender workers and thus, "knew what they were getting" (Betty Page). However, with the sex trade dispersing across the city, former divisions within the trade faded. Accordingly, areas of the stroll are no longer defined by a particular type of worker. As one participant summarized, "there was high track, there was low track, then the alley. It's all done now" (Freddie).

During the time of my study, Edmonton's street-level sex trade was further impacted by the economic bust in Alberta's oil field caused by the falling price of oil and gas in the latter half of 2014 (Johnson, 2015; Staples, 2013). As production decreased, many oil workers found themselves unemployed and the surge of clients with disposable income soliciting sexual service at the level of the street dramatically diminished. At the same time, the proliferation of accessible technology like cell phones and the internet have significantly reduced the number of workers and

clients soliciting each other at the level of the streets (see my discussion of technology in Chapter 2). Whilst the declaration by an Edmonton Police Service sergeant that “on any given night in the city there are no more than eight women working as street prostitutes” (Johnston, 2017) is most certainly a significant underestimate based on my experience working with this population, he is correct in his assertion that Edmonton’s street-level sex trade is “nothing what it once was”.

Despite its substantially decreased size, street-level sex work(ers) in Edmonton continues to be identified as a problem affecting Edmonton neighbourhoods (City of Edmonton, 2018a, 2018b; Kraus, 2018). Yet little research has examined this phenomenon in any detail. Even at its prior peak, Edmonton’s street-level sex trade received little scholarly or official attention. Recognizing that Edmonton’s street-level sex trade has experienced significant changes over the last decade, yet remains under-researched, this project aims to help fill this knowledge gap. I wanted to know what we could learn about Edmonton’s street-level sex trade from those with experiential knowledge and, in particular, those with experience working in Edmonton’s street trade.

## **Methodology**

This section outlines the methodological assumptions and choices I employed during the research process. I begin by outlining the methodological framework with which I approached the project. I first discuss the exclusion of experiential voices in sex work discourse. I then locate my critical feminist position as part of the wider critical research umbrella and identify the importance of lived experience for knowledge production. Following this discussion, I outline the research process. I discuss how I gained access to this population, my chosen method of inquiry, and the recruitment process of participants. Lastly, I offer some thoughts on reflexivity and note the limitations of my choices.

### *The Exclusion of Experiential Voices*

Discussions about sex work tend to be dominated by what Snider (2006) refers to as ‘authorized knowers’: those whose status - such as professor, service provider, legal authority, and policy analyst - presumes expertise and offers subsequent legitimacy to speak about those involved in sex work. This is because assumptions of expertise reproduce relations of social and political power that hold certain perspectives as more ‘valid’ or ‘true’ than others. As a result, the ability to be recognized as ‘legitimate knower’ is unequally attainable to different populations (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2012; Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002). Despite having experiential knowledge of the topic, individuals involved in sex work are not recognized as authorized knowers and, consequently, often have their voices silenced and expertise devalued in conversations about their lives and work. Because of this, our understanding of what sex work is and how it is experienced by those who sell and buy sexual services is primarily informed by those without experiential knowledge, but whose narratives are held as the ‘truth’ against which alternative possibilities are assessed (Hugill, 2010; Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006b). This is true of sex work discourse at a national level, as well as locally.

Discourse surrounding *Canada (Attorney General) v. Bedford* (2013), which resulted in three sections of the criminal code prohibiting sex work-related activities<sup>3</sup> being struck down and the development of Bill C 36: *Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (PCEPA)* as replacement, as well as the crisis of missing and murdered sex workers in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (see Oppal, 2012) offer examples of the predominance of academics, service providers, politicians, legal officials, and policy analysts in conversations about sex work, those involved,

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<sup>3</sup> The sections challenged and ruled unconstitutional in the *Bedford* case were s. 210 (keeping or being found in a bawdy house), s. 212(1)(j) (living on the avails of prostitution), and s. 213(1)(c) (communicating in public for the purpose of prostitution).



and the issues that impact them (Asian Women Coalition Ending Prostitution, 2013; Attorney General of Canada, 2013; Francis, 2005; Hugill, 2010; Sher et. al., 2013; Women's Coalition for the Abolition of Prostitution, 2013). A similar trend is found in local discourse about Edmonton's sex trade.

Most of the research on sex work in Edmonton and Edmonton's street-level sex trade specifically reveals insight from community redevelopment groups, social service providers, municipal commissions, and service providers (c.f. Boyle Street/McCauley Planning Coordinating Committee 2017; City of Edmonton, 2010, 2012, n.d.(a), n.d.(b); Edmonton Police Commission Task Force on Prostitution 1999; Safedmonton 2007). Rarely is space held open for the voices of those comprising the objects of this discourse and meaningful contributions from workers themselves are minimal. For example, when included in discussions and reports, sex workers' input is often reduced to statistics or limited quotations (c.f. Prostitution Awareness and Action Foundation of Edmonton, 2005; Edmonton Social Planning Council, 1993; Nowlan, 2007; Safer Cities Initiatives, 1996). With the most recent report published in 2007, local discourse on street-level sex work in Edmonton is significantly out of date and excludes insight acquired after the economic bust in Alberta and legislative changes with *Bedford* and *PCEPA*.

Experiential persons are excluded from authorized knower status for several reasons. One reason is because they are necessarily invested in their particular situation, which is mistaken as bias by those valuing objectivity and generalizability (Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 2004). The assumption that non-experiential knowers are better able to offer unbiased truths about sex workers' social realities reinforces positivistic assumptions about the possibility, and desirability, of objective knowledge. Such assumptions suggest that knowledge exists *a priori* to research or

political processes; in other words, there is an objective truth that already exists independent of the research and political process that simply awaits discovery by experts (DeVault & Gross, 2007).

Another reason, and one that is entangled with the first, is that sex workers are positioned as objects, rather than subjects, of much of the research that reflects the prevailing position on sex work (i.e. the dominant narrative). This position, which I term the ‘sex work-as-exploitation’ position and is also variously referred to in the literature as prohibitionist, abolitionist, or anti-prostitution, argues that sex work<sup>4</sup> is always and unavoidably negative because it is inherently exploitative and violent (Attorney General of Canada, 2013; Bindel, 2017; Farley, 2004; Farley et al., 2005; Longworth, 2010; Moran & Farley, 2019). According to the sex work-as-exploitation perspective, sex work is a manifestation of gender inequality and inevitably non-consensual because it is rooted in male dominance over female bodies (i.e. trafficking, pimping) and desperation (i.e. poverty, abuse) (Farley et al., 2005; Attorney General of Canada, 2013).

Research from the sex work-as-exploitation perspective often reinforces structurally deterministic analyses of sex work that deduce workers’ experiences from their socioeconomic conditions. It has been criticized for pathologizing those involved and dismissing the need to ask workers about their own insights, decision making strategies, or ameliorative suggestions regarding their lives and work (Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006b; van der Meulen, 2011). As ‘prostituted women’, those who sell their services are constructed as “the hyperbolized victim” (Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006b, p. 6), subsequently rendering them “inadequate speaking subject[s]” in conversations about their lives and work (Szörényi, 2014, p.26). This is especially true for those who experience additional intersecting oppressions, such as Indigenous sex workers

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<sup>4</sup> Proponents of this perspective often explicitly reject the language of ‘sex work’ in favour of prostitution, prostitutes, and prostituted women. The language used remains a political and divisive issue among researchers and politicians (see Parent et al., 2013; Sanders et al., 2009;). I use the language ‘sex work’ and ‘sex worker’ in this dissertation because it better enables examination of the specifics of the sexual exchange and those involved.

and transgender sex workers, who are frequently spoken for by ‘experts’ external to their communities (Shdaimah et al., 2017).

With violence constituting an intrinsic aspect of the trade, there is little discursive room to explore how various factors – personal (e.g. addiction, mental health), social (e.g. stigmatization, racism), economic (e.g. feminization of poverty, barriers to employment), and political (e.g. criminalization, colonialism) – differently influence individual experiences of violence when selling sex or more broadly (Bruckert & Chabot, 2010). Yet, as Ferris (2015) argues, ignoring the ways in which colonial narratives and policies contribute to the violence experienced by Indigenous sex workers, particularly when that ignorance is achieved through silencing Indigenous sex worker voices, is itself a form of cultural violence. Defining the sex trade *as* violence and exploitation also erases incentive to investigate the material conditions and experiences of women because everything is simply theorized as the coerced result of violence (Parent & Bruckert, 2013). It also ignores possibilities for agency, overlooking the choices people make even if they are not in control of the conditions (Chapkis, 1997; Hannem, 2016; Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006b; Koken, 2010; O’Neill, 2009; Roche et al., 2005).

When experiential voices are included in texts adopting the sex work-as-exploitation perspective, it is often in a limiting manner, with pre-established categories and closed answer surveys that restrict participants’ responses (c.f. Brannigan, 1994; Farley, 2005). In this way, the issues addressed and interpretive frameworks through which to analyze their responses are predetermined and the opportunities for participants to speak about their work or offer insight not directly solicited by researchers are restricted. Alternatively, voices of experiential people are included, but only if they serve as further evidence of the exploitative and violent essence of sex work. To support their claims, research projects adopting this perspective often ask participants

questions about mental, physical, and sexual abuse. Focusing on the negative aspects of their lives and work and requesting that participants relive distressing experiences risks contributing to additional stigmatization, exploitation, or traumatization of an already vulnerable and marginalized population (James & Platzer, 1999; Liamputtong, 2007). With a high frequency of abusive experiences already established among the sex worker population (see Farley et al., 2005), this line of inquiry seems intrusive at best and ethically irresponsible.

In contrast to the above, a growing sector of sex work research adopts inductive research methods that ‘study up’ (Harding, 2004), making sense of the data after it has been collected rather than through pre-determined hypotheses and variables. This work creates space for experiential voices and knowledges with open-ended questions that can better capture a fuller range of experiences. It is most often seen in the work of researchers that position their analysis of sex work and how that work is experienced by those involved through the lens of labour (hereafter ‘sex work-as-work’) (Bruckert & Chabot, 2010; Bowen, 2013; Bungay, 2013; Hannem, 2016; Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006b; Law, 2011, 2013; van der Meulen et al., 2013; Wahab, 2003). Positioning their analyses against the prevailing perspective, this work often asks participants to ‘talk back’ (Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006b) to the dominant presumptions about their lives and work. This work functions as a ‘counter narrative’ to the dominant narrative, disputing the claims of the sex work-as-exploitation perspective by revealing alternate possibilities grounded in the lived experiences and accounts of sex workers.

Researchers adopting this sex work-as-work perspective are sometimes accused of dismissing or overlooking workers’ experiences of violence or constrained choices (c.f. Bindel, 2017; Farley, 2004; Farley et al., 2005). However, this characterization is inaccurate. In contrast to the exploitation perspective, those adopting the work lens locate the source of this violence and

constrained choices in the current conditions shaping the trade rather than the trade itself, such as the stigmatization and criminalization of workers that encourages a ‘discourse of disposal’ (Lowman, 2000) and forces women to adopt dangerous strategies to reduce visibility (Bruckert & Chabot, 2010; Hugill, 2010; Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006b). Experiential insight is then solicited to explore how workers keep themselves safe and successful despite these risks. For example, Harris et al.’s (2011) study of Australian sex workers focuses on workers’ perceptions of workplace risk(s). By emphasizing workers’ risk management strategies, rather than simply focusing on the particular risks they encounter, they highlight the individual and collective strategies workers develop to modify or manage risks, thereby becoming active agents in their own safety rather than helpless victims in need of protection. Similarly, Roche et al.’s (2005) examination of storytelling as a risk navigating strategy demonstrates how workers use stories to evaluate and reduce the risks they encounter while working. By extending the conversation from the specific risks associated with or experienced within the sex trade, to how workers engage with and make decisions concerning these risks, this work identifies the important contribution of experiential knowledge without rejecting the possibility of victimization or danger.

By asking workers how they perceive and manage their work, sex work-as-work researchers draw attention to valuable insight not acknowledged by those who overlook workers’ experiential knowledge, at the same time as they challenge the silencing and exclusion of experiential voices. O’Neill (2001) maintains that an emphasis on the experiential and personal enables a better understanding of sex work and the broader social relations that impact it, while at the same time fostering processes of social inclusion for those involved. This is because, rather than attempting to uncover truths about the sex trade, the focus remains on the often-diverse ways participants experience and make sense of their work. This requires that researchers enter the field

with questions that seek out and permit a wider range of insight and experiences. As Sanders (2006, p.465) concludes in her discussion of methodological nuisances in sex work research, “[r]esearchers have the responsibility not to produce more of the same but to address the questions and areas that are often pushed to one side” by prevailing conversations about sex workers and their work.

### ***Critical Feminist Research***

A focus on inductive research frameworks that disrupt existing knowledge and privilege marginalized voices is a defining attribute of critical research, and critical feminist research in particular, with which I position myself (Doyle & Moore, 2011; McClelland, 2017; Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2012; Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002). Critical research constitutes a theoretically and methodologically diverse body of research and theory united by an emphasis on the political nature of research and knowledge (Stubbs, 2008). It recognizes that in addition to some knowers being perceived as more legitimate than others, certain knowledges (i.e. ways of understanding) are held as more true than others, with some being regarded as *the* truth. In other words, particular discourses come to take on the status of ‘common sense’ with the result that they are simultaneously naturalized and normalized (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014). A central concern of critical research is how power imbalances determine which discourses come to be accepted as ‘truth’ and whose interests and perspectives those truths reflect (Kelso & Porter, 2010). At the same time that authorized knowers are most likely to have their knowledges be taken up as truths and common-sense status is difficult to interrupt let alone negate, dominant discourses are neither stable nor fixed. Discursive resistance is possible when marginalized populations are provided the opportunity to both ‘talk back’ to the narratives about their lives (Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006b; Kelso & Porter, 2010; McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014). Moreover, as I

demonstrate throughout this dissertation, disruption is possible when marginalized populations are permitted to tell their own stories untethered to existing frameworks and narratives.

Critical research, therefore, draws attention both to how power operates through discourse, as well as the knowledge creation process. The researcher is not simply the objective vessel through which these counter or alternative voices and accounts are heard, but an active participant in resisting and disrupting hegemonic ‘truths’. Accordingly methodology is not simply a process through which to produce knowledge, but rather an ethical strategy through which resistance and disruption is either facilitated or repressed. A commitment to producing critical research means acknowledging that choices made during the research process – from the decision of what and who I chose to study, to the questions I choose to ask and manner through which participants can respond, to how I choose to analyze and disseminate the results – shape both what is known about a particular subject and what can be known.

Unique to critical feminist research (CFR) is its corresponding commitment to preserving gender at the center of theory and practice (Chesney-Lind & Morash, 2013; Flavin, 2001; Renzetti, 2018). As a critical feminist researcher, I believe that the differential privileging of particular ‘knowers’ and particular knowledges in academic and political discourse demonstrates that knowledge production is not only political, but fundamentally gendered. This can be understood as existing on two interrelated levels. First, the unequal distribution of gendered power under patriarchy has created an androcentric bias in research and policy with the result that research on and by women has been historically marginalized, an outcome that has re-emerged with the anti-feminist backlash fostered by the contemporary neo-liberal climate in which inequalities are simultaneously denied and justified (see Chesney-Lind, 2006; Dragiewicz, 2018; Faludi, 1991).

Second, and of particular importance to this dissertation, how we understand and experience the world is informed by our “location in a hierarchically structured system of power relations” (Wylie, 2004, p.343), as patriarchy intersects with other forms of inequality, including racism, heterosexism, and classism to produce different experiences of privilege and oppression. This informs CFR’s critique of androcentric research’s generalizability, as well as its focus on privileging the voices of those marginalized by these power relations. Not only does the matrix of power relations shape our experience of the social world, and the resulting knowledge we produce, those who experience oppression because of their particular social locations may have a greater ability to provide insight into the conditions of their oppression and the corresponding social relations because they navigate them on a daily basis (Hill Collins, 2000, 2004; Jagger, 2004; Smith, 1987, 2004). They also have a greater motivation to challenge dominant ways of thinking that contribute to their marginalization than those whose position locates them on the more advantageous end of oppressive structures (Brooks, 2007; Mason & Stubbs, 2011). Accordingly, attending to the lived experience<sup>5</sup> of women with experience in the sex trade, thus, constitutes an ideal starting point from which to build new knowledge with the potential to challenge dominant discourses and disrupt currently dichotomized thinking. As will be elaborated on throughout the dissertation, it is the privileging of participant insight, and its ability to expose the inadequacies and exclusions of dominant narratives, that enabled this dissertation’s findings.

Yet, respect for marginalized groups and their contributions extends beyond simple inclusion in knowledge creation. It also requires that this knowledge be purposeful. In other words, knowledge produced should advance ameliorative social change for marginalized groups, not just scholarly or professional advancement for researchers (Comack, 1999; DeVault & Gross, 2007;

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<sup>5</sup> Van Manen (1990, p.39) describes lived experience as “certain way of being in the world” that is interpreted reflexively and expressed through language.



O'Neill, 2001; Reinharz, 1992; Sprague, 2005). This obligation takes on additional importance with sex work research. When the perceived value of research findings is restricted to academic or professional purposes, researchers become active participants in exploitation through what Sanders (2006, p.464) calls “a ‘smash and grab’ mentality”. This is unfortunately common in sex work research, where “[r]esearchers are sometimes seen as akin to pimps, coming into the field to take, then returning to the campus or institution, or suburb where they write up the data, publish and build careers – on the backs of those they took data from” (O'Neill, 1996, p.132).

Preserving the voices and perspectives of research subjects and making the knowledge accessible for change are two means through which this responsibility is honoured. Research, thus, becomes a means through which to “validate the lives and stories of previously ignored groups of people” and “help empower communities and the people in them” (Thorton Dill & Kohlman, 2012, p.164). An excellent example of making knowledge useful is the *Toolkit* created by Purvis et al. (2014), which translated the findings of Bruckert and Chabot's (2010) report on labour site challenges and the impact of intersecting marginalizations into intervention tips and policy and service recommendations for service providers, as well as a resource map for the workers themselves. REAL's (2016) *Resource Guide*, created as a companion document to Hannem's (2016) report on sex worker needs and experiences, offers another example of ‘useful knowledge’, providing social service agencies with recommendations for effective support and workers with tips to keep safe and successful. The contributions of these research endeavours extend beyond the creation of knowledge *about* their population, the importance of which cannot be dismissed, to the creation of knowledge *for* them (Reinharz, 1992). Listening to the voices of women in sex work is, thus, at once a theory of knowledge creation, a method of creating knowledge, and an act of praxis and the foundation for creating it (Brooks, 2007).

## *The Research Process*

**Initial Steps.** Research on and with sex workers must navigate multiple methodological challenges. Sex workers are recognized as a ‘hard-to-reach’ population because of the criminalization and stigmatization of sex work involvement (Benoit et al., 2005; Sanders, 2006; Shaver, 2005; Wahab, 2003). This means that they may be distrustful of researchers and other non-experiential persons and reluctant to disclose membership or discuss their experiences. For this reason, in addition to the abovementioned expert knowledge, they are often excluded from participating in knowledge creation about their lives and work, or social issues more broadly. As a hard-to-reach population, I had to think carefully about access and rapport. In order to facilitate the research process and increase my chances of securing participants, I elected to perform what I imperfectly refer to as an ‘unofficial ethnography’ prior to commencing the project. This means that I took steps to observe, listen to, learn from, and engage with this population, without these activities actually constituting part of the research project. Instead, these steps helped inform the structure and focus of the research I subsequently performed. This will become clearer as I discuss the steps.

When I decided to study Edmonton’s street-level sex work community, the first thing I did was request meetings with several non-profit organizations that work with this population in order to learn about the people involved, the issues they experience, and the support these organizations provide. I then followed up with one of the organizations about potential volunteer opportunities that would permit interaction with this population. I volunteered and then worked with this organization for two years before I decided to initiate participant recruitment. During this time, I used my interactions and conversations with members of the sex trade community to learn more about them, their activities, and their concerns about their work and lives. This insider knowledge

shaped the focus of my research and the interview guide according to the issues that seemed central and important to them, not just what I believed was important or necessary to support my theoretical position on the sex trade (see above discussion). I also established my presence in a place where potential participants felt safe and supported and allowed me to begin to build the necessary relationships that are essential to trust and comfort with disclosure.

This knowledge and access were central to my ability to secure ethical approval for this dissertation. At the same time, it was important that the support I provided in my professional role was not affected by the research process. For this reason, I chose to keep my advocacy and research work separate. This means that the insight I gained and experience I had through my work with this organization informed, but is not included in, this dissertation. It provided a framework for understanding the Edmonton street-level sex trade, shaping my methodological choices and orienting knowledge, and enhanced both access and rapport with research population, but I do not draw on it directly, for example to quote memorable conversations or discuss specific events. It is for this reason that I refer to the experience as an unofficial ethnography and I position it as occurring prior to the study itself.

**Choice of Methods.** My project aims to ‘write’ sex workers and their lived experiences and insight into the conversations about their lives (DeVault, 1990). Consistent with my methodological framing and goal of taking experiential women seriously as ‘knowers’ and ‘speakers’, insight was solicited through semi-structured qualitative interviews with women involved in street-level sex work. Interviewing is rooted in the belief that knowledge is actively produced through people speaking about experience (DeVault & Gross, 2007). In contrast to the silencing of sex work voices in much of sex work discourse, the interview process is designed to

create opportunities for voice and, thus, to make experience 'hearable'. This allows the formulation of knowledge based on women's experiences and insight.

Semi-structured interviews offer the best method for this project for several reasons. First, semi-structured interviews constitute the ideal method for working with marginalized and vulnerable populations as this method produces the necessary space for participants to articulate and elaborate on their experiences and topics of interest to them in their own words (Allen et al., 2010; Nagy Hessey-Biber, 2007; Sanders, 2006). This is important to critical feminist projects, which oppose fitting women's stories into pre-established categories based on prevailing discourses and, instead, use them as the foundation from which to build (new) knowledge. Moreover, the interviews reveal not only participants' responses to questions posed, but also explore the meanings they attribute to a situation or experience.

Second, while semi-structured interviews make use of an interview guide that highlights key themes and questions to explore during the interview process, the interview schedule is kept flexible to adapt to the specifics of each interview (Gibson & Brown, 2009). This allows for detailed responses, unexpected answers or topics, follow-up questions, and dialogue between the participants and the researcher that is not possible in formally structured interviews and pre-determined or closed answer questionnaires or surveys (Sanders, 2006). It also allows for ongoing analysis, as later interviews benefit from reflections and insight from previous interviews. The increased space and flexibility are what allows the diversity of lived experience to be articulated. This allowance enabled the most significant contribution of this project, as the main themes identified here were not the direct focus of any specific questions I asked.

Third, semi-structured interviews maintain the presence of the research participants in the research process, analysis, and write up. It does this by preserving their words and speaking styles

rather than reducing their responses to sound bites and statistics (Anderson & Jack, 1999; Smith, 1987). With existing frameworks inadequate for explaining their experiences, participants' responses are often wordy and indirect as they struggle to explain what they do or think. It is this struggle, however, that points researchers towards this inadequacy and 'want' for more relevant language. Participants' repeated utterance of "you know", although often dismissed as inarticulateness, may suggest what DeVault (1990, p.103) calls "a request for understanding" that comes from power relations involved in linguistic patterns and discursive frameworks (Sprague, 2005). Subsequently Anderson and Jack (1991) encourage researchers to attune to the experiences, thoughts, and feelings being expressed that challenge acceptable conversation. Accordingly, I include multiple quotations throughout this dissertation and strive to maintain participants' forms of expression. So even though some quotations are slightly modified for clarity or space, I endeavored to maintain their original tone and focus.

Last, by interviewing participants I acknowledge them as subjects, rather than objects, of knowledge (DeVault & Gross, 2007; Sprague, 2005). Engaging with participants 'in person' encourages researchers and other speakers to recognize the personhood of the research population, with the capacity to make choices – even if constrained – and offer insight about the world around them. By doing so, researchers are already in a better position to see difference and diversity, than when conceived of as abstract 'other', or "bearers of unexplained categories" (Lazreg as cited in DeVault & Gross, 2007, p.187), about which generalizing statements can be made.

**Recruitment Process.** Despite my professional experience facilitating ethical approval of the study and access to potential participants, I am cognizant that ethical complexities can exist when participants are familiar with the researcher from other contexts (Ensign, 2003). For this reason, I adopted a passive recruitment strategy for this project. I chose not to actively recruit

participants or discuss the project with potential participants while I was in my service role, nor to approach potential participants on the streets or when they were working to avoid accidentally ‘outing’ their involvement in sex work or reducing income earning potential (O’Neill, 1996). Instead, I successfully secured the cooperation of four local organizations that work with individuals involved in street-level sex work, who allowed me to post recruitment material in their facilities and orally informed their clients of my research. Participation was open to anyone over the age of 18, who identified as female in the personal and/or work life (trans-inclusive), and had recent involvement in street-level sex work (defined as within the last two years). Interested participants could then contact me directly through a private cell phone acquired solely for this project to set up an interview or receive additional information.

Recognizing that not all eligible individuals may access the cooperating services or even notice the recruitment material, and that social networks can be advantageous for disseminating awareness, I also hoped to benefit from snowball sampling. For this reason, I encouraged participants to inform others that may be interested. Whilst snowball sampling has proven effective for reaching sex work populations for some researchers (Benoit et al., 2005), like Sydor (2013) my snowball efforts were less successful. Only two participants reported hearing about my project from other participants, but they were already aware of the project from observing the posters. Although I cannot claim with certainty any reasons for my lack of success with snowball sampling, it is possible that the study was a lower priority than other responsibilities potential participants were experiencing at that time. Dispersion activities have also weakened the social networks among street-level sex workers, who can no longer work as groups and, thus, no longer share information as readily as before. Lastly, recruitment occurred between October and January, a

period during which Edmonton can experience unfavourable weather. It is possible that potential participants may have been reluctant to expose themselves to the elements for the interview.

**Interview Procedure.** Interviews were conducted between October 2014 and January 2015 in several publicly accessible areas in Edmonton's downtown that provided relatively private spaces. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours, as participants were free to skip questions they did not want to answer, end the interviews at any time, and converse for as long as they desired. They were audio recorded with permission and I also took notes during and after our conversation.

Participants were provided an envelope prior to the start of the interview that included information about the project and the consent form, the honorarium of twenty dollars cash, and a list of relevant resources should they desire services or other assistance. Each package also contained recruitment business cards that provided basic information about my study and methods of contact that they were encouraged to share if desired. The package was provided prior to the interview so as to not affect participants' individual interview experiences or coerce their participation past their subjective comfort points.

**Participants.** Privacy was a foundational condition to secure ethical approval for this study. The application for this project was under consideration by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Committee around the same time as two sex worker researchers at the University of Ottawa were resisting a warrant by law enforcement to reveal the identity of a confidential interview.<sup>6</sup> It was also recognized that many members of the sex trade community are known to each other, as well as the organizations that serve them, and that the characteristics of Edmonton's

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<sup>6</sup> See Samson, N. (2014, Mar 5). Quebec ruling supports confidentiality of researchers' interviews. *University Affairs*. <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/news/news-article/quebec-ruling-supports-confidentiality-of-researchers-interviews/>

street-level sex trade can render demographic details unintentionally revealing. For example, there is a significant overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in Edmonton’s street-level sex trade (Barrett, 2013; Safedmonton, 2007) and relatively few non-Indigenous, non-Caucasian members. Consequently, an ethnic breakdown of participants can easily ‘out’ an individual’s involvement in the project. This identification risk is enhanced when combined with other identity categories, such as gender identity and age, and characteristics, like addiction history or housing status. For these reasons, I was encouraged to limit the collection and dissemination of any identifying information about my participants.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, I provide a deliberately brief summary of my research participants’ demographics derived from their response to my initial icebreaking question “tell me a little about yourself” or the body of their narratives. I provide an additional discussion of participants’ sex trade status in Chapter 2.

I was privileged to have twenty-five individuals with experience in street-level sex work participate in interviews for this project: **Abigail, Ava, Betty Page, Cat, Cece, Chantelle, Chloe, Cindy, Ellie, Emma, Freddie, Jamie, Jane, June, Kristina, Leigh, Lydia, Monique, Olivia, Samantha Cookie, Samara, Skylar, Sophia, Stacey, and Tara.**<sup>8</sup> As participation was open to anyone who identified as female in their personal and/or work lives, I use the term women when discussing my participants. However, I recognize that gender is a social construction that defies binary classification. Given that I did not ask participants to specify their gender identities unless they first self-disclosed, it is possible that some participants may not identify as female. Three participants voluntarily choose to self-identify as transgender during the interviews: Betty Page, June, and Freddie. Whereas Betty Page and June’s narratives indicated a female identity, Freddie

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<sup>7</sup> Guidance regarding privacy was provided by the University of Alberta’s Research Ethics Committee and my supervisory committee.

<sup>8</sup> All participants choose their own pseudonyms. A few were altered for privacy and/or clarity.



discussed their gender in a fluid and non-binary manner. For this reason, reference to Freddie is made with the gender-neutral pronouns ‘they’, ‘their’, and ‘them’, while other participants, including Betty Page and June, are discussed using the pronouns ‘she’ and ‘her’.

There was considerable diversity in ages among participants. Those who self-disclosed their age identified a span from early twenties to mid-fifties at the time of the interview. Most participants started selling sexual services at a young age and many discussed being street-involved in some manner as youth, either from running away from home or foster care, being kicked out of their home, or otherwise finding themselves without stable housing between the ages of 12 to 18. The age range of participants, when contextualized with the young age of entry and the recruitment specification for current or recent (defined as within the past two years) experience, suggest a lengthy history of sex trade involvement that spans decades for numerous participants. This notwithstanding, two participants started in the sex trade as adults.

Mirroring the overrepresentation of Indigenous women in Edmonton’s street-level sex trade, nearly two-thirds of my participants indicated Indigenous heritage.<sup>9</sup> Even though Edmonton has the second largest Indigenous population of all Canadian census metropolitan areas according to the 2016 census, Indigenous people constitute less than 6% of the Edmonton population (Statistics Canada, 2019a). Yet according to a report by Safedmonton (2007), approximately 70% of women in street-level sex work in Edmonton are Indigenous. My experience volunteering and working with this population during my unofficial ethnography would place this estimation higher, since Indigenous women represented the majority of the clientele with whom I interacted. Multiple factors contribute to the overrepresentation of Indigenous women in street-level sex work, a

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<sup>9</sup> The ethnic and racial identity of participants is deliberately kept vague (see above discussion).

detailed discussion of which falls outside the scope of this study.<sup>10</sup> However, their involvement must be contextualized in the continuing legacy of colonialism, and the devastating consequences of the residential school system and family separation, the legislative enforcement of gender inequality through the provisions of the *Indian Act*, systemic discrimination at the social, political, and legal levels, and the resulting negative effects on mental health, economic instability, and substance use (Anderson, 2016; Ferris, 2015; Hunt, 2013, 2015/2016; Oppal, 2012; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Indigenous women, in particular, experience marginalization through the operation of what Anderson (2016) calls ‘the triangle of oppression’, in which a) racist and sexist stereotypes influence and work alongside b) discriminatory structures and systems, and c) prejudicial actions to maintain the oppression of Indigenous women and limit the choices and opportunities available to them.

Sex trade involvement also cannot be analyzed in isolation from the multiple structural and material inequalities (e.g. poverty, racism, substandard housing and health care, overcriminalization, etc.), as well as the related traumas, that Indigenous peoples continue to experience at a disproportionate rate and that stem from settler colonial relations of oppression (Ferris, 2015; Kaye, 2017; Razack, 2000). For example, Indigenous peoples in Canada represent a larger proportion of those living below the poverty line, experience a greater depth of poverty, and are more likely to experience unemployment than non-Indigenous people (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). In Edmonton, Indigenous peoples represented close to half (48%) of those in Edmonton’s homeless count in 2016, increasing to more than two-thirds (68%) for Indigenous women (Homeward Trust Edmonton, 2016). While caution must be taken

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<sup>10</sup> A more detailed discussion can be found in the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015). Also see Anderson (2016). Examination of the role of settler colonialism in legal responses to the sex trade can be found in Kaye (2017).

to not deterministically theorize Indigenous sex trade participation and their marginalized status, these inequalities affect the degree to which sex work involvement is perceived to be a necessary, feasible, or advantageous option. **Data Analysis.** I transcribed the interview audio recordings verbatim. Transcriptions and quotations included in this dissertation utilize the following notation guide:

**Table 1**

*Transcription Notation*

<b>Symbol/Notation</b>	<b>Action Indicated</b>
...	Pause in speech
[...]	Portion of interview removed by researcher
[text]	Text added by researcher for clarity
[Me: text]	Speech contributed by researcher during participant's response
text/ text (i.e. "you have to/ like you have to be nice")	Speech that was cut off, changed direction, or was reworted
<i>Text</i>	Speech said with emphasis
[ <i>text</i> ]	Indicates non-speech verbal expressions (i.e. sighs or laughter)

*Note.* Adapted from Roulston (2014)

I then analyzed the transcriptions with an emphasis on what the data was telling me, not solely which themes replicate those of sex work literature. Accordingly, my analysis was inductive and ongoing, discerning key concepts and revising categories. Coding was achieved with Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT). CGT is a modified version of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) Grounded Theory that is ideal for critical inquiries because it explicitly incorporates reflexive

practice, or what Charmaz (2017) refers to as “methodological self-consciousness”, rejecting the assumption of an objective researcher and attuning to the impact of subjectivity, preconceptions, and power on the research process. By incorporating doubt and scrutiny into the analysis process, CGT calls on researchers to define and redefine concepts that are currently taken-for-granted or unacknowledged and pursue questions that emerge during the data collection and analysis process (Charmaz, 2017).

CGT makes use of interactive coding, moving back and forth between data and codes while interpreting what the data is saying. During initial coding, I remained close to the data, reading and analyzing the interviews line by line, asking questions like: What is happening in the data? What ideas or actions are being taken for granted? What is the participant saying or not saying? (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Here, codes included things like ‘searching for belonging’, ‘relies on intuition’, ‘sticks with regulars’, ‘scared of change’, ‘role of street walking’, ‘lack of understanding from police’, ‘changing work location’. Later, I identified the most significant codes and developed coding categories such as ‘street smarts’, ‘complicating street label’, ‘involvement motivations’, ‘conceptualizing exit’, ‘work style’, and ‘self-identification’. By questioning what I had learned from the literature and my service experience, what participants were saying to me, and what unspoken themes they seemed to be directing my attention to with their responses, I began to realize my taken-for-granted conceptualizations of involvement and exiting that made generalizing assumptions about sex work. Returning to the literature, I realized that these concepts and their complexity were rarely explained or even acknowledged with current discourse. It was this gap that my findings were addressing, and which denotes the most significant contribution of my project.

### *Limitations and Reflexivity*

My main findings were directly enabled by my methodological choices because they encouraged participant prioritization of topics and made space for unanticipated themes. This notwithstanding, they do impact the type of knowledge I can produce. Specifically, they limit the ability to produce generalizable knowledge about sex work, street-level sex work, or even street-level sex work in Edmonton. For example, passive convenience recruitment strategies are unlikely to recruit representative samples, a common challenge in sex work research (Benoit et al., 2005; Shaver, 2005). Flexible and semi-structured interview structures also permit inconsistencies and divergences in topics addressed by participants, hindering researchers' ability to discuss trends among responses. Additionally, inductive coding is influenced by researcher subjectivity and predisposition. These limitations, however, are not unique to my study and are common to much qualitative work.

Consequently, the contributions of my research, and research like this, lie not in the discovery of generalizable knowledge or objective truth, but in the inclusions of insight and experiences that have otherwise not held space in sex work discourse. As a critical feminist researcher, I concede that knowledge is partial, mediated, and subjective (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002). The pursuit of 'truth' in social issues faces many challenges, primary of which is the recognition that knowledge created through research is always partial because accounts of lived experience are not the same as lived experience itself (Comack, 1999; Van Manen, 1999). Participants provide not only a description of their experiences, but their mediated interpretations of it, shaped further by the interview dynamics (DeVault & Gross, 2007). Moreover, the themes raised by participants are significant for discussions about sex work, not because of the specific experiences or ideas that participants express, but how those experiences and ideas point us to

unexpected and novel ways of thinking about sex work and those involved. This project actively discourages the use of generalizing or homogenous classification when discussing those involved with the sex trade.

I am also cognizant of the control and influence I have over the research process and presentation of research findings, which shapes the knowledge that was and could be created with this project. Qualitative interviews disrupt, but do not eliminate, the power imbalance of academic research. Even though a loose structure and open-ended questions better permit detailed and unanticipated responses than more formal interview guides, the interview process is still limited by the questions I asked, as well as each participants' willingness and ability to disclose within the confines of the interview. Moreover, any power favouring participants ends when I turn off that recorder. As the researcher, I still determine how I interpret, analyze, write-up, and disseminate these results (Anderson and Jack, 1991; DeVault & Gross, 2007; Mathner & Doucet, 2003). For this reason, my research methodology is distinct from other inclusive methodologies like Community-Based Research and Participatory Action Research. Despite sharing many of the same goals as these methodologies— a concern with social justice for my research population, acknowledging research participants as experts, holding space for participant voices, and creating purposeful knowledge that leads to ameliorative social change – my project does not position participants as 'co-researchers', nor were participants actively included as stakeholders in the study's design, analysis, or dissemination. Accordingly, although I adopt a *participant-centred* approach (Shaver, 2005), this research does not constitute a collaborative partnership between myself and my research participants or their larger community.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For sex work research that does adopt community-based and participatory action methodologies see Allard & Farris (2015), Martin (2013), O'Neill (2010), O'Neill & Campbell (2002), O'Neill et al., (2008), Orchard et al. (2016), and Wahab (2004).

Finally, despite my experience working with my research population, I remain an outsider to that population. Lacking personal experiential knowledge of sex work, as well as many of the structural constraints that shape the street-level sex trade, such as poverty, familial abuse, racism, and addiction<sup>12</sup>, influences how I approach the topic and interpret participants' responses, as well as how participants engage with me. An example of this may be my participants' reluctance to discuss race and racial identity during our interviews or, alternatively, my inability to recognize the presence of these themes in their accounts when not explicitly named. As a manifestation of power inequality, race operates through silences and through the privileges of passing. Raguparan (2017) contends that racialized and Indigenous sex workers often attempt to manage the stigma attached to their sex trade involvement and racialized identity by "invisibilizing their race" (p.71). Attempts to keep their racialized and Indigenous identities secret by her participants were motivated by the privileges afforded to whiteness, as well as the desire to avoid contributing to the colonial conflation of Indigenous women with sex workers. This invisibilization may also be unconscious, reflecting participants' internalization of racist stereotypes and implications. Concomitantly, my own racial privilege blinds me to how their accounts allude to or directly implicate processes of colonization and racialization through couched or placated language.

Since I do not share a social location or history with the research participants, it is important that I engage in reflexivity, making visible and challenging the assumptions, expectations, and privileges I bring to the research process and the influence this may have on the production of knowledge. This involves looking critically at how I have heard and interpreted what the women have told me and being explicit in the final product about who is speaking: the participants or myself (Comack, 1999).

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<sup>12</sup> These are examples of issues identified in the literature, as well as by several participants. They should not, however, be assumed to affect all street-level sex workers or necessarily play a role in their involvement with the sex trade.

## **Chapter Summary**

In the absence of research incorporating the voices and experiences of women involved in Edmonton's street-level sex trade and reflecting the changes that have occurred to the trade with the economic downturn and legislative amendments, this project seeks to meaningfully include the experiential insight and lived experience of twenty-five participants to produce more nuanced understandings of sex work in general, and street-level sex work in Edmonton specifically. My methodological choices directly impact the main themes discussed in this dissertation. By providing participants flexibility and space with their narratives, they were able to respond in unanticipated ways that ultimately led me to question some of the taken-for-granted assumptions I was making about sex work and that are prevalent in much of the scholarly and professional sex work discourse. In the next three chapters, I use participants' insight and experiences to identify and unpack these assumptions, beginning with the binary framework used to classify sex work involvement. With the acknowledgement of more diverse relationships with sex work than 'involved' or 'exited', I endeavour to examine the specifics of my participants' involvement in the sex trade and the significance of this for broader conversations about sex workers and their work.



## Chapter 2: What Does Sex Work Mean

What is a ‘sex worker’? Attempts to answer this question recall an enduring and heated debate within the sex work literature (Chapkis, 1997; Farley et al., 2005; Longworth, 2010; Parent & Bruckert, 2013; Mann, 2014; Sanders et al., 2009; Scoular, 2004; Showden & Majic, 2014; van der Meulen et al., 2013). This debate presents a polarized discursive binary informed by philosophical and theoretical perspectives on the meaning of what is considered the defining element of sex work: the sexual exchange. Ideas about the sexual exchange, typically presented as either inherently exploitative or as a form of labour, contribute to two competing perspectives that dominate research and policy: sex-work-as-exploitation (Ekberg, 2004; Farley, 2004; Farley et al., 2005; Longworth, 2010) and sex-work-as-work (Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006b; Bruckert, 2002; van der Meulen et al., 2013), respectively. Those involved in the selling of sexual services are, subsequently, regarded as either coerced victims or agentic entrepreneurs.

However, by operating in a deductive manner, where what sex workers ‘are’ is determined primarily, if not solely, by ideas about the classification of the sexual exchange, sex work discourse propagates a partial, unidimensional, and homogenous representation of those involved (Shaver, 2005). Not only do sex workers become entirely associated with their work (Bruckert, 2002; Bruckert & Chabot, 2010; Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006b), they are assumed to all have the same type relationship with that work, in both the objective and subjective sense. As a result, an overly simplistic and binary conceptual framework of sex work involvement is reproduced that ignores the diverse relationships individuals have with sex work. This matters because dominant narratives about sex work shape how researchers, policy makers, and lay persons think about sex work and those involved.

In this chapter, I address this gap by interrogating participants' relationships with sex work, comprising the nature of their participation in sex work activity and how they make sense of that participation. I begin by examining current conceptualizations of sex work and how they classify sex workers as either 'involved' or 'exited' without elaboration of either category. Next, I demonstrate how this binary framework is inadequate for making sense of my participants' relationships with their work. Incorporating the value of 'conceptual disruption', I then analyze how my participants make sense of their involvement and sex work involvement more generally. This discussion commences a conversation about the assumptions about sex work that are frequently reproduced in the sex work literature, as well as what remains overlooked and unaddressed, that I continue in the following chapters. In doing so, I demonstrate the importance of seeking out and listening to the insight sex workers can provide about their lives and work and how this can provide more nuanced meanings and manifestations of sex work than are currently acknowledged.

### **How We Currently Discuss Sex Work**

Academic and policy discourse on sex work promotes a vague definition of what is meant by sex work as a general phenomenon, as well as street-level sex work specifically. First, sex work is commonly defined as the activity in which sexual services are exchanged for financial or other compensation (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2012; Benoit & Shumka, 2015; Canadian Public Health Association, 2014; Dalla, 2002; Department of Justice Canada, 2014; Murphy, 2010; Strega et al., 2014; Wahab, 2004). Rarely do scholars render explicit their assumptions about what they mean by 'sex work' and 'sex workers'. This is particularly true when referencing sex work status, a taken-for-granted theme in sex work research. Within research and policy, those involved in the selling of sexual services are described as either 'sex workers' or 'ex-sex workers', with little to

no clarification of these labels. In the absence of more nuanced descriptions, sex work status is implicitly conceptualized as comprising a mutually exclusive and exhaustive binary: ‘involved’ or ‘exited’.

The binary positioning of sex work status and, subsequently, sex workers themselves, is largely the result of the assumed self-evident meanings of the labels employed. Rarely do authors affix qualification or quantification to what they mean by ‘involvement’ in sex work or the eligibility parameters for inclusion as sex workers and ex-sex workers. Williamson and Baker’s (2009) typology of street-level workers’ work styles, based on Williamson’s (2000) graduate research, is one of the few studies that acknowledges that street-level workers may engage with their work in diverse ways. Identifying factors such as level of autonomy over work conditions and motive for participation, Williamson and Baker categorize participants as three distinct work styles: pimp-controlled, renegade (‘independent entrepreneurs’), and outlaw (‘street hustlers’). Yet, despite highlighting the existence of multiple relationships to the work – what they refer to as work styles – they do not explain how they understand involvement, nor sex workers.

Definitions of ‘exiting’ are only marginally more common and reveal the status binary framework in action. For example, in their survey of online sex workers, Drucker and Nieri (2018) explicitly focus on “active” sex workers, noting their contrast to other studies that focus on those who have “already exited or were attempting to exit” (p.3), but offer no further definition of active. They do, however, operationalize exiting as the cessation of sexual service provision. Similar definitions of exiting are offered by Ham and Gilmour (2007, p.748), “ceasing employment as a sex worker”, and Benoit and Miller (2001, p.iv), “retired from the sex industry”, although neither indicate what initial employment comprises. Sanders’ (2006, p.405) definition of exiting – “making transitions out of sex work” – differs in its recognition of exiting as a process, rather than

just an outcome. However, there is still no clarification of what distinguishes ‘in’ from ‘out’ of the trade.

Sources that operationalize their use of the label ‘exited’ or ‘exiting’ often employ what Matthews et al. (2014, p.2) refer to as “a zero-sum conception of exiting” in which exiting is understood exclusively as involvement’s counterpart, even though neither is fully explained. As a result, involvement in sex work is implicitly conceptualized as occurring in a binary way: as either present *or* absent. The subjects of sex work discourse are, subsequently, either ‘involved’ or have ‘exited’, comprising the categories of ‘sex workers’ or ‘ex-sex workers’, respectively. Occasionally, the definition of ‘exited’ is further qualified by affixing a temporal condition; however, the specifics of this condition vary widely. For instance, Hickle (2017) and Benoit and Miller (2011) both specify a two-year abstinence from sex work activities as constituting exited, whereas Matthews et al. (2014) concede exiting at three months. The substantially different period of required abstinence underscores the absence of commonly agreed upon interpretations and criteria of sex work status.

In employing the taken-for-granted binary framework of sex work status (‘involved’ or ‘exited’), researchers and policy makers sustain the polarization of sex work discourse because sex workers and their work are constructed as homogenous and unidimensional discursive, and material, phenomena. Discursively, sex work can be categorically exploitation *or* work, with workers classified as victims *or* agents, if everyone involved is assumed to participate in the sex trade in an identical manner and under the same conditions. Materially, this conception of sex work status provides a partial and flawed understanding of sex work involvement that inaccurately categorizes the lives and experiences of those involved. As D’Adamo (2017, p.195 footnote) notes, the label sex worker is often affixed to people who do not self-identify as sex worker or classify

their behaviours as sex work. Individuals may participate in exchanges of sex for money or other resources without any larger affiliation with the sex worker identity or larger sex work community (Hannem, 2016). This suggests that sex work may be as much a personal stance (i.e. identification *with*) as a behaviour description (i.e. participating *in*), as I discovered when attempting to classify the involvement status of my participants.

When commencing data analysis, I initially evoked the dominant status binary in which involvement and exiting are understood as mutually exclusive statuses to categorize my participants. If their narratives either admitted or alluded to ‘recent’ engagement in the sexual transaction that is typically taken as the defining element of sex work involvement, I classified them as involved. Even though recent was defined as “within the past two years” on recruitment material, I did not screen participants for this criterion or ask participants to specify their most recent engagement. Instead, recent was inferred by their use of the present tense to discuss involvement or qualifiers like “lately” or “now”. If their narratives implied no participation at the time of the interview, speaking about engagement only in the past sense, I classified them as exited. The results of this binary classification are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Binary Classification of Participants’ Sex Work Status*

<b>Involved</b>			<b>Exited</b>
1. Abigail	8. Ellie	15. Monique	1. Betty Page
2. Ava	9. Emma	16. Olivia	2. Jamie
3. Cat	10. Freddie	17. Samantha Cookie	3. Leigh
4. Cece	11. Jane	18. Skylar	4. Samara
5. Chantelle	12. June	19. Sophia	
6. Chloe	13. Kristina	20. Stacey	
7. Cindy	14. Lydia	21. Tara	

The resulting proportion of involved to exited participants, 84% (n=21) to 16% (n=4) respectively, was consistent with my pre-data collection expectations and initially escaped further consideration. However, the inadequacy of this categorical approach in which involvement is interpreted only as absent or present became increasingly clear the more I engaged with the data. I gradually realized that participants’ narratives spoke to relationships with sex work that defied classification as simply involved or exited, any or none. For example, although Jane and Kristina’s narratives indicated continued participation in sexual exchanges, both explicitly claimed they were no longer involved. Other participants’ statuses were unclear or seemingly precarious, contingent on the circumstances in which they find themselves, the precarity of other options, or a willingness to participate ‘when needed’. My attempt to revise my initial classifications of sex work status based on their narratives, rather than the dominant binary, lead to Table 3:

**Table 3**

*Non-Binary Classification of Participants’ Sex Work Status*

<b>Narrative acknowledges or suggests continued involvement</b>	<b>Identifies as not involved, but narrative suggests participation</b>	<b>Involvement status is unclear from narrative</b>	<b>Narrative supports assertion of non-involvement</b>
1. Cat 2. Cece 3. Chantelle 4. Chloe 5. Cindy 6. Ellie 7. Emma 8. June	9. Lydia 10. Monique 11. Olivia 12. Samantha Cookie 13. Stacey 14. Tara 15. Sophia	1. Jane 2. Kristina	1. Abigail 2. Ava 3. Freddie 4. Skylar
			1. Betty Page 2. Jamie 3. Leigh 4. Samara

Whereas Table 2's deductive structure forces participants whose involvement status was unclear or even contradictory into either present or absent categories, Table 3's inductive structure allows for additional possibilities based on the narratives provided. However, like the categories of work styles developed by Williamson and Baker (2009), Table 3's categories still maintain a one-dimensional interpretation of involvement that provides an incomplete and unnuanced depiction of participants' relationships with their work. By focusing only on the status of involvement, rather than the practice of that involvement, I ignored the factors contributing to different relationships with sex work. I also did not appreciate the differences in involvement between participants in each category, nor how the specifics of individual workers' involvement may change across time and circumstance.

Wahab (2004, p.155) contends that there can be "no universal sex worker experience" because workers have distinct social identities and labour under vastly different working conditions. I contend that an additional factor must be considered as central to unique sex work experiences: the nature of their involvement. It is both incorrect and negligent to infer that sex workers' involvement in the sex trade is identical or consistent. Yet the language and frameworks currently available in sex work discourse do not recognize the vast gradations of involvement that exist between active participation and complete abstinence. Nor do they concede differences with context, such as how participants secure their dates and with whom. Worse, they may suggest that these differences are irrelevant to the conversation. Yet, dimensions like the frequency of their participation, the level of dependence on that income, the clients with whom they exchange their services, and where and how they secure dates directly affect experiences of sex work and how those experiences are understood by workers. Even though there is valuable insight to be gained

by asking sex workers about their specific experiences and the meaning they affix to them, this persists as a notable gap in the sex work literature.

In overlooking sex workers' relationships with their work, more specifically the details of their participation and the meanings they affix to it, researchers and policy makers miss valuable data that offer richer understandings of who the subjects of this inquiry are and the nature of their work. What results are homogenous arguments about what sex work 'is' and who sex workers 'are' that assume uniformity and permanency while neglecting the diversity that exists (Shaver, 2005). Yet, because meaning is always contextual and multiple, a singular category and descriptor can never fully capture nor depict the complexity that truly exists (Carline, 2011). Critical interrogations of sex work must, therefore, concede the value of conceptual disruption as part of their analyses.

### **The Value of Conceptual Disruption**

Within critical research, and particularly feminist critical research, there is an increasing appreciation of the need to recognize multiple interpretations of scholarly concepts, and the significance of interpretation for nuanced theorizing about social phenomena and relations. As part of this, researchers are encouraged to "disrupt the taken-for-granted" and "introduce elements of plurality and polyphony", explicitly asking themselves "What are all the ways that people interpret this concept?" throughout the research process (McClelland, 2017, p.451). A sizeable portion of this literature is found in sexuality studies, and investigations of sex definitions in particular.

For example, Sewell et al. (2017) and Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) both emphasize the deficiencies of dichotomous frameworks ('yes' or 'no') for capturing participants ideas about what counts as "sex". Sewell et al. found that assessments of whether particular acts constituted sex varied depending on whether participants were provided a dichotomous choice or a Likert-



type scale that permitted intermediate answers of ‘probably’ and ‘probably not’. Non-dichotomous classifications of sexual behaviour were also reported by Peterson and Muehlenhard whose respondents were asked to describe experiences of ‘almost but not quite sex’, ‘just barely sex’, and ‘unsure’.

Dichotomized frameworks have also been found to be inadequate for discussions of sexual consent. Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005) argue that sexual activity is not simply ‘wanted’ or ‘unwanted’ by individuals, because there are actually multiple dimensions of consent, which produce a distinction between ‘wanting sex’ and ‘consenting to sex’ that is currently overlooked. Moreover, by thinking about sex only as ‘wanted’ or ‘unwanted’, researchers contribute to “a missing discourse of ambivalence” that may more adequately describe some participants’ experiences (p.15). Although they do not explain what they mean by ambivalence in the original article, Muehlenhard et al. (2016, 463) later expand on the multiple ways that individuals can be ambivalent about sex:

Some discussions of wanting and consenting to sex seem predicated on the assumption that sex is either wanted or unwanted. Sometimes, though, individuals have reasons for wanting to engage in sex and reasons for not wanting to engage in sex. They feel ambivalent, which has been defined as having both favorable and unfavorable thoughts and feelings toward something [...] They could be ambivalent about sex in general, sex with a particular partner, or sex under particular circumstances. They could have positive and negative feelings about the sexual encounter itself (e.g., someone might feel both aroused and self-conscious) or about possible outcomes of the act (e.g., the effect on the relationship and the effect of spending time having sex rather than studying for an exam).

The acknowledgement of ambivalence within sexual consent lead them to more directly explore the dimensions of, and distinction between, sexual consent and desire, as well as the implications of multiple interpretations of these concepts in interpersonal relationships (Muehlenhard et al., 2016; Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007).

Other research attends to the significance of intersectional identities and context in sexual definitions. Horowitz and Bedford's (2017) analysis of sexual definitions by gender and sexual orientation identifies divergent assessments of acts depending on the gender and sexual orientation of survey respondents, with responses influenced by how sexuality is experienced and enacted by different genders and sexual identities. Sewell et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of context after discovering that respondents differently classified an act as sex when presented with a scenario in which the act occurred between themselves and their partners than when the scenario presented the partner as engaged in the same behaviour with a different person outside of the relationship.

These studies offer examples of 'conceptual disruption' whereby the taken-for-granted itself becomes the object of interrogation, as "the researcher contend[s] with a variety of forms of epistemic difference, the influence of social locations on meaning-making, and definitions and meanings that, far from demonstrating coherence or stasis, may be continually destabilized" (McClelland, 2017, p.452). Although limited, there is evidence of this type of work within the sex work literature. Much of this work challenges the victimization/agency opposition constructed by the competing dominant perspectives on sex work in which issues like choice or consent are conceptualized as existing only in a dichotomized fashion – i.e. as completely absent or entirely unrestricted (Jeffrey, 2002; Kong, 2006; Scoular, 2004; Shdaimah & Leon, 2015; Showden, 2011; Showden & Majic, 2014). Notably, Showden and Majic's (2014) edited collection examines

agency, not as an identity that exists or is absent, but as “complex knowing negotiation” (Dewey & Patty as cited in Showden & Majic, 2014, p.xxiv). Similarly, Kong (2006, p.413) rejects the agency/victimization binary in favour of viewing those involved as having “a multifaceted and potentially strategic identity” as they navigate “a complex web of power and domination”.

Also emerging as an example of conceptual disruption is the sex work research examining the meaning of ‘exit’ and the diverse ways that sex workers transition out of the sex trade. Whilst the bulk of the exiting literature examines push and pull factors that facilitate or hinder exiting ability, a small number of researchers have taken issue with the simplistic conceptualizations of exiting itself in sex work discourse (Bowen, 2013, 2015; Drucker & Nieri, 2018; Ham & Gilmour, 2017; Law, 2011, 2013). Attending to the insight of experiential women, these scholars identify multiple interpretations of exiting that challenge the assumed abstinence of the dominant sex work status framework. Preferring the term ‘transitioning’ over ‘exiting’ because of its association with labour, Law’s (2011, also 2013) analysis of transition experiences of indoor sex workers reveals that respondents’ frequently classify periods of abstinence from sexual service provision, regardless of length, as ‘taking a break’ rather than ceasing participation (i.e. exiting). Respondents drew on subjective factors when distinguishing the two statuses, suggesting the central role intentions and strategy play in defining sex work status.

Similarly, Drucker and Nieri (2018) noticed significant variations in the meanings their sample of online sex workers assigned to exiting. When asked what they understood exiting to mean, one-third of their participants defined exiting, not as the cessation of service provision, but rather as ceasing advertisement of their involvement in sex work, regardless of continued participation. By doing so, they draw attention to the role of active solicitation in personal definitions of non-involvement. In addition, Law (2011, 2013), Ham and Gilmour (2017), and

Bowen (2013, 2015) challenge the construction of exiting as denoting complete abstinence from the sex trade, noting that many of their participants maintained some level involvement in the sex trade even after transitioning to other forms of ‘mainstream’ (i.e. non-sex trade) work or expressed a willingness to do so.

This critical work on exiting is important because it opens up space for multiple interpretations of exiting other than complete abstinence and, in doing so, highlights the need for more complex understandings of individuals’ relationships with sex work. Missing from this important conversation, however, is an interrogation of what is first meant by involvement. Their findings and ensuing discussions implicitly reveal that researchers’ and their subjects’ conceptualizations of exiting – what it means and when it has been ‘achieved’ – are directly influenced by how they understand ‘involvement’. For Drucker and Nieri’s respondents, the active effort involved in maintaining their online profile seems to factor centrally in their understanding of what it means to be involved in sex work, and, thus, what would constitute exiting from it. For Law, Bowen, and Ham and Gilmour, involvement seems to be tied to participants’ intentions and proportionality of sex trade vs. mainstream work participation. In none of the cases, however, is this explicitly acknowledged or addressed.

Using the language of Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005), I contend that there is currently a missing discourse of *involvement* in sex work research and policy that, in effect, limits knowledge about the lived experience of sex workers. Nuanced discussions of what exiting means and looks like must first consider what it means to be involved in the first place. It is to this question that I now turn my attention.

## **How My Participants Understand Sex Work**

How sex workers understand sex work involvement can differ dramatically from dominant sex work discourse. Their narratives demonstrate a resistance to the dominant status binary when making sense of their own lived realities. In doing so, they identified important questions and subsequent considerations for conversations about sex work. First, *what counts as involvement?* To answer this question, I examine how my participants understand sex work and, correspondingly, what ‘counts’ as sex work involvement. Second, *what does it mean to be involved?* This theme explores the motivations for and perceived benefits participants associate with their involvement.

Both of these themes emerged out of the general narratives of participants rather than in response to any specific questions I posed. Since the interviews were loosely structured and flexible in nature, participants had space to provide insight on issues and experiences I did not explicitly ask about and to do so in their own wording. It was in this elaboration and sometimes contradiction enabled by this space that these themes materialized. In addition, because street-level was not always specified by me or participants, it was often unclear whether the discussion concerned sex work generally or street-level sex work specifically. This ambiguity is not unique to participants and resembles the tendency of sex work discourse more generally, particularly those sources that do not specify the ‘type’ of sex work they are discussing.

### ***What Counts as Involvement: Working Conditions***

Sex work is most commonly conceptualized only and entirely by the exchange of sexual services for resources, otherwise known as sexual transaction or ‘date’<sup>13</sup> (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2012; Canadian Public Health Association, 2014; Dalla, 2002; Department of Justice Canada, 2014

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<sup>13</sup> I use the terms exchange, transaction, and date interchangeably.

Murphy, 2010; Strega et al., 2014; Wahab, 2004). Any and all participation in that exchange, according to this framework, means one is involved in sex work and, subsequently, a sex worker. Although I shared this interpretation of sex work and sex work status when commencing this project, I learned that my participants did not. Instead, their understanding of what sex work is, and thus, what ‘counts’ as sex work, involved additional criteria not currently acknowledged by the dominant definition.

This became evident as I analyzed the interviews and noticed repeated reference to participation in sex work using the past tense. Multiple participants expressed variations of “I haven’t worked in a while” at some point during the interviews. This assertion, by itself, is not unusual and would otherwise suggest that their sex work status was exited at the time of the interview. However, this statement was commonly accompanied by declarations of what is generally considered to be sex work involvement: continued participation in sexual exchanges with (often regular) clients, as demonstrated in the following quotes from Kristina and Jane:

I haven’t worked in a while [...] I have two clients that I see twice a week, or once a week each, and I just stuck with them [...] I’ve known them for quite some time and they’ve taken care of me for a while. (Kristina)

I have people [that] call me from out of town that just want to party, right? That’s what I do. [...] Like I said, I haven’t done this for some time. I got friends that I’ll see whenever I see them, and we just go, ok? (Jane)

I was initially tempted to interpret their utterance of no longer working while admitting to seeing clients as contradictory statements, perhaps indicating a disconnect between what participants actually do and what they say they do. However, I realized that doing so reinforced a limited understanding of what sex work is and what it means to be involved. In particular, it over-

emphasizes the significance of the sexual transaction in conceptions of sex work involvement, while dismissing valuable contextual elements. Even though I defined sex work solely by the sex-for-money exchange, my participants did not. Instead, this apparent paradox actually demonstrated that the meaning of sex work and thus what it means to be working or involved in it is, for them, tied to other criteria in addition to the exchange. For my participants, these variables include the location of their work, the clientele they interacted with, the presence of intent and purposeful action, and level of dependency.<sup>14</sup>

**Street Presence.** Sex work discourse generally recognizes sex work as comprising two sectors: the indoor sex trade and the street-level sex trade. The distinction between the two sectors is based primarily on the objective location of their work and resulting conditions (Sanders et al., 2009). Whereas the indoor sex trade is recognized as an umbrella category for a variety of activities including erotic dance, erotic massage, escort, and online activities which take place in diverse indoor settings, discourse on street-level sex work remains relatively rigid, stagnant, and one-dimensional. The street-level sex trade is commonly assumed to refer only and entirely to ‘streetwalking’ – i.e. sexual solicitation and transactions that take place at the level of the street or otherwise occur in a ‘public place’. Section 213(2) of the *Criminal Code of Canada* defines public place as “any place to which the public have access as of right or by invitation, express or implied, and any motor vehicle located in a public place or in any place open to public view.” Weitzer (2005) provides a unique elaboration to the definition of street-level, noting that the label refers to situations in which the initial transaction occurs in a public place, regardless of whether the sexual

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<sup>14</sup> There may be additional variables, but because participants were not directly asked for their definitions they were either not included in the narratives provided or I did not recognize their role. This is an important area for future research.

act occurs in a public or private setting. Although, like many aspects of sex work, ‘street-level’ is most commonly evoked without any further description.

Participants’ narratives simultaneously supported and challenged this construction of street-level sex work. Similar to dominant representations of street-level sex work, participants viewed streetwalking<sup>15</sup> to be a fundamental aspect in how they understand sex work and, thus, what counts as sex work involvement. In contrast to dominant representations, however, streetwalking rarely constituted the bulk of their income-earning activity. Instead, street presence was often engaged in only when necessary and only if their regulars – customers familiar to workers and with whom they have developed a working relationship – were unavailable.

Like I say, I hardly go out on the street. If I have to [get money] I’ll call up regulars. If I don’t have money, and if none of them are available, that’s when I take a walk. (Skylar)

I only went out like a couple of times when I need the money. [...] Like now, they are all just my regulars. Like I have regulars. You’ll never see me out there. I usually have their phone numbers, so the people that I see are people I met years and years ago. I don’t meet new people. (Emma)

I have a couple of regulars that I see. They have my phone number now, so I don’t go out as much as I used to. So they just phone me, hopefully on days that I need them money [laughs]. (June)

I’m lucky that I don’t work outside a lot, because I work – as you heard when my phone rang – I have a lot of clientele. [...] I’m lucky I have a lot of regulars. (Olivia)

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<sup>15</sup> Streetwalking may denote both the physical location of their work and the intentional and purposeful action behind it (i.e. active solicitation). This section discusses the location of their work. I take up the role of intent and purposeful action later in the chapter.



The question of what ‘counts’ as sex work has previously been posed for indoor sector activities, such as dominatrix work (Levey & Pinsky, 2015), erotic dance (Bruckert, 2002; Clipperton, 2013; Schweitzer, 2000), escorting (Koken 2012), online activities like web cam girls (Henry & Farvid, 2017) and ‘sugar dating’ (Nayar, 2017). This discussion has yet to be taken up in the literature on street-level sex work, at least not within the North American context. van de Walle et al. (2012) offer the concept “transactional sex” as an alternate label in “situations where sex is explicitly exchanged for money or a material reward, but for which terms such as *sex work* or *prostitution* are considered inappropriate by the researchers or research participants” (p.546). Their study of the experiences of young people in Amsterdam found an almost unanimous rejection of the classification of their participation in transactional sex activity as a form of prostitution. One reason given for this rejection is the association of the term with a particular manifestation known as ‘window prostitution’, where sex workers attract customers from the street through window displays. Because their sample’s transactional activities differed from window prostitution, primarily by occurring in private, they rebuffed the classification of their behaviour as prostitution.

This public/private divide also informed my participants’ differential classification of their participation. In both dominant constructions and participants’ interpretations, public streetwalking forms a central criterion of (street-level) sex work involvement. The distinction lies in how the relationship between streetwalking and sex work is understood. Dominant constructions concede sex work if a sexual transaction takes place and assumes that, for street-level sex workers, these transactions (mostly) involve streetwalking. For my participants, however, sex work is not just whether an exchange took place that happened to involve streetwalking, but rather sex work

*is* an exchange that involves streetwalking. In other words, in order to be sex work, it must involve streetwalking. Exchanges that occur without streetwalking do not ‘count’ as sex work.

This finding raises two questions. First, how is it that street presence plays such a smaller role in participants’ lives than is assumed by prevailing images of street-level sex work? Second, if they are not participating in streetwalking, is it more accurate to classify them as indoor sex workers? First, access to cell phones and the internet have dramatically changed how sexual exchanges are arranged (Aral et al., 2006). One result is that street-level workers no longer need to be in public areas, relying on chance interactions on the street, to secure customers. They can now arrange dates in their homes or other locations with cell phone or internet access. This includes those who are experiencing homelessness, who still often own cell-phones or have access to the internet at public libraries or social service agencies.<sup>16</sup> These tools helped them adapt to the municipal dispersion and police sting activities that disrupted Edmonton’s existing sex work strolls. Workers became increasingly mobile and hidden, enabled by cell phones and internet access.

I just don’t feel the party out there anymore. That’s just now how the economy works. And you know those of us who do work, we’re online, you know, we’re not standing on the corner anymore. [We’ve] got no time for that... You know we’re so used to street level; it’s not only street level. It hasn’t been for a long time now. I’m sure some girls / I mean it’s still there, but it’s not what it used to be. (Freddie)

I worked in Calgary [and the police] used to come to the track and kick everybody off or they’d ask you for ID [...] so they wiped [the track] down now. I don’t know how they

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<sup>16</sup> Wooley’s (2014) review of the literature on homelessness and cellphone possession found estimates ranging from 44% to 73% of those surveyed.

managed it, just constantly bugging them so clients get scared. So that's why now people are moving to the internet, phone calls – client calls you, “Hey I can't come around that day, becomes friends with you, right? (Samantha Cookie)

With access to technology, sex workers had the means to connect both with new clients, as well as those with whom they have already interacted, without street presence. Although there is still an element of chance involved with securing new clients (i.e. whether a new client views their online ad), it is nowhere near the level that street solicitation requires. Chance is also dramatically reduced with regular clients, with whom they can share their direct contact information.

Arranging dates through phone, email, or online sites also provides additional security for workers through a record of customer information that is not available to them in street transactions. This is especially important for transgender workers by providing opportunities for gender disclosure prior to meeting in person, thereby reducing the violence from transphobic customers who unwittingly solicited services from transgender workers (I discuss this in more detail in section 2 below).

In addition to cell phone and internet, participants also arranged dates in bars and hotels, offering further challenges to the streetwalking stereotype. As Ellie explains:

Getting picked up in the bar, yeah, and in the rooms there. ... I got a lot of my friends who've got rooms there, yeah. So if I'm in the west end, I just go down to theirs. I don't know, we kind of like take turns, yeah, or we'll just keep eyes on each other. (Ellie)

This integration of technology with street-level sex work and the decreasing significance of street presence is noteworthy because it blurs the public/private divide typically used when discussing street-based vs. indoor sex work. It also leads us to the second question: if street presence is reduced or absent, are they now more accurately classified as indoor sex workers?

The adoption of technology by street workers means that technology is no longer a defining characteristic of indoor sex work and street presence is no longer a defining characteristic of ‘street-level’ sex work. Despite this destabilization, it remains inaccurate to infer that street-based workers ‘become’ indoor workers simply through their adoption of technology or inside transactions or that there is no difference between the sectors. Even though the distinction between indoor and street work is commonly made by the location of work, intersectional ideologies about class, race, gender identity, substance use, and mental health continue to marginalize those classified as street-level sex workers even when streetwalking activity itself declines. Racism and colonial attitudes devalue and dehumanize Indigenous and racialized individuals in the sex trade, especially for those experiencing poverty and addiction (Brooks, 2010; Bruckert, 2012; Ferris, 2015; Oppal, 2012; Raguparan, 2017; Razack, 2002). Stigma also continues to operate within the sex industry against those who provide direct contact sexual services, as well as those with addiction or mental health issues (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2012; Benoit et al., 2018; Hannem, 2016; Knox, 2014; also Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2013; Levey & Pinsky, 2015). In addition, as I return to later in the chapter, homophobia and transphobia marginalize those whose sexuality and gender identities challenge heteronormativity (Benoit et al., 2018; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2018; Laidlaw, 2018).

Recognizing this blurring of sector boundaries without discounting the significance of social location, Hail-Jones and Oselin (as cited in Shdaimah et al., 2017) recommend a descriptor based on socio-economic status instead of setting: ‘lower-echelon sex work’. Although the term itself and its parameters are undefined, its actions are said to be “explicitly public in nature” (Hail-Jares et al., p.241) and its deployment is intended to prioritize “those soliciting street side, working out of single-room occupancy hotels, advertising on low-cost websites, or operating in similar low-

wage conditions” (Shdaimah et al., 2017, p. 9). Although their suggestion has not yet been embraced by sex work discourse, it raises a valid concern regarding the need to complicate our divisions of sex trade sectors. My participants’ emphasis on the significance of streetwalking to what ‘counts’ as sex work indicates that critical thought must be given to more suitable descriptors and distinguishing factors of sex work activities than location of solicitation and exchange. At the same time, however, we must be careful to not overlook how the matrix of socio-economic variables inform working conditions for different sex workers. Thus, whilst heeding Bruckert and Chabot’s (2010, p.106) warning against “superimposing class onto sex work into a simplistic hierarchy that effectively juxtaposes ‘high-class escorts’ to ‘lower-class street-based workers’”, we cannot deny the influence of these variables. Overlapping forms of discrimination and stigma, as well as poverty, continue to restrict and deny movement within the sex industry regardless of technology or location access. Encouraging sex work researchers to take privilege seriously, Beloso (2012) reproduces Siobhan Brooks’ declaration, “Not everybody can sell their sex equally” (p.64), to theorize how intersectional oppressions shape sex workers’ agency, access to space, and labour potential in a capitalist and prejudicial market (also Rand, 2019).

**Indiscriminate Clientele.** Decreased participation in streetwalking behaviour among my participants is made possible by their access to customers already familiar to them and with whom dates can be scheduled as necessary or desired. The significance of regulars for street-level workers is far less explored in sex work research than for indoor workers because it is inconsistent with the assumed street presence of, and indiscriminate acceptance of clients by, street-level sex workers (van de Walle et al., 2012). As Green (2016, p.81) notes, the specification that sex workers participate not simply in an exchange of sex for money, but rather a sexual exchange “that is ‘indiscriminate’, ‘promiscuous’, or (in the words of Swedish law) ‘casual’” is frequently repeated

in official legal discourse. The conflation of sex workers having sex with multiple men with them having sex with *random* men is one of the primary assumptions symbolically linking sex workers with ‘whores’ (Pheterson, 1993).

Similar to the way that participants both support and challenged the centrality of streetwalking activity, indiscriminate and unfamiliar clientele emerge as a crucial condition of sex work. They echo the element of randomness in their understanding of what ‘counts’ as sex work, while challenging the assumption that that type of client constitutes the bulk of their exchanges. Instead, transactions with regulars provided the majority of their sex work-related activity and income. As the previous quotes demonstrate, many primarily interact with regulars, with whom they either receive or initiate transaction requests. Their preference for regulars is unsurprising, as regular clients provide greater financial stability while also reducing workers’ exposure to the harms associated with street presence and interactions with potentially predatory strangers (Murphy, 2010; Williamson & Baker, 2009). By building a clientele base of regulars and scheduling recurrent dates, workers secure a more stable income than is possible with street solicitation, which is more susceptible to the effects of location, weather, competition, and chance. These factors contribute to a negative perception of streetwalking, which subsequently impacts workers’ perceptions of self-worth, as explained by Abigail and Samantha Cookie:

You’re standing on a corner for hours on end sometimes. Sometimes you don’t even get picked up, you know? And sometimes that takes a strike on your confidence, on your self-esteem. It’s like, what makes me/ what makes that bitch better than me? (Abigail)

The track is the worst, it makes you feel like shit. It makes you feel like crap standing out there, it’s cold waiting for clients. It’s drama. It’s dark outside, people are sleeping and

you're out there. You're wondering what the hell is putting you out there like at this time of night, you know? (Samantha Cookie)

Several participants explicitly identified competition among workers as a major concern impacting their street presence:

I'm afraid to go out now... because of the other workers and clients... [workers] are just getting meaner on the streets [...] that's their territory, something like that. It's basically like that, like if you're not friends with them then you're not allowed on their block or whatever. (Kristina)

"The girls just they're so afraid of each other and the johns. There's no safety for them at all. *I'm* scared when I go out there to work and that bothers me because I've never been afraid [...] and now the girls are fighting over the johns because society and the cops are making it so fucking hard for the girls to work period, you know? (Cat)

I guess like most of the girls' attitudes down the street, some of them think that they own a block I guess sometimes, yeah or that's their corner you're working on. Then some of the girls will be like "[you're] going to move to a different corner". But it's never happened to me, like whatevs. I've seen it happen to other girls. [Me: what happens if the girls won't leave?] Well they usually end up fighting or something, yeah, over something stupid. But yeah, that's what usually happens" (Emma)

Increased competition among workers, frequently expressed through violence, is a direct consequence of decreased clientele due to eroding economic context as I discuss in Chapter 1. Having a reserve of regular clients decreases the requirement of street presence and the resulting competition and violence. Established relationships also benefit clients. Research suggests that clients prefer to see the same workers because their prior positive experiences suggest a decreased

likelihood of their own victimization (see discussion of ‘Outlaw’ workers, Williamson & Baker, 2009, p.37).

Working relationships with regular clients mean that participants are not solely reliant on streetwalking and the associated risks, such as poor lighting, competition, and predators that intend to harm them. As street presence is perceived by participants, as well as the sex work literature, to be the defining attribute of (street-level) sex work involvement, its absence informs their assertions of ‘not working’ despite participating in continued sexual transactions with regulars. Sexual transactions with regulars were perceived as profoundly distinct from similar transactions with unfamiliar clients, with the result that regulars were no longer interpreted as clients at all. This is best illustrated in the extended quote from Cat:

I no longer work on the street, I now have regulars that come to my home, that I trust to come to my home, that um, you know, they’re almost my social life. You know, it’s like friends with benefits that give me money. You know, they, a couple of them, just happen to be married. Um like for the longest time I never even considered it prostitution, you know, and then a friend of mine said, “You’re still taking money from them”. [Me: What did you classify it as?] Friends, you know? And I thought “Oh my god, she’s right”.

Cat’s classification of her regulars as friends rather than clients demonstrates the differential meaning affixed to transactions between new and regular clients and a subsequent distancing from the economic dimension of the exchange. The implications of this is that continuing to see regular clients and accepting payment for sexual activity from regular clients is interpreted as discrete from sex work involvement, which is linked to physical street presence and strangers. This distinction is enabled by the nature of the relationship between participants and their regulars. McMillian et al. (2018) locate sex work as part of a wider sexual network involving



economic support and ‘gift giving’. Their review of sex work studies in sub-Saharan Africa suggest that the trading of money and gifts for sex is often a normative aspect of affective relationships and distinct from Western conceptions of sex work. Compensation for sexual service provision can be positioned as part of a larger series of obligations laid out by “[g]endered economic and resource inequalities [that] underpin male provider obligations associated with paying for sex” (p.1521), such as when a woman is financially dependent on her partner.

Sex work is sometimes discursively differentiated from economic support within the context of intimate relationships in the sex work literature through the specification of the exchange being “devoid of any emotional involvement” (Nowlan, 2007, p.13), even if the significance of that qualifier to sex work definitions, as well as to how sex workers make sense of their relationship to their work, is untheorized. But, as I show in the second part of this chapter, sex workers can and do develop emotional involvement with their regular clientele. With the defining qualifier between sex work and intimate economic support no longer applicable, sexual transactions are no longer ‘distinct’ from the exchanges in other relationships. In this way, instead of a mostly economic transactional relationship, the social relationship (e.g. friendship) between participants and their regulars becomes primary, with additional economic benefits. This can be seen in the way Cat describes her regulars: “friends with benefits that give me money”.

Now comprising a type of social relationship, it is possible that the payment for services provided, when from regulars, is interpreted as denoting a ‘gift’ or functioning as part of a routine, “a mutual trade or whatever” (Lydia), rather than forming a sexual transaction in the traditional sense. For Monique, payment is perceived as a ‘bonus’, or additional benefit of the transaction, with the primary benefit being self-assurance derived from clients’ interest:

If you're willing to put yourself out there for the sex trade, you have to find a guy that's obviously willing, that finds you attractive enough, and for me that's flattering enough. I don't even need money for that when they're gorgeous like that and think I'm gorgeous.

Even though in an ideal world, workers' confidence and self-worth would not be tied to their participation in sexual exchanges, unfortunately, and as I will discuss below, clients are frequently a rare source of acceptance and care in a wider sea of exclusion and abuse. As a result, participants make distinctions between sexual transactions with unfamiliar clients and 'boyfriends', even if within casual and non-monogamous relationships such as those between regular clients and workers. Whether the sexual transaction is understood as part of 'work' or a relationship, or even somewhere in-between, and thus whether the money is considered payment or a gift, is therefore subjective and context dependent (Browne & Minnichello, 1995).

With the basic definition of sex work specifying the exchange of sexual services for money in a 'quid pro quo' manner, the "receiving or giving something of value merely as 'thanks' for, or incident to, a sexual act" does not necessarily 'count' as sex work (Green, 2016, p.76; Harris et al., 2011; Nayar, 2017). This is increasingly likely when the exchange is dictated by shared understanding rather than explicit negotiation (McMillian et al., 2018), such as when the terms of the exchange have previously been determined in earlier transactions and are subsequently not re-vocalized in future interactions. This suggests that negotiation itself – both its presence, as well as its terms – may act as additional variables affecting how sex work is understood.

**Intent and Purposeful Action.** The prevailing image of street-level sex workers presents them as enthusiastically propositioning potential clients driving by in their cars while standing on their corner or walking their stroll (Ferris, 2015). This stereotype assumes that sex workers typically initiate or solicit their transactions while intentionally working and, subsequently, that

sex work is a deliberate and premediated activity. However, my participants' involvement in sexual exchanges often lacked these elements. Several participants indicated that their involvement with street dates (dates secured at the level of the street, i.e. 'real' sex work) often manifested without active intention or conduct on their part. For example, Monique, Lydia, and Samantha describe their participation in non-regular dates as frequently occurring in a reactive rather than proactive manner, i.e. acquiescing a proposal from a purchaser rather than initiating the proposition:

I don't really look for it. it just kind of happens to me. [...] But if the opportunity arises, it's great. (Monique)

I used to live on 107 Ave and I'd go to the store to get a bag of chips and like cars would follow me [...] Sometimes I go for it. Like this one, I actually said "Sure, why not" and he turned out to be a nice guy. [...] It's like cars, when they stop, I think "Hmm, I can make money right now or I can keep walking". It's usually people that chase me. I don't look to them, they come to me. Like they follow my walking. That's how I do it" (Lydia)

You could just be on 118<sup>th</sup> [Ave] and just be a normal girl, not looking for work, and a client will be like "Hey, want to get in my car?" [...] Just standing at the bus stop, clients come [to solicit], right? (Samantha Cookie)

The previously mentioned quotes from Jane and June reveal that working when the opportunity presents itself also applies to interaction with regulars. In these scenarios, participants framed their involvement in sexual exchanges as taking advantage of opportunities presented to them. This opportunistic participation is perceived as different from sex work because, unlike the stereotype of sex workers as the instigator, they did not initiate the exchange, nor possess prior intent to participate in one.

The differentiation between purposeful and opportunistic participation is an undertheorized area of sex work discourse, which has yet to really interrogate the significance of different types of exchanges. However, it echoes the distinction made between active advertisement of sex work participation and actual participation in sexual exchanges in Drucker & Nieri's (2018) analysis of online indoor sex workers' exiting intentions. In the same way that the purposeful action involved in maintaining online profiles factored centrally in their respondents' interpretations of what it means to 'exit', so that some participants defined exit as ceasing advertising their services, my participants read significance into purposeful action in the form of active solicitation when interpreting whether their behaviour 'counts' as sex work. In the absence of deliberate purposeful action, acceptance of a date does not necessarily constitute sex work involvement.

Also informing participants' distinction of opportunistic participation and sex work is the issue of 'intent' and, more specifically, whether their participation was preceded or instigated by an intent to participate in a sexual exchange. Although participants' discussion of opportunistic involvement demonstrates a *willingness* to participate in a sexual exchange if and when an opportunity is presented, this was not seen to fulfil the criterion of *intending* to participate in a sexual exchange, itself a necessary criterion for sex work involvement. Pomery et al. (2009, p.896) define willingness as "an individual's openness to opportunity, that is, his or her willingness to perform a certain behavior in situations that are conducive to that behavior". This is distinct from intention, which speaks to planned behavioural action. Openness to uninitiated interactions, and subsequent acceptance, lacks the effort and planning that is taken to define sex work involvement and, thus, does not 'count' as sex work.

Accordingly, both prior intent and purposeful action to fulfil this intent were central criteria participants draw on when defining sex work and interpreting their own behaviours. Like the

stereotype of dominant discourse, these elements play a principal role in their understanding of what is meant by sex work involvement. However, when their participation is opportunistic and reactive in nature, both of these elements are absent. The absence of these features enables their sexual transactions to not count as sex work involvement, similar to how a taxi driver who agrees to drive a friend to the airport in exchange for \$10 on their day off may perceive this activity as distinct from their ‘work’.

**Dependency.** Also consistent with the discursive assumption of streetwalking behaviour is the construction of street-level sex workers as entirely dependent on, and desperate for, the income this streetwalking provides. This assumed dependency is used by the sex-work-as-exploitation perspective as evidence of the exploitation inherent to the sexual transaction and the subsequent need to ‘save’ those currently involved who remain “undeterred by (or oblivious to) the constant perils of her work” (Hugill, 2010, p.58; also Carline, 2011; Ferris, 2015). Although sex work income is recognized as being only one of multiple income sources for indoor sex workers, (c.f. Benoit & Shumka, 2015; Parsons et al., 2007), street-level sex workers are constructed as entirely dependent on the money earned through selling sexual services, with sex work constituting their ‘main job’ (van de Walle et al., 2017). This assumed dependency reinforces the (mis)characterization of sex workers as indiscriminate with customers and interactions because they are assumed to be engaging in survival sex – sexual exchanges to secure basic needs – and supports the sex work status binary’s disregard of gradations of involvement, such as ad hoc or part-time participation. (I explore this in Chapter 3.)

In actuality, few of my participants indicated that they are solely dependent on the income earned from sexual exchanges, regardless of whether these exchanges took the form of ‘real’ sex work (that which is seen to count as sex work) or not. This lack of dependency functions as another

variable rationalizing their disassociation of their participation with sex work. This lack of dependency also explains why participants were able to reduce streetwalking and instead mostly interact with regulars or opportunistically. So how is it that they are not as dependent on sex work income as commonly assumed? Several participants reported engaging in other income-earning activities either concurrent with or as an alternative to sexual transactions. Jane and Leigh picked bottles to return for deposit and Monique panhandled. Monique, Chantelle, Tara, and Leigh also engaged in drug selling activity. Others, like Freddie and Cat, mentioned receiving payment for acting as “watchers” or “stats keepers” for other workers, observing details of clients and transactions to provide to authorities in instances where a worker was assaulted or failed to return from a date. This role is distinct from third-party roles like managers, security, or ‘pimps’ because the watcher has no input on whether the other workers accept or decline customers, their rates, or the conditions of dates. Instead, it was a fluid arrangement agreed upon by the workers, whereby one worker would refrain from a date to provide a passive form of security to the others through information keeping in exchange for payment.

Not all additional sources of income came from fringe activities, criminal in nature or associated with marginalized populations. Sex work income often supplemented or was supplemented by ‘mainstream’ (i.e. non-sex work) labour force participation or governmental financial assistance. For example, Emma’s entrance into the sex trade started when the income from her mainstream job was insufficient to meet her needs:

Yeah, I started working the streets then because the money I was making through [my job] wasn’t enough. We were only getting paid \$155 a week, and I need more than that... so I started working like part time on the streets.

Conversely, Lydia, June, and Cat used sex work to augment the funds they received from social assistance programs that prohibited concurrent participation in mainstream work. In this way, their sex work participation resembled the labour market equivalents of moonlighting and multiple job holding, the experience of approximately 6% of the Canadian population and particularly common for female and young workers (Fulford & Patterson, 2019)

Thus, sex work was frequently just one of multiple income generation activities for those involved. Accordingly, sex work represented less of a ‘main job’ providing ‘core income’ for my participants, than one of several simultaneous income streams. For some, this multiple job holding even included mainstream employment. The concurrent involvement of sex workers in sex work and non-sex work labour is rarely acknowledged in the sex work literature. Of the small number of scholars who have examined the simultaneous participation of sex workers in both sex work and mainstream employment, all examine indoor sex workers (see Bowen, 2013, 2015; Ham & Gilmour, 2017; Law, 2011, 2013). Its occurrence among street-level sex workers remains unaddressed because it challenges both the assumed dependency affixed to street-level workers and the sex work status binary that only recognizes ‘all’ or ‘none’. Taken in tandem with the dominant narrative in which sex work is perceived as inherently exploitative and undesirable, the implicit assumption is that an individual who has access to mainstream labour options would not (and should not) maintain their participation in sex work.<sup>17</sup> Yet, contrary to the all or none conceptualization, the nature of my participants’ involvement, most notably the absence of streetwalking, selectivity with clientele, and opportunistic participation, demonstrates far less dependence on sex work income than the dominant representation concedes. This lack of dependency plays a contextual factor in participants’ perceptions of sex work involvement and

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<sup>17</sup> I engage in a more detailed discussion of this theme in Chapter 4.

their own sex work status. Because they were not entirely dependent on the revenue from sex work participation nor was sex work interpreted as their ‘core’ occupation, their participation in sexual exchanges did not necessarily ‘count’ as involvement.

**Summary of What Counts as Involvement.** Participants’ declaration that they ‘no longer work’, despite continuing to participate in sexual exchanges reveals multiple implicit assumptions within sex work discourse. First, it assumes everyone, sex workers and non-sex workers alike, operates with the same definition of sex work and, consequently, what it means to be involved. Yet, my participants’ ability to identify themselves as no longer involved despite continuing to participate in the sexual exchange – what is commonly believed to define sex work involvement – shows that this is not the case. Their understanding of sex work evokes multiple criteria in addition to the exchange itself that are currently not considered, or at least not explicitly acknowledged, in dominant definitions offered in research and policy. Because they affix their own definitions to what ‘counts’ as sex work, their definitions were far more complex. This emphasizes the value of conceptual disruption in critical research, including the need for researchers to both operationalize their own use of concepts, thus rendering explicit the assumptions they are making about the subject(s) involved, and clarify those of their participants in order to identify potential dissent and difference.

Second, and related to the first, my participants challenge the assumption that any and all participation in the exchange of sexual services for money counts as sex work. Through identifying the criteria that must be met for a sexual exchange to count as sex work, they shift the focus from the exchange itself to the context of the exchange. When scholars engage with a topic without reflecting on the pre-existing assumptions they possess about the subject or those involved, they risk overlooking the influence and significance of contextual variables. This enables assertions to



be made about sex workers' work, without actually considering how it is they *do* that work. This increases the likelihood that we misunderstand their relationship with their work and the various different ways they participate. By attending to the conditions of their work, I was able to realize that their involvement does not exist in an either/or manner, but is instead shaped by multiple variables such as the location of their work, the clientele with whom they interact, the level of purposeful effort they exert, and accessible sources of income.

### ***What Does It Mean to Be Involved?: Emotional Embodiment***

Participants' understanding of what sex work is and what it means to be involved is not solely influenced by the specifics of their working conditions or the fundamental criteria that defines it. It is also informed by the perceived rewards or benefits their participation provides. Most discussions of sex work emphasize money as the primary if not sole draw to, and of, sex work participation (Benoit et al., 2017; Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006a, 2006b; Mayhew & Mossman, 2007). van de Walle et al. (2017) explicitly use the term 'reward' to refer to the money or other material profit derived from sex work participation. Rarely does the conversation about the benefits of sex work extend to non-financial and non-material motivations or rewards, even though the receipt of money itself offers additional benefits to simple financial profit. According to Williamson & Folaron (2003, p.279), money not only alleviates financial constraints, but also offers "tangible proof of accomplishment" that functions as personal satisfaction, as well as encouragement to continue. Similarly, Jeffrey and MacDonald (2006b) argue that money provides symbolic as well as financial reward, bestowing social and political power to those who possess it, which in turn bolsters agency and independence in otherwise limited and oppressive contexts.

Money was a prominent theme in my participants' narratives. However, their involvement was not exclusively financially motivated. This is evident by the nature of their participation.

Limited streetwalking activity, discernment with clientele, and opportunistic rather than proactive action are counterintuitive to profit maximization. Furthermore, few were solely dependent on sex work income and several interpreted payments from regulars as constituting a bonus or gift of the interaction rather than the primary goal. If participants are not just in it for the money, their involvement must yield additional benefits. The question, then, becomes what other rewards do participants associate with sex work and how does this influence their understanding of sex work involvement more generally?

The dearth of research examining possible benefits of involvement is explained, in part, by the dominance of the sex work-as-exploitation perspective in scholarly and political discourse. Defining sex work as always and entirely exploitation limits the conversation to the negative aspects of the trade. With sex work understood as violence and those involved in the selling constructed as victims, there is little discursive space to consider that sex trade involvement may provide individuals with something that the so-called mainstream world does not or, at least, is currently not. This is particularly true for street-level sex work, which is often presented as the most exploitative and victimizing form of sex work (Cimino, 2012; Shdaimah & Leon, 2015; Strega et al., 2015). Street-level sex work's repeated conflation with survival sex removes the possibility that those involved associate their involvement with anything other than desperation and despair. If, however, we concede that sex work involvement is not solely defined by force and that some sex workers express agency by choosing to participate in sex work, even in situations where choice is constrained, then attention can be paid to the factors informing that choice, including what they perceive as the inducements of participation. To do so does not deny the reality of violence and other forms of mistreatment individuals may experience while in sex work, it simply does not limit the conversation to these experiences (Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006b). In fact,

acknowledging that individuals *perceive* certain benefits to sex trade involvement contextualizes their current involvement and can illuminate larger social and structural tensions and dysfunctions in need of redress.

By attending to the motivations and perceived rewards participants associate with their involvement I realized that involvement in sex work denotes more than the physical participation in sexual exchanges for money or its other behavioural activities like streetwalking, customer enticement, and transaction negotiation. Involvement is not only physically demonstrable, but also emotionally embodied. It comprises intangible elements that speak to a sense of identity and collective membership. Drawing on the sociology of work and labour markets literature, these elements can be said to constitute the latent, or less obvious, functions of sex work involvement. Latent functions are typically associated with an individual's well-being, and offer non-financial rewards or motivations like a sense of purpose and social connection (Krahn et al., 2020). The latent functions of sex work are interpreted as central benefits of my participants' involvement in the sex trade and inform the meaning they affix to sex work involvement more generally.

**A Community of Recognition.** Participants' narratives revealed a common theme informing the meaning they affix to their involvement. Involvement was intimately associated with a sense of acceptance and belonging. It was within Edmonton's street-level sex work community that many indicated that they found a place where they truly 'fit'. This community of recognition motivates and rewards their participation and plays a primary factor in their understanding of what it meant to be involved. This was true for all participants, regardless of their sex work status, and even for those who stated they "didn't do that anymore". Despite identifying as not involved in the physical activities that count as sex work, even those who were not actively participating at the

time of the interview expressed affinity with the sex work community and, thus, identified as involved with sex trade more generally.

Sex work research regularly speaks to the themes of exclusion and rejection as explanatory variables leading to individuals' entrance into the trade (Dalla, 2001; Dodsworth, 2015; Mayhew & Mossman, 2007) or as the outcome of sex work's stigmatization (Bruckert & Chabot, 2010; Hail-Jares et al., 2017; Mellor & Lovell, 2012). However, their counterparts – acceptance and belonging – remain far less acknowledged because they are non-harmonious with the sex work-as-exploitation narrative. Yet, a desire for acceptance and belonging make sense in a context of exclusion and rejection. It is, thus, unsurprising that some may prioritize the sense of community that exists within Edmonton's sex trade in their understanding of what it means to be involved in sex work, even above monetary benefits.

When the subject of community is addressed in sex work discourse, it often takes one of two forms. Much of the research focuses on how sex workers are excluded from communities, constructed as trespassers or undesirables in a space they don't otherwise belong (Hubbard, 1999; Melrose, 2008; O'Neill et al., 2008; Sanders et al., 2009). In these cases, the community being discussed is generally spatially determined, synonymous with neighbourhood, and unequivocally comprised of non-sex workers. Alternatively, sex work community is used abstractly to denote a population or category. Reference is frequently made to the 'sex work community' without further elaboration of what that means or entails (Brewis & Linstead, 2000a; Murray et al., 2010; Read, 2014; Sanders, 2016; Sanders et al., 2009; Shaver et al., 2011). Yet, the community of which my participants speak is neither geographically bounded nor an abstract category. Rather, it is interactional and relational in nature. Community, in this sense, describes social relationships with others that not only provide social support and acceptance, but also help participants make sense

of themselves and others through the creation of normative values and practices (Downe, 2003). Unfortunately, this type of community and its significance for how sex workers make sense of their involvement is woefully under-researched, even though it may act as an important factor influencing not only sex work involvement, but as Murphy (2010) identifies, sex work tenure.

Research that does contemplate the social relationships of sex workers is generally of a particular type (c.f. Dalla, 2000, 2001; Dodsworth, 2015; Leary & Minnichello, 2007; O'Neill, 2001; Oselin, 2014). First, it focuses on (blood) familial relationships or relationships with intimate partners. Second, the relationships being discussed are presented as dysfunctional and detrimental to sex workers' physical, emotional, or psychological wellbeing. Third, these relationships are identified as explanatory variables that either inform individuals' entrance into the sex trade or structure their exit from it. Few sources have explored the social relationships cultivated between sex workers and other members of the sex trade community and how these relationships are perceived as positive outcomes of participation. This may be influenced by Dalla's (2002, p.69) characterization of street-level sex work as "largely a solo activity". An absence of supportive relationships within the sex trade is also consistent with the sex work-as-exploitation narrative.

Read's (2014) analysis of fictive kinship among street-level sex workers offers a rare look at non-familial, non-intimate partner relationships within the sex trade. Focusing on the relationship between female sex workers and their pimps, she finds a 'patriarchal authoritarian' kinship arrangement that mirrors traditional male-headed nuclear families. Although she briefly considers the nature of the relationships between sex workers, it is limited to that which occurs within this pimp-led kinship structure rather than within the sex trade as a whole. We are left with little sense of the broader social relationships that comprise the street-level sex work community or the nature of the interaction among workers who do not work with pimps. Analyses of street-

level sex work that do not focus on pimp relations is important, as, contrary to most assumptions, not all sex workers are under pimp control. Even though sex work discourse often positions the pimp as “an integral part of street-level prostitution” (Williamson & Cluse-Tolar, 2002, p.1088; also Dodsworth, 2015; Farley, 2005; Read, 2014; Williamson & Baker, 2009; Williamson & Folaron, 2003), the prominence of pimps in street-level sex work is increasingly in dispute (c.f. Bruckert & Law, 2013; Gould, 2011; Jeffrey & MacDonald 2006b; Tutty & Nixon, 2003).

While not contesting that pimping may characterize the experiences of some sex workers in Edmonton, none of my participants worked for a pimp at the time of the interview and only two had previously worked with one as youth. Although some participants indicated that they had people in their lives that benefited from their sex work income, their relationships with these individuals were more complex than dominant pimping narratives allow. For example, individuals like drug dealers and family members may have indirect roles in their sex work participation, materially gaining from interactions when they occur, but unlike pimps they do not dictate their occurrence or its terms. It is, thus, important for research to consider the relationships sex workers have with others *outside* of the pimp relationship structure that take the form of more horizontal or peer relations. In addition, even though it was not addressed in my interviews, research on sex work should also examine these more complex relationships between sex workers and those who benefit from their labour but do not constitute pimps or third-party actors like agents or security (see Bruckert & Law, 2013; Bruckert & Parent, 2018).

The importance of studying relationships with others in the sex trade community (apart from pimps) is reaffirmed in my participants’ narratives. They identified the presence of a largely supportive community within Edmonton’s street-level sex trade through which they secured acceptance and a sense of belonging. Constituting its own subculture, this affiliation develops out

of shared values, language, and norms specific to sex work participation (Dalla, 2006; Read, 2014), and the common possession of a 'spoiled' identity thrust upon them by mainstream society (Goffman, 1963). This is best evidenced in the following quotation from Freddie.

I joined the prostitutes and uh I seemed to fit there. There's a bond there, you know, chemistry, affection, whatever that we all get and it's just there. The outside world, the mainstream, they don't see it – we're outsiders, degenerates - prostitutes, right? Now it doesn't matter, but I mean at that time in your life I needed [the acceptance]. I was young, I didn't know anybody in Edmonton, I was just coming out. It was fun, I didn't have a job, I couldn't handle money properly. It made sense, right?

With their use of language like "fit", "bond", "we all get it", Freddie articulates the acceptance and sense of camaraderie that can emerge from shared experiences of stigma and exclusion. Sex work represents a form of highly stigmatized work known in the occupational literature as 'dirty work', or work that is perceived as socially, physically, or morally 'tainted' (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Brewis & Linstead, 2000a; Mavin & Grandy, 2013). As a type of work that is considered "an affront to the moral order of society", sex work is especially stigmatized because it is perceived as even 'dirtier' than other forms of stigmatized labour (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014, p.84; Levey & Pinsky, 2015). As Ashforth and Kreiner (1999, 2013) explain, the negative connotation of this dirtiness is then transferred to those who participate in dirty work occupations, creating the spoiled identity; those 'spoiled' then form a strong sense of positive affiliation with other members and the activities of their work in an effort to insulate themselves from the effects of their stigmatization. As I will show, this affiliation takes on particular significance for individuals experiencing intersecting marginalizations, such as Freddie's navigation of their gender identity. The greater the stigma experienced by dirty workers, the greater the sense of

occupational culture and “us versus them” mentality as a form of stigma management (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2014).

Even though none of my participants identified this search for belonging as the initial motivation that pulled them into the sex trade, the community they found once involved was eagerly received. This community was comprised of two core member categories: other sex workers and regular clients.

**Members: Sex Workers.** The construction of sex work as a solitary activity results in the potential of a supportive sex work community being largely dismissed. For example, despite noting that “several” of her participants established friendships with other workers in the sex trade, Dalla (2002, p.68) dismisses these cases as “the rare exceptions”. Similarly, Sharpe (1998) contends that even though sex workers may develop social ties with one another, their relationships are best defined as convenience-based, temporary, and fickle. Challenging this dismissal, a small number of studies identify the presence of positive social relationships among individuals involved in the sex trade (Maher, 1997; Murphy, 2010; Shdaimah & Leon, 2016; Strega et al., 2014). These findings dispute the assumed absence of supportive relationships among sex workers and, subsequently, the sex-work-as-exploitation narrative’s suggestion that sex workers interactions with others within the sex trade are always adverse in nature. For example, Murphy’s (2010, p.781) study of street-level sex workers identifies the presence of a social network among her respondents, the majority of whom report that they “look out for [...] and support one another”. Similarly, Maher (1997) finds supportive social relations among her population of substance-using women who participate in sex work. Although her respondents tended to classify these relationships as ‘associates’ rather than ‘friends’, Maher describes their affiliation as “more complex and perhaps less instrumental than they initially appear” (p.38).



Consistent with this small segment of literature, my participants spoke of their relationships with other sex workers in an overwhelmingly positive manner. They offered stories demonstrating instances of support and friendship. Sometimes this support was demonstrated through material acts, like the sharing of personal items. Jamie, for example, makes sure to have “extra smokes or a bus ticket or stuff like that” to distribute to other workers when she visits Edmonton’s sex work organizations. Support also takes the form of important practical advice regarding how to stay safe and be successful in Edmonton’s sex trade. Several participants mentioned that they had been mentored by other workers when beginning their sex work involvement or acted as mentors for others. This mentoring takes the form of both relationship building through social interaction and risk navigation through the sharing of strategies and skills that enhance safety and payoff (Williamson & Baker, 2009). In the absence of any instruction manual, new workers have to figure out the informal norms and practices through trial-and-error unless they can look to others for guidance. Abigail explains:

When you work you don’t get a fucking instruction manual [...] After meeting girls like they just tell you some of the tricks that they know too. Like, they’re like ‘oh make sure the guy touches you first before you touch him’ kind of thing, like for undercover cops and all that stuff. They’d be like ‘let him tell you a price instead of you telling him’ and stuff like that. Like I would meet like girls and they knew I was fresh, I didn’t know nothing.

Although not frequently addressed in the literature, sex work is an activity that depends on skill and localized knowledge. Workers have to learn how to read and negotiate with potential clients, avoid detection by law enforcement, and navigate residents hostile to their presence. The knowledge shared by workers extends beyond that which is directly related to sex work to include the larger management of risk through the circulation of ‘street smarts’ or contextualized local

information specific to street life and the social and political context that surrounds it (Roche et al., 2005; Harris et al., 2011). This includes learning about the location and programs of social service agencies, the laws and policies regulating their behaviour, and informal norms of the various groups comprising Edmonton's street community.

In addition to active mentoring, workers provide each other with what Strega et al. (2014, p.33) refer to as "being there-ness", which describes a form of care that provides immediate assistance and contributes to new ways of understanding what support can look like and how it can be received. Within critical and feminist literature 'care' is recognized as comprising both a material practice and ethical lens through which to consider the relationships people have with, as well as the responsibility they have to, other people (Gilligan, 1982; Holland, 2010; Tronto, 1994). When scholars speak to an 'ethic of care', they draw attention specifically to those caring relations that remain overlooked or are marginalized (Holland, 2010). This can include the giving and receiving of care among members of stigmatized groups that is rooted in the shared experiences of that stigmatization. In other words, this feeling of 'being there-ness' that Strega et al. describe is rooted in the affiliation developed out of shared experiences only held by a marginalized segment of the population. Shdaimah and Leon (2016, p.53) described this as the "trust and non-judgemental aid [that] can only come from another woman who has lived what many refer to as 'the life'." Unlike the oftentimes conditional and paternalistic care offered by biological family and social service agencies that compels them to behave in particular ways and redefine their concerns through existing 'expert-determined' categories (Young, 1994), this community support is perceived by participants as having no strings attached.

This acceptance from and connection to other sex workers must be contextualized in a larger climate of exclusion and stigmatization through which most participants are forced to

navigate because of their involvement in ‘dirty work’. ‘Whorephobia’ is a term used within the sex work literature to describe the multiple manifestations of sex work stigmatization which produce adverse effects in terms of barriers to accessing resources and negative sense of self (see Bruckert & Chabot, 2010, also Benoit et al., 2018). Participants were very aware of the low value society, including their blood-family, places on sex workers, particularly street-level sex workers. “We’re basically as addicts and prostitutes, just basic homeless street people. Just thrown-away people [...] just fucking dirty, crazy, junkies” says Leigh. Abigail adds, “we’re the lowest of the low”.

Street-level workers are assumed to be at the bottom of the sex work hierarchy, informally referred to as the ‘whorearchy’, because of the direct contact they have with clients, and because it is often participated in poor women, women of colour, and substance-using women (Brents & Hausbeck, 2010; Bruckert & Chabot, 2010; Knox, 2014; van de Walle et al., 2012). In this way, the ‘dirtiness’ associated with their labour, as well as themselves, is compounded by their perceived inability to adhere to privileged or ideal standards of femininity, typically defined by whiteness, middle-class status, and chasteness (Hill Collins, 2000; Jeffrey, 2002; Mavin & Grandy, 2013; Raguparan, 2017). This whorearchy operates not only at the level of mainstream society, but also within the sex work community itself as different workers distance themselves from stigma through downward comparisons with other sex workers they perceived as inferior and thus ‘dirtier’ than them (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2014; Benoit et al., 2018; Bruckert, 2002; Mavin & Grandy, 2013). Olivia, who previously worked as an erotic masseuse, described shifting to street-level sex work as “a kick in the balls” that took a long time for her to accept.

The whorephobia experienced by Indigenous and transgender workers is further compounded by its intersection with racism, colonialism, and transphobia (Bruckert & Chabot,

2010). The overrepresentation of Indigenous women in street-level sex work, as well as the disproportionate violence they experience, is rooted in the colonial policies that disrupted Indigenous families and the colonial ideologies that constructs Indigenous populations, and Indigenous women specifically, as both hypersexual and inferior (Anderson, 2016; Ferris, 2015; Hunt, 2013; Oppal, 2012; Razack, 2002; White, 2009). These racist and colonial attitudes racialize the whorearchy, placing Indigenous women at the bottom, as inferior and against whom “violence may occur with impunity” (Razack, 2002, p.143; also Farley et al., 2005).

Racialized trans workers are disproportionately the victims of this violence, as “intersecting layers of colonialism, transphobia, and homophobia mark Indigenous trans bodies as disposable” (Lyons et al., 2017, p.883). The inherently transphobic and homophobic nature of the violence trans sex workers experience is recounted by Betty Page:

[Clients] don't know I'm a transsexual because I have breasts. I look like a woman. They assume I'm a woman... until they go downstairs and they're like 'Oh my god, what's that?'. That's why I was shot. That's why I was stabbed. That's why I was thrown out of a car. That's why I was hit by a hammer. That's why, because being transgender.

The horrors of Betty Page's victimization are rooted in the intersection of 'whore stigma', homophobia, and transphobia, which magnify the 'discourse of disposal' that both enables and contributes to a social climate in which violence and discrimination against sex workers thrives (Lowman, 2000). It is not simply that she is a sex worker who happens to be transgender, but rather that she is a *trans person who sells sex* – thus defying not only morality, but also the gender binary and compulsory heterosexuality that structures society – that informs her attackers' actions (Laidlaw, 2018; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2018). This violence becomes part of a larger pattern of social denouncement of their gender identity that often begins upon initial

disclosure. For example, June was renounced by her foster mom as a child “because I was coming out as transgender and she couldn’t handle it”.

The connections participants developed with other sex workers often function as a replacement for non-supportive, absentee, or otherwise dysfunctional familial relationships or their foster proxies, as in June’s case. It is, thus, unsurprising that multiple participants employed familial language when referring to other workers or their place within Edmonton’s sex trade community. Describing Edmonton’s sex trade workers, Betty Page exclaimed “they’re your sister, your brother, your auntie, your uncle”, Tara stated, “I usually end up being called sister a lot [laughs] ‘Hey sis’ or something like that, right?”, and Ellie noted, “they either call me mom, auntie, sister”. Cindy called sex workers her ‘family’:

This is my family. This is the people that I love. sometimes I go to my [blood-related] family and I don’t even feel comfortable around them [...] I don’t know, they’re not my family [...] We’re [sex workers] like a little family, we understand each other”

Few scholars have examined the creation of “nonconventional” kinship<sup>18</sup> among sex workers, or specifically the use of family terminology to describe non-familial relationships among sex workers. In addition to Read’s (2014) observation of patriarchal kinship forms among pimp-controlled sex workers, Strega et al. (2014, p.20) examined the creation of ‘families’ among their sample of non-pimp-controlled street-level sex workers. Similar to their sample, my participants identified a sense of collective identification stemming from shared experiences as socially stigmatized and economically marginalized populations. In this way, ‘family’ denoted a label given to relationships they had *with* others, to describe their community, as opposed to their actual

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<sup>18</sup> Nonconventional kinship is the term offered by Nelson (2014) to describe the various manifestations of fictive kin, families of choice, and voluntary kin.

relationship *to* them (i.e. familial). It was through this surrogate family unit that care, support, and acceptance was finally found.

Indigenous participants were the most likely to use ‘family’ terminology when discussing other sex workers. Despite the research on Indigenous street-level sex workers (see Farley, 2005), there is little research that examines the significance of sex work ‘families’ for Indigenous sex workers. Although few participants directly discussed racism or colonialism during the interview<sup>19</sup>, their experiences do not exist independent of the cultural dislocation and social marginalization that structures their lives. Indigenous participants’ identification with other sex workers, particularly other Indigenous sex workers, can denote both a desire for affiliation in the absence created by colonial disruption, as well as an act of resistance. Employment of ‘family’ in this way is consistent with Indigenous traditions and culture. Since Indigenous community members often play central roles in childrearing activities, terminology typically used to describe blood relatives in dominant definitions of family such as ‘auntie’ are applied to both blood and non-blood family members that provide care (Tam et al., 2017). The attribution of affective and affiliative labels to people otherwise segregated and stigmatized by a racist and colonial society may also represent an attempt to ascribe new meanings to and a revaluation of their (currently stigmatized) identities.

In this way, these nonconventional kinships expressed in Indigenous conceptions of family and sex worker families more generally dispute the traditional nuclear family model that is taken-for-granted as the standard family form (Baca Zinn, 2000; Nelson, 2014; Smith, 1993). Whereas blood relations are accepted as legitimate forms of relationships as Nelson (2014, p.216) argues, nonconventional kinships “have to *prove* that they are, indeed, both significant and meaningful.”

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<sup>19</sup> See discussion of racial invisibilization, internalization, and privilege in Chapter 2 (pg. 39)

Pointing specifically to the terminology employed for fictive kinship, she identifies how these relationships – which are most commonly used to describe patterns of relationships among ethnic and racial minority populations – are easily dismissed as fabricated, imaginary, or overestimated, as seen in Sharpe’s (1998) downplaying of sex worker social ties. By not dismissing their use of family terminology to describe non-blood members, researchers gain important insight on both the functional roles other sex workers play in each other’s lives (e.g. mentoring, emotional support, and material support), as well as the significance of these relationships, which exceed that expected from friendships (Muraco, 2006).

The relationships developed among sex workers and the resulting affection experienced with and from each other, thus, offers an important departure from their wider stigmatization and its physical manifestations. Maher (1997) argues that social relationships among ‘like’ individuals play a central role in the wellbeing of marginalized populations like sex workers, providing emotional support and material assistance, as well as a primary foundation for identity formation, especially with individuals otherwise ascribed a stigmatized identity (Pheterson, 1996). Social research demonstrates that supportive and confiding relationships are frequently found among members of so-called ‘voluntary’, as opposed to biologically or legally mandated, groups, particularly when those groups are highly homophilous (similar) in nature (McPherson et al., 2001; Pollack, 2009). This connection with other sex workers is interpreted by participants as a primary benefit of their sex trade involvement, distinct from financial gain. However, this social network created within Edmonton’s sex trade community is not simply a by-product of their involvement. It also plays a central role in the meaning they affix to sex work involvement; more specifically, it shapes how they make sense of their own involvement in sexual acts and identity as providers of sexual services. Being ‘involved’ in sex work means more than simply the physical acts of

participating in sexual exchanges or the activities surrounding it; it also means being part of a mutually supportive community that fills a gap created by rejection and exclusion and offers ongoing insulation against the whorephobia they encounter from mainstream society.

*Members: Clients.* Even though other sex workers comprised the bulk of participants' social networks within the sex trade community, several participants discussed regular clients as comprising a part of this community. Sex work research rarely attends to positive relationships between clients and sex workers because it does not fit into the dominant sex work narrative. This narrative proposes a negative and resentful relationship between sex worker and client (Farley et al., 2015; Williamson & Baker, 2009). Clients are typically constructed as “aggressive, misogynistic deviants” (Sanders & Campbell, 2007, p.16) and “ugly boogey-men in trench coats objectifying women” (Ross as cited in Hope Ditmore 2007, p.16), who possess little empathy for those who sell sex and a high likelihood of participating in violence against women, especially sex workers (Farley et al., 2015).

Contradicting this narrative, Cat, Lydia, Jane, Monique, and Ava described their regulars as “friends”. Cat also describes her regulars as having a primary place in her social life. Other participants also recounted incidences with regular clients that they interpreted as demonstrating affection or support without prompting from me or in response to a particular question:

I'd stay at um a guy's place [...]. He treated me with respect. Like um I could stay there, take a shower, have something to eat, sleep. Yeah, he had lots of respect for me. [...] Yeah, he'd always come pick me up, take me home, see that I was tired, and put me to sleep and feed me.” (Chantelle)

Like some guys, a lot of guys, just want, honestly what I found, is a lot of guys just want to help you get warm. Like for instance, I know a lot of guys that if it's cold, they just want



to take you somewhere warm. They'll give you \$20 bucks no problem, but they just want to keep you somewhere warm" (Monique)

Participants' relationships with regulars were often described as "being taken care of". This 'care' was typically at the level of basic needs, food and shelter, but also included a sense of acceptance and personal validation. This is evident in Monique's assertion that when clients find her attractive enough to want to participate in an exchange, "that's flattering enough. I don't even need the money when they're gorgeous like that and think I'm gorgeous". Personal validation from clients has only been recognized by a limited number of researchers as a factor influencing sex work involvement and is restricted to studies of indoor sex workers (see Benoit et al., 2018). However, this is likely an effect of the manner with which the different sectors are studied. With examinations of the labour of sex work generally restricted to the indoor sex trade, and analyses of street-level focusing on instances of violence, little space has been made available in studies with street-level sex workers to discuss relationships with clients.

Desire for care and validation is easily interpreted as evidence of the exploitative nature of sex workers' relationships with their clients, particularly when sex workers are engaged in survival sex or otherwise dependent on the income from these interactions. However, for many sex workers the issue is more complex than this interpretation allows. Sex worker needs are not always survival-based, as evidenced by participants' abovementioned restrictive engagement (opportunistic involvement, absence of streetwalking, additional income sources, etc.) Moreover, the use of sexual behaviour for validation is not restricted to sex workers. Using sex to gain emotional intimacy and self-worth describes a pattern that exists in all sectors of society (Weber, 2013). Although clients may take advantage of sex workers' need or desire for food or acceptance to secure sexual satisfaction, the relationships sex workers have with their clients are more

multifaceted when they also include intimacy and sincere affection. As Sanders (2008) notes, relationships between sex workers and regular clients may be imbued with emotion, with emotion sometimes prioritized over the sex. When the social quality of the relationship increases, the economic aspect can become secondary in importance or be ascribed with new meaning, becoming a bonus or gift received in addition to friendship or affection (i.e. “friends with benefits that give me money” (Cat)).

Even in situations that lack additional layers of affection between client and sex worker, constrained agency exists in the ability of participants to figure out ways to meet their needs in a climate of limited choices and social and material restriction (Shdaimah & Leon, 2015; Showden, 2011). Kong (2006) argues that capitalist employment relations are never completely voluntary because of unequal power relations. She identifies the lack of permanent arrangement and ability to enact control through refusal of clients and services as evidence of (constrained) agency operating in these interactions, which challenges the sexual slavery rhetoric of the exploitation narrative.

Most importantly, these relationships were not perceived as exploitative by the participants themselves because they involved more than the sexual exchange. Although I did not interview clients and, thus, cannot speak to their personal motivations or intentions, my participants’ perceptions of their relationships offer valuable insight because these perceptions inform their relationship to their work and how they make sense of their involvement. While the potential of false consciousness exists, I also have to be careful not to discount their own interpretations of their lives. Participants *interpreted* their relationship with regulars positively and believed that the care received from their interactions with regulars was a primary benefit of their involvement in the sex trade and a central component of what it ‘means’ to be involved in sex work more generally.

*Summary of What It Means to Be Involved.* This section identified the operation of a sex work community in Edmonton's street-level sex trade, of which membership is interpreted by participants as a 'reward' for their participation and a central element of how they understand themselves. Although rarely analyzed through the lens of 'reward', the social relationships and sense of belonging developed through sex work involvement has been identified by a small number of researchers as a perceived benefit of participation (Downe, 2003; Murphy, 2010). This is especially true for Indigenous and transgender participants who experience the intersecting stigmas of whorephobia, racism, and transphobia. For workers acquiring a social network and sense of self from their membership in the sex work community, participation in the sexual exchange becomes only one of the activities that falls under the sex work umbrella, along with community creation, rather than comprising the defining factor.

This demonstrates another limitation of the categorical binary approach for theorizing sex worker status. Whether someone is involved in sex work cannot necessarily be externally determined, because involvement is subjectively defined by those involved and may be dependent on the perceived motivations or rewards associated with it. Involvement's meaning and status is not solely determined by the physical act of exchanging sex for money, nor the activities that surround the exchange. It is also informed by a sense of belonging and acceptance that comes with being part of a community composed of common norms and experiences. For this reason, involvement exists not only in the presence of behaviour (i.e. participating in sexual exchanges), but also in its absence. In other words, participants may be 'not involved' in the sense that they are currently not participating in sexual transactions, but 'involved' because they still identify as a member of the sex work community.

As Showden (2011, p.155) articulates, sex workers “do not have the agency to make sex work mean whatever they want it to mean. They have to operate within the norms and interpretive frameworks available, even as they push the boundaries of these normative categories and interpretive structures”. As a result, they have to navigate their personal sense of identity with that “imposed” on them by their membership in a stigmatized group (Petro, 2010). This may explain why participants spoke positively about their membership in the sex work community, but generally rejected the sex worker label for themselves. Even though identifying as a sex worker is stigmatizing because of the ‘dirty’ label affixed to that work, being part of the sex work community can be rewarding. This finding is similar to Downe’s (2003, p.50) research with young sex workers, who described their participation in sexual exchanges as “a small price to pay in exchange for the sense of community and the cultural currency that led them to feel as though they belonged somewhere”.

As Sanders et al. (2009, p.33) note, although sex workers’ identities are “inextricably associated” with their involvement in sexual exchanges in sex work discourse, “the fact that they sell sex is a part of their lives, rather than a single identifying characteristic” (also Bruckert & Chabot, 2010). This makes sense, as sexual encounters may account for only a minor proportion of their daily activities (Brewis & Linstead, 2000b), as I demonstrate in Chapter 3. So although participants identify as *part* of the sex work community, they emphatically stressed that sex work “doesn’t define who I am” (Betty Page). Unlike Kong’s (2006) sample of sex workers in Hong Kong, my participants did not separate a ‘work’ identity as existing distinct from their personal ‘non-sex worker’ identity.<sup>20</sup> Instead, their membership in the sex trade community was “just

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<sup>20</sup> It must be noted that I did not ask my participants how or whether they distinguished identities. I did, however, ask them how they define themselves and how they wanted to be defined by others. This theme emerged from this questioning as well as their general narratives.

another hat” (Lydia), existing alongside other identities, comprising a larger multifaceted identity. In doing so, they challenged the non-sex work community’s tendency to affix the sex worker identity to them as a master status that expunges their other identities and roles (O’Neill, 2009). As Cat exclaims after listing her other identities, “Why can’t I be all of those things?”.

## **Chapter Summary**

Criteria reinforced by dominant representations of street-level sex work shape how participants understand what sex work involvement means, interpret their engagement in sex work-related activities, and assess the motivations and rewards associated with sexual exchanges. In popular and scholarly conversations about sex work, multiple implicit assumptions are made about the act and actors of sex work. Two of the primary assumptions made are that involvement exists in binary fashion: as either present or absent, and that this binary adequately explains the relationship of all sex workers with their work. In attending to my participants’ narratives, however, I observed two direct challenges to these assumptions.

First, despite how it may be classified by external actors, not everything ‘counts’ as sex work to those involved. Often defined simply as the exchange of sexual services for money, my participants affix additional criteria to their interpretations of their own behaviour. Their interpretation of their behaviours is both experiential and discursive (Brooks, 2007; Comack, 1999). They reflect on what they do and draw on the discourses available to them to make sense of their experiences with the sex trade and their relationship to sex work. Drawing on dominant stereotypes about street-level sex work when assessing whether or not something constitutes sex work, they use the absence of these elements to define their participation as different. This enables them to identify as “no longer involved” despite continuing to participate in behaviour defined as involvement by dominant discourse.

Their narratives thus raise important questions about how scholars think about sex work in a particular way that dismisses the multiple and diverse ways it is enacted by those involved. When street-level sex work is assumed to denote street-walking behaviour, indiscriminate acceptance of customers, purposeful action, and financial dependency, policies and programs are put in place to address these conditions. That may describe the situation of some sex workers, but it does not reflect the reality of all. Researchers must provide subjects with the space to describe their own experiences with, and relationship to, sex work, rather than imposing their own definitions and assumptions. At the same time, however, it must be recognized that research subjects can only draw on the discourses and vocabulary available to them to reflect on and articulate their experiences. Those who feel that available frameworks do not offer the language necessary to describe their situation are faced with a difficult choice, “either saying things that are not quite right, or working at using the language in non-standard ways” (DeVault, 1990, p.97). Acknowledgement of how the translation of experiences through such choices requires the distortion or erasure of important aspects of that experience or results in situations that appear incongruous must be made to avoid devaluing or contradicting the insight such translations retain.

Second, involvement in sex work is not only physically enacted but emotionally embodied. The involvement binary assumes involvement is defined only by the physical act of participation, but my participants’ narratives dispute this claim. Perceived as a primary reward of their participation, many participants saw community membership as a defining factor of what it means to be involved in sex work more generally. Acting as insulation from the matrix of stigmas they navigate on a daily basis, the sense of acceptance and belonging that came from shared norms and experiences was highly valued. They thus defied the sex work status binary’s interpretation of involvement by identifying as being involved because of their membership with the community

even if they did not participate in the physical acts comprising the sexual exchange. By investigating the ‘benefits’ participants associate with their participation in the sex trade, researchers and policy makers gain valuable explanatory context for their engagement.

By interrogating the assumptions we have about what sex work, and sex work involvement, means, we can see that sex work is not only a label that describes a specific activity, but rather an umbrella category to describe a multitude of relationships occurring in various contexts. In this way, sex work can be recognized as “a highly elastic [constructed] category” rather than a singular reality (Jeffrey, 2002, p.xv). In the next chapter, I continue to interrogate the complexity of sex work by considering what this diversity of involvement looks like in practice.

### **Chapter 3: What Involvement ‘Looks Like’**

In the previous chapter, I examined how participants understand sex work and what it means to be involved in it. As part of this, I identified a central problem with the sex work involvement binary framework used to discuss sex work in scholarly and professional discourse – not all participation in a sexual exchange is perceived by participants to count as sex work, with the result that individuals may participate in a sexual exchange but not classify themselves as involved in sex work. I extend this discussion in this chapter by identifying another limitation of the binary: the erasure of diversity comprising the category of involvement. Labelling everyone who answers in the affirmative to the question “have you ever had sex in exchange for money or other goods” as involved, without further interrogation of that involvement, limits nuanced understandings of what it means to ‘be’ a sex worker and to ‘do’ sex work. This is because this way of thinking about involvement is entirely categorical in nature. However, involvement is not simply a status, but an activity in process. By asking what involvement ‘looks like’ for my participants, I reveal the varied nature of sex worker’s involvement in the sex trade that defies a simplistic ‘present’ or ‘absent’ model of discursive categorization.

I begin this chapter by examining current conceptualizations of sex work and how they rely on and reproduce certain temporal assumptions about sex workers’ involvement. Exposing those assumptions, I demonstrate how the one-dimensional representation they produce enables generalizing statements to be made about sex workers and the nature of their participation. I then review the limited research that does quantify sex workers’ participation and reveal how their findings refute the temporal assumptions about what sex work ‘looks like’, but are often unacknowledged or dismissed by the scholars who noted them. Using my participants’ narratives to further tease out a more nuanced picture of what involvement ‘looks like’, I reveal the diversity



of involvement that exists among sex workers, as well as that which exists across individual sex workers' sex work careers. This increased nuance is lost when researchers rely on inaccurate and one-dimensional assumptions about sex work involvement and, I argue, needs to be accounted for in future sex work research endeavours.

### **Temporal Conceptualizations of Sex Work Involvement**

Not only does the language currently used to discuss sex work involvement assume a 'present' or 'absent' manner, sex workers are also implicitly constructed as participating in sex work *ad infinitum* or not at all, with the result that the vast gradations of involvement that exist between working 24/7 and complete abstinence are overlooked. This facilitates the polarization of sex work perspectives and, in particular, the sex-work-as-exploitation assertion that all sex workers are integrally victims in need of rescue, because it is assumed that anyone involved in sex work is necessarily involved in exactly the same way, and the sex worker becomes unimaginable outside of her assumed infinite participation in sexual exchanges. Sex work involvement thus becomes positioned as an identity category in much of the sex work literature as opposed to a behaviour activity (Bruckert & Hannem, 2013; Shaver, 2005). This limits our ability to consider the processes of involvement, so that involvement is recognized as a practice that individuals participate in in addition to an identity category or status description.

The conflation of sex workers with their work has already been noted by scholars critical of one-dimensional accounts of sex workers (Bruckert, 2007; Bruckert & Chabot, 2010; Day, 2007; Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006b). Reflecting on her own experience in the sex trade, Highcrest (1997, p.91) states, "[p]rostitutes are rarely shown cleaning house, buying groceries, hanging out with friends, or just sitting around" even though "[t]hese ordinary activities took up most of my days". Highcrest's statement remains as true now as it was when originally stated over two decades

ago. These gaps in representation and understanding persist in contemporary sex work research. Similarly, Sanders et al. (2009, p.33) critique much of the policy discourse on sex work for positioning the selling of sex as the “single identifying characteristic” of sex workers’ lives and identities. While these sources encourage a critical rethinking of how we think about sex worker identity and the various other activities in which sex workers are involved outside of their participation in the sex trade, there has yet to be a similar call to critically rethink how researchers talk about the specifics of sex worker involvement itself. Scholars, even those offering critical analyses of sex workers’ labour, rarely specify the nature of their participants’ involvement in the sex trade. As a result, our understanding of *how* sex workers are involved with the sex trade remains partial, and generalizing statements that ignore difference among sex workers can flourish. When investigation of sex work participation is limited to sex work status (‘involved’ or ‘not involved’), researchers and policy makers overlook the significance of context and detail of that involvement and produce inaccurate assumptions about sex work behaviour.

Occasionally, researchers provide superficial acknowledgement of involvement diversity by evoking broad temporal categories that remain un- or poorly defined. For example, Oselin (2010, p.532) specifies that her respondents reported “regularly working in prostitution”. Most commonly, if included, temporal qualifiers are used to specify ‘part time’ participation (Aral et al., 2006; Benoit, Jansson, et al., 2018; Benoit, Oulette, et al., 2017; Brewis & Linstead, 2000b; Hawken et al., 2002; Lowthers, 2018; Law, 2010, 2013; Mishra & Neupane, 2015; Sanders, 2007). Regrettably, what ‘part time’ means remains unstated, or is simply positioned as a contrast to ‘full time’ or as supplemental to other employment. Reference is also sometimes made to ‘occasional’ or ‘casual’ sex workers, as distinct from ‘part-time’, but without clarification of this distinction (Law, 2010; Scrambler, 1996).

When only statuses that differ from ‘full-time’ are specified, full-time emerges as the taken-for-granted and unstated norm of sex work involvement. Yet, without additional clarification, researchers and policy makers are left to presume what these qualifiers mean, subconsciously relying on the dominant frameworks and assumptions already cemented within sex work discourse. So ‘full-time’ involvement may be read through the dominant portrayal of sex workers as spending the majority of their day, every day, participating in sex work. Yet, this does little to refine the other categories. Does ‘part-time’ mean not every day *or* just not the entirety of each day? Likewise, does occasional mean once a week, month, or year? Importantly, because sex workers are rarely asked to classify their involvement, it also remains unclear whether the vague qualifiers applied by researchers reflect those sex workers would use to describe their own work. In fact, as Williamson (2000) argues, because sex workers are wholly equated with their work, externally imposed qualifiers are likely to interpret their work as full-time (i.e. unstated norm) even if the workers themselves would classify it as part-time. This is why qualifiers are typically introduced only for non- ‘full-time’ participation, because it differs from what is assumed to be typical involvement.

Seldomly do researchers quantify their discussion of sex work participation or ask their respondents to do so. Oselin (2010) and Nowlan (2007) offer two rare exceptions. In her examination of sex work in multiple cities in the United States, Oselin (2010, p.532) notes that even though her “interviewees did not provide exact measures of the frequency of their sexual transactions [...] most stated these exchanges ranged from a few times per week to daily, depending on their need for money”). Offering a more local example, Nowlan’s (2007, p.46) examination of Edmonton sex worker participation in a joint police and service organization intervention project offers the following description of his subjects’ ‘work pattern’:

Of the 134 surveys conducted, 48.5% of the subjects indicated that they work the streets daily, 28.3% claimed they worked at least once per week, while 14.9% claimed they worked up to five times per week.

These differences in participation frequency are significant for understanding the relationship sex workers have with their work, yet no further discussion is provided by either author. Using Nowlan's subjects because of the statistical breakdown provided, there is also no indication of the participation frequency of the remaining 8.3% of respondents not specified, although I suspect it is less than once per week because that is the lowest frequency indicated. The omission of those respondents, particularly when acknowledged in tandem with the nearly 30% of workers only participating once per week, is significant because it challenges dominant assumptions about what it means to *be* a sex worker, which are based on this assumed – yet unspecified – continuous participation in sexual exchanges.

These assumptions are even evident in the types of questions we pose about sex work. For example, Brewis and Linstead's (2000b, p.88) examination of sex worker identity asks "How, then, do prostitutes manage to engage in 'work sex' on a daily basis". Similarly, Harris et al.'s (2011, p.386) research on risk management in sex work explores "what daily working life might be" for their participants. This demonstrates and reproduces the assumption that sex workers indeed participate in sex work *daily*. This emphasis on 'daily' is also apparent in Hannem's (2016, p.9) discussion of sex work as "a full-time job". As a result, individuals who participate in a less stereotypical (i.e. less frequent) way risk being overlooked or excluded. This, subsequently, affects the type of policy or programming that is implemented to regulate their behaviour and respond to their assumed needs and schedules. Moreover, this discussion of work pattern assumes a shared

definition of ‘working’<sup>21</sup> between researcher and respondents, an assumption I challenged in the previous chapter.

Information about the nature of sex workers’ involvement is also occasionally indirectly indicated. For example, Hawken et al. (2002) provide a breakdown of the mean, median, and range (from 0-10) of respondents’ number of sexual partners in the week prior to the study, including differentiating regular from non-regular clients, in their study of ‘part time’ female sex workers in Kenya. With 10 clients per week forming the maximum number reported by their respondents, and means of 1.0 and 1.5 for regular and non-regular clients, respectively (medians of 1.0 for both), their findings also demonstrate much lower frequency of participation than is commonly assumed in sex work discourse. Notably, the authors did not purposefully recruit individuals in ‘part time’ sex work, instead adopting this descriptor during the analysis phase to describe their findings.

This discussion of research employing some manner of participation descriptors demonstrates that sex workers’ involvement frequently differs from the 24/7 or abstinent models commonly promoted in sex work discourse. Yet, the significance of both details about, and variation in, sex worker participation rarely forms part of the conversation. In order to develop more nuanced understanding of sex work in Canada and the experiences of those involved in Canada’s sex trade, and ensure the proper programming and policy are in place to respond to their varied needs, researchers need to investigate the specific nature of the multiple relationships individuals have with their work. A central question whenever the topic of sex work is addressed in research should subsequently be “what does involvement *look like* for those being discussed?”. Drawing on my participants’ narratives, I will now demonstrate the insight such questions make possible.

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<sup>21</sup> Nowlan’s (2007, p.58) survey guide asks “How often do you work (as a prostitute)?” Oselin (2010) does not specify the wording used.

## **What Involvement ‘Looks Like’ For My Participants**

The frequent lack of definitions offered for sex work, sex worker, and sex work status demonstrates the taken-for-granted nature of this topic and the people involved. This may explain why so few studies have asked sex workers to talk about their participation as sex workers. Yet, as I reveal in the previous chapter, my participants’ involvement differs from the dominant portrayal of street level sex workers as primarily, and persistently, engaged in streetwalking behaviour and indiscriminately accepting clients because they are dependent on the income earned from sexual exchanges. Instead, few were solely dependent on sex work income alone for survival, which enabled them to have greater control of their working conditions. As a result, many were able to restrict their participation to regular customers and engage in streetwalking and new client solicitation as a last or supplementary resort. Their participation was also more opportunistic and reactive in nature than is acknowledged by prevailing discourse. By asking the question ‘what counts as sex work?’, I have already demonstrated that the nature of sex work involvement ‘looks’ very different for my participants than is commonly assumed in scholarly and political discourse.

Reassessing their involvement through the question of ‘what does their involvement look like’, or, worded differently, ‘what are the specifics of their involvement?’, I reveal an additional facet by which their participation differs: by its diversity. This diversity exists at two levels. First, there is diversity of involvement among workers. Rather than participating in a uniform manner, sex workers participate in the sex trade differently from one another. Second, there is diversity in the involvement of workers over time. The specific aspects of any particular worker are best recognized as dynamic rather than static in nature, with the result that their involvement changes over the course of their sex work careers. Even though both levels of diversity may seem obvious

when articulated, neither are regularly acknowledged in scholarly, political, or popular conversations about sex work.

### ***Diversity Among Sex Workers: Variations of Involvement***

The literature is beginning to acknowledge, albeit in a superficial manner, that individuals participate in sex work *differently* through the application of vague temporal qualifiers like ‘full time’, ‘part time’, and ‘occasional’. But these general categorizations tell us little about the practice of involvement: how sex workers actually ‘do’ their work. Moreover, they maintain the homogenous representations of sex workers, or at least of all sex workers in each temporal category, as all having the same relationship with sex work and participating in an identical manner. This then informs the conversations about, and decision-making regarding, their lives and work, permitting one-size-fits all solutions that overlook the diverse experiences of women involved in sex work and the contexts in which their work takes place (Williamson & Baker, 2009). Yet, as Abigail cautioned when discussing Edmonton’s sex trade: “there’s diversity of working girls here”.

As I noted when discussing the involvement status of my participants, it is incorrect to infer that all of my participants in each of the broad sex work statuses, even when expanded beyond the involved/exited dichotomy (see Chapter 2, Table 3), are involved in sex work in exactly the same way. It is entirely unrealistic to presume, for example, that all 15 participants who admit involvement work the same number of hours per day or even the same number of days per week. It is similarly incorrect to posit that both participants who identify as uninvolved but whose narratives suggest involvement see the same ratio of regular clients vs. new clients or participate in the same frequency of streetwalking behaviour. In other words, not only is there diversity in participation between each of the status categories, there is also diversity *within* each category.

Since I did not directly ask participants to specify the nature of their involvement, I can only speak to the dimensions that emerged from their general narratives. Additional variables are likely to be ascertained from more direct probing with those involved.

**Participation Frequency.** First, their involvement differs according to the frequency with which they participate. Their involvement in sexual exchanges (whether it ‘counts’ as sex work or not) may range anywhere from multiple times per day to a few times a year, as well as both more and less frequently. Acknowledging this span is important, because an individual who works multiple times per day would experience sex work differently from someone who participates a few times per year, and, subsequently, has different needs and circumstances. Workers who participate more frequently may be more financially dependent on sex work income. Greater dependency means that they lack the same agency over the conditions of their work as less dependent workers, such as the ability to refuse ‘sketchy’ clients or avoid streetwalking and the subsequent potential presence in unpopulated and unlit areas that may increase their vulnerability to violence.

This differing dependency can be said to reflect the distinction made within the sociology of entrepreneurship literature between ‘opportunity entrepreneurship’ and ‘necessity entrepreneurship’. Opportunity entrepreneurship results from greater economic freedom and flexibility, wherein participation is framed as the pursuit of opportunity, unlike necessity entrepreneurship which is done by those with little economic freedom in the form of prospects and security and thus constitutes a constrained choice (Angulo–Guerrero et al., 2017; Baskaran, 2019). Unsurprisingly, necessity entrepreneurship is more prevalent among women, whose choices are constrained by the larger exclusion and inequality they experience at the social, political, and economic levels (Minniti, 2009; Pines et al., 2010). The intersectional effects of other



marginalizations would also be significant. Non-traditional employment, like sex work as well as other activities included under the ‘gig economy’ label, exist as a rare prospect for economic participation for many marginalized and stigmatized groups (see Baskaran, 2019). However, sex workers should not automatically be assumed to be necessity entrepreneurs, because necessity and opportunity are typically presented in a dichotomous format, with necessity described as those “*forced* into entrepreneurship as a means of survival” and a “last resort” absent of economic security (Baskaran, 2019, pp.345-346). While this may describe the involvement of some sex workers, as I reveal in this and the preceding chapter, it cannot be generalized for all. An individual’s involvement in sex work is strongly affected by their relative level of economic freedom and constrained choices, the motivations and rewards associated with their involvement, and the resulting degree to which their participation exists, and is interpreted, as ‘opportunity’ or ‘necessity’.

For this reason, it is important to avoid assuming a causal relationship between participation frequency and financial dependency or necessity more generally. Money is only one of the motivations and rewards of sex work involvement among my participants. Workers participating solely for financial reasons may limit their involvement to that which is needed to achieve financial goals, whether immediate or longer term. Participants who receive emotional satisfaction through their interactions with clients may desire more frequent engagement irrespective of financial need. Additionally, sexual exchanges have to be scheduled around other obligations. Participants with childcare responsibilities, other employment, or injuries are less free to partake in dates and, subsequently, may have a lower participation frequency. For example, when asked what contributes to her lack of participation, Jamie, a single parent, responds, “Um I’m too busy [*laughs*]. I’m just too busy [*laughs*]”. Alternatively, Cat was previously injured and

unable to participate in sexual exchanges for an extended period of time. However, despite her inability to participate in sexual exchanges, her ‘involvement’ in sex work continued. She simply shifted the nature of her involvement to an alternate role: “But even while I was healing I was still working, but not on dates. I was watching the girls and they paid me. I knew every vehicle every girl got into, you know”.

As Cat’s example demonstrates, it is not simply participation in sexual exchanges that varies in frequency, but also participation in other activities that form part of the operation of the sex trade. Thus, sex workers engage in the primary activity recognized as ‘sex work’ at different rates, as well as other sex work activities that rarely form part of the scholarly or political conversation. To more accurately understand the nature of workers’ involvement with the sex trade, researchers must consider both the frequency of participation and the nature of that participation.

**Clientele.** The specifics of sex workers’ involvement also differ by clientele. Diversity exists both in the number of clients they interact with, but also the nature of the clients. How many regulars each worker has varies by worker, as well as over time. Sex workers who have recently commenced participation in the sex trade have not had the same time and opportunities to build a roster of regulars. Workers who altered their working conditions (e.g. changed locations, sectors, availability, etc.) may disrupt their roster or their relationships with particular regulars. Each worker would also have a unique ratio of regular vs. new clients and this ratio may regularly fluctuate depending on their and their clients’ other obligations. As I note in Chapter 2, regular clients are not only preferable to my participants, because these relationships are socially as well as economically beneficial, but also make up the bulk of their sex work activity.

My participants desired a higher ratio of regular to new clients for reasons such as safety, dependability, and emotional connection. Kristina attributes having regulars as the reason she had to date avoided being caught by the police, a likelihood that increases with streetwalking and new clients, stating “I feel safe around [regulars]. I’m not/ like I know they’re not cops, undercover cops, or like you know something that would put me in jeopardy of getting picked up”. This is likely, but not necessarily, the case for many sex workers. The quantity of regulars varied among participants. Kristina maintained a small roster, stating “I have like two clients that I see twice a week, or once a week, and I just stick with them”, whereas Olivia stated, “I have a lot of regulars”. Similarly, Samantha Cookies noted that she’s “always looking for new clients”. Although I did not ask her to explain this comment, I imagine that this strategy would help reduce any dependency she has on any particular person.

The nature of sex workers’ clientele is significant because workers who mostly see regulars may differently experience and interpret their work than those primarily engaging with strangers and partaking in streetwalking activity. The degree to which workers are mostly able to participate in sexual exchanges with clients they ‘like’ and feel safe with, compared to new clients or regular clients they ‘dislike’ or who feel unsafe, not only impacts how they experience their work – i.e. as ‘positive’ or ‘negative’, as fulfilling as emotional need or contributing to a negative sense of self, etc. – but potentially also the frequency with which they participate. Those who mostly transact with clients they dislike may reduce their participation if they are in a position to do so. For example, Williamson and Baker’s (2000) typology of worker styles includes ‘Outlaw’ workers who have no interest in establishing a base of regular clients and instead seek to restrict their sexual interactions with any clients. Likewise, those who mostly interact with new clients may restrict their participation to that which is necessary because of the increased risks of violence, arrest, or

nonpayment associated with unfamiliar clients. On the other hand, those who mostly transact with clients they like may increase participation because of the emotional satisfaction they receive regardless of financial need and, as found by Law (2011, 2013) and Bowen (2015), continue seeing regular clients even after ceasing other participation in sex work.

**Technology and Work Sites.** The nature of sex workers' involvement may also vary depending on their access to, and integration of, technology and multiple work sites. Technology increases workers' availability to be contacted about a potential date (Brewis & Linstead, 2000), regardless of the frequency of acceptance. The ability to advertise online and be accessible through email or telephone also enables a worker to schedule multiple dates in a manner unavailable to those soliciting on the street who are more subject to chance encounters, as well as the effects of weather. The ability to secure dates without having to endure the elements, especially in locations like Edmonton that experience bitter colds and debilitating storms during the winter months, likely increases the number of clients they see, as well as permits the additional agency over which clients are accepted or rejected. Subsequently, the frequency of streetwalking activities and initiation would vary, not only by financial need, but also by access to technology. Similarly, workers who also work in additional locations, such as hotels or massage parlours, may adapt their ratio of 'indoor' vs. street solicitation depending on the weather or other variables, and also have a broader range of clients from which to establish their roster of preferred clients.

Not all workers benefit equally from technology and multiple work sites. The whorearchy that operates within the sex trade restricts the movement and mobility of sex workers who are seen to do the 'dirtiest' work and experience the intersecting effects of racism, classism, cisgenderism, heterosexism, and mental health and substance use stigma. Despite increased access to technology

through public sources like libraries and shelters, sex workers still face barriers. One of these barriers is credit card access:

Like if you don't have the internet, how can you go Backpage? if you don't have a credit card, how can you get on Backpage, you know? Or if you want to find a sugar daddy, you can't do it without a credit card *[laughs]*. Like shit like that. You've got to buy memberships. You've got to. (Abigail)

Financial restrictions and even existing criminal records create additional barriers for work sites that require municipal licenses. The City of Edmonton requires erotic masseuses (referred to as body rub practitioners), escorts, and erotic dancers (exotic entertainers), as well as the businesses they operate out of, to be licensed (City of Edmonton, 2020). Although Edmonton's fee schedule indicates that licenses for workers do not have a fee, they do in Calgary (City of Calgary, 2020).

Samantha Cookie explains:

An independent license? [...] It costs 3 thousand dollars ... I think. Yeah, it's a year, it's like 3 thousand dollars, and I'm like/ or is it for a lifetime? Because one of the girls here has/ I don't know. It must have a time on it because I know the massage parlour one expires in like 2 years or something. 3 hundred bucks?

Reviewing the City of Calgary's (2020) Business Licence Fee Schedule, I calculated that the initial costs for a 'body rub practitioner', 'date or escort', or 'exotic entertainer' license come to \$237, with renewals costing \$196. Although significantly less than Samantha Cookie's quote, these fees can be substantial for those already experiencing financial restrictions. Her statement also demonstrates the confusion that many workers may have attempting to successfully navigate the municipal regulations necessary to obtain these licenses. Both Edmonton and Calgary also require a police record check as part of the license application. In Edmonton, this has a \$70 fee and requires

two pieces of identification (one government issued), both of which may be inaccessible for those experiencing poverty, housing insecurity, and the effects of colonial dislocation practices (Taylor, 2017).

Sex workers without access to online or telephone advertising and scheduling, and those who do not work in multiple locations, participate in and therefore experience their work differently from those who do. They have less agency over their working conditions and are subsequently more vulnerable to external forces like the weather, dispersion activities, and police surveillance, as well as less able to be discriminate among potential customers. This affects their ability to protect themselves from bad clients and subsequent incidences of violence. All of this affects the conditions of their work, the frequency of their participation, the clientele with whom they interact, and, subsequently, what their work ‘looks like’ in practice.

**Agency and Control:** Last, even though none of my participants worked for a pimp, at least according to dominant representations, the nature of sex workers’ involvement certainly differs depending on the level of control they have over their working conditions and occurrence as determined by their relationship (or lack thereof) with a pimp figure. As Williamson and Baker (2000, p.33) describe in their typology of the pimp-controlled sex work, “[w]hen under the control of a pimp, a woman must understand and accept the conditions of work, that is, he controls her actions, money, and resources and she must live by his rules.” With less agency over their work conditions, including the rate of participation, the customers with whom they interact, and the price of services, a pimp-controlled worker’s involvement would differ from independent workers who set their own terms.

The relative impact of this aspect of sex workers’ involvement is important to acknowledge, but because pimps did not directly impact the work of my participants, I deliberately

keep this section brief. Future analyses that consider how pimp influence impacts what sex work looks like for those selling sexual services should be careful to adopt more nuanced definitions of ‘pimps’ that recognize influence and pressure that may come from less stereotypical parties, such as romantic partners, family members, and drug dealers who benefit from the money earned through sex work in less direct ways (see discussion in Davis, 2013). Betty Page explains

[Pimps] don’t necessarily have to be man, somebody who takes your money. A pimp could be anybody. A drug dealer, that’s a pimp. Every druggie I call a pimp because they take the girls’ money. That’s what a pimp does, takes their money, correct? That’s what drug dealers do. (Betty Page)

**Summary of Diversity Among Sex Workers.** The section identified four factors that affect how sex workers participate in their work and create diversity of involvement between workers. Participants’ narratives spoke to the influence of participation frequency, clientele makeup and quantity, technology and multiple work site access and integration, and autonomy and control for shaping their sex work practice. This is not an exhaustive list. Additional variables are likely to be revealed when research participants are asked more directly about their involvement, and this is likely to reveal important insight. This is particularly true when analyzed through a deliberate intersectional lens that attends to the power of social location, systems of oppression, and resulting privileges.

Acknowledging the multiple and diverse ways involvement is enacted by those involved in sex work is important because it draws attention to the variability of circumstances and corresponding needs shaping their participation in the sex trade and, subsequently, resulting from it. Recognition of this diversity can lead to more appropriate services and support that better respond to the multiple different relationships sex workers have with their work (Williamson &

Baker, 2009). Appreciation of this, as well as the potential agency workers have over their involvement, is currently lacking in much of the sex work discourse because it refutes our singular conceptualization of sex work and does not fit the dominant portrayal of sex workers as pimp controlled and financially dependent in accordance with the prevailing sex work narrative. As a result, any other relationship workers have with sex work becomes unimaginable or construed as the exception.

### *Diversity Across Involvement: Variations Over Time*

A critical reading of my participants' narratives through the question of what their involvement 'looks like' reveals a second error in dominant discussions of sex work involvement: the assumption that involvement denotes a static status category. In their analysis of the complexities of sexual consent, Muehlenhard et al. (2016) discuss the significance of thinking about consent to participate in sexual activity as a discrete event, in which, once given, it is assumed to continue in an unchanging manner until it is retracted, versus as an ongoing continuous process – in which it is continually negotiated and assessed. With sex work status envisioned as a binary, it can be argued that dominant discussions of sex work assume involvement exists in both a uniform and unchanging manner until the worker exits, rather than something that is continually negotiated and variable. While the former enables definitive declarations about the 'truth' of sex work and one-size solutions, the latter call for a critical rethinking of what we mean when we talk about sex work involvement and the significance of modifications in participation for those involved.

In addition to the ambiguity of qualifiers like 'full time' and 'part time', classifications of sex workers based on rate of participation are problematic since participation rates can regularly change with circumstance. Yet, this is rarely acknowledged in the sex work literature. When



discussing the participation and tenure rates of male escorts in London, Cameron et al. (1999) critiqued the artificiality of the distinction between full and part-time involvement, noting that because many are students and, thus, subject to the demands of an academic schedule, their involvement regularly changes. Other responsibilities like childcare and mainstream employment would also take up more or less of one's time depending on the schedules of daycare, vacation, and other external demands. Sex workers are busy continually navigating the interrelationships between social, health, economic, and other factors and this affects their relationship with their work (Bungay, 2013). However, because discussions of sex work evoke static representations of involvement, changes in participation typically go unacknowledged and unanalyzed.

Attending to the dynamic nature of my participants' involvement, I now explore how their involvement has changed over the course of their sex work career. My use of the concept 'career' here differs from the traditional use of the word, to describe linear progression of an employee within conventional organizational structures (Adamson et al., 1999; Murphy & Venkatesh, 2006; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Rather, I use the term 'career' in a looser sense - to describe the nature of their relationship with the sex trade and how they make sense of this relationship-, which constitutes "a continuously constructed phenomenon" that is highly subjective and contextual (Adamson et al., 1999, p.257). Adopting Murphy and Venkatesh's (2006, p.133) sex worker-informed definition of career, sex work can be understood as a career "because of the meaning and significance that it takes on in [sex workers'] lives and how they conceive of their future". Recognizing that this meaning is situationally influenced, the structure of sex workers' careers is best defined by the kaleidoscope career model (KCM), which Sullivan and Baruch (2009, p.1557) describe as follows:

Like a kaleidoscope that produces changing patterns when the tube is rotated and its glass chips fall into new arrangements, the KCM describes how individuals change the pattern of their career by rotating the varied aspects of their lives to arrange their relationships and roles in new ways. These changes may occur in response to internal changes, such as those due to maturation, or environmental changes, such as being laid off. Individuals evaluate the choices and options available to determine the best fit among work demands, constraints, and opportunities as well as relationships and personal values and interests. As one decision is made, it affects the outcome of the kaleidoscope career pattern.

The metaphor of a kaleidoscope helps direct our attention to the way in which variables such as need and circumstance change the nature of the relationship sex workers have with their work and, thus, produce diversity in a worker's involvement over time. It also acknowledges the existence and interplay of multiple dimensions of involvement, such as participation form, financial significance, personal identity, and social relationships.

Unfortunately, little research considers how individual sex worker's involvement changes. The small segment of literature that does consider change typically does so only through an exiting lens, whereby modifications in involvement are assumed evident of a desire and effort to cease involvement (c.f. Bowen, 2013, 2015; Ham & Gilmour, 2017; Law, 2011; Sanders, 2007). As a result, only changes that occur at a particular moment in a sex workers' overall sex work career are acknowledged. This ignores the many changes in a sex worker's involvement that can occur between their initial entry into the industry and their decision to exit from it. Although I cannot address the full scope of changes in my participants' involvement over the course of their careers because I did not directly probe this line of questioning, I can note that many participants referenced working less and more selectively and maintaining flexible involvement in their general

narratives. The following discussion should, thus, be taken as my initial contribution to a necessary conversation that is hopefully advanced in future research.

**Working Less Frequently and Working More Selectively.** It is possible that, for some of my participants, restriction to regular clients and opportunistic participation defines their entire experience with the sex trade. This is most probable for those whose involvement functions as supplementary to other sources of income or for those that interpret payment as secondary to other rewards like finding a community of acceptance. On the other hand, like any activity participated in for a prolonged period of time, it is reasonable to expect that many experience alterations in the specifics of their involvement over time and across circumstances. Indeed, my participants frequently indicated that the nature of their involvement had changed in some way since they initially started. Specifically, most narratives revealed a reduction in participants' level of active solicitation over the course of their sex work tenure.

One of the most commonly referenced ways in which their participation had changed is by working less frequently and more selectively. They either reduced or discontinued their street presence, as well as their interactions with new clients, choosing instead to only continue participation with a small number of regular clients. This is evident in the following quotes from Tara and Cat:

Before, I just kept going. Like every day I'd do it. But now, I'm not out there as much anymore. I'm usually just waiting for my clients, my regulars, 'cause I don't want to be out there mainly because I don't want to be seen by people that I know. (Tara)

Like probably I have two regulars now, you know, as opposed to god knows how many, that I see. I see one twice a month and the other one twice a month. But I mean that's double my income, you know? (Cat)

Decreasing one's client base to regulars, particularly 'preferred' regulars, is most commonly examined within the sex work literature as a part of a transition process out of the sex trade (Drucker & Nieri, 2018; Law, 2011; Sanders, 2007). Notably, Sanders (2007) discusses this tendency in her 'Gradual Planning' model of exiting, in which workers intentionally engage in a range of behaviours such as sporadic participation and client reduction as part of their exit strategies. However, these behaviours are not necessarily restricted to the exiting process and do not, on their own, indicate a desire for abstinence. Rather, it is possible that these behaviours represent *strategic involvement*, or deliberate strategies of participation.

The issue of strategic involvement represents a significant gap in the sex work literature. When considered, it is typically theorized through an exiting lens. For example, Ham and Gilmour (2017) theorize a symbiotic relationship between exit plans (intentions to leave the industry) and work practices (decisions and actions regarding current participation). Drawing on interviews with indoor sex workers – the population of sex workers with whom discussions of work practices are most common – the authors reveal how respondents' intentions to have sex work be a temporary income source shape the decisions they make with regards to their engagement, such as exerting less effort to maintain regular clients and participating in sex work only to the extent necessary to finance short-term goals. Yet, exit intentions are only one factor influencing sex workers' work practices and decision-making. One does not need, want, nor intend to exit to participate in a strategic manner in the present. For example, in contrast to the emphasis on exiting, Lowthers' (2018) study of 'institutionalized sexual economies' identifies the "calculated choices" her participants made to *enter* the sex trade over other labour options (specifically the cut flower industry), including higher incomes and access to social programming. She further states, "many

single mothers felt that street-based sex work actually allowed them to be better mothers compared to their experiences of motherhood at the flower farms” (p.463).

Thus, sex work participation itself can be understood as strategic. When this is acknowledged, researchers’ focus can turn to the elements and conditions shaping workers’ strategies. For my participants, it is possible that reduced participation is a natural response for participants who are able to meet their needs through means other than sex work, regardless of their exiting intentions and even in their absence. Since few of my participants were solely dependent on sex work income, and several interpreted payments from regulars as ‘gifts’ rather than profit of the sexual exchange, it is plausible that they modified their participation according to what is considered desirable or necessary for their current situation, rather than a future goal. Furthermore, as workers gain security (e.g. financial, housing, etc.), whether through sex work or other income sources, and subsequently no longer participate in what is considered survival sex, they can be more selective with regards to the quantity and conditions of their sex work involvement. This does not mean that they necessarily interpret their involvement as negative or perceive the sex trade negatively; rather, it may simply mean that they, like other employees in non-sex work industries, choose not to work more than is needed for their current needs and wants. To quote Freddie, sex workers are always “working to balance it all out”, which points to the inherently dynamic state of their involvement.

Alternatively, this reduction in clients and street-walking behaviour may be in response to external changes in their working conditions, such as dispersion activities, the proliferation of online sex work, and legislative changes. These changes resulted in a decrease in the quantity and quality of clients seeking to purchase street-level services, lowered prices, and increased

competition amongst workers. Betty Page noticed a sizeable reduction in the amount she could get from sex work:

The prices have changed dramatically. I could get, as a transsexual, I could get \$100 a shot every time. Now I can get \$20/ now they're getting \$20 out there on the street right now."

No longer able to dictate her prices and unsatisfied with current rates, she began to reconsider her participation. Stacey, Abigail, June, and Tara also discussed the unwelcomed reduction in pricing and shift in perceived quality of clientele reduced pricing attracts. Their discussion of current workplace norms suggests that it may be the current conditions of their work, rather than the work itself, that sex work is perceived as no longer serving their interests and the reason some workers "don't feel the party out there now" (Freddie).

Even though adverse working conditions may encourage some to cease participation entirely, as was the case for Sanders' (2007) participants, others may choose to maintain their involvement but modify their participation or even stimulate mobility *within* the sex trade to locations and roles that are perceived to better meet their needs. Jeffrey and MacDonald (2006a) and Abel and Fitzgerald (2012) found considerable movement of sex workers between different sex work sectors in their studies of Canadian and New Zealand sex workers, respectively. Income potential, level of independence, and work conditions played central roles in determining choice and the sufficiency of location, and these were regularly re-assessed. In addition, since sex work involvement is interpreted by participants as yielding non-financial rewards like acceptance and belonging, they may also desire to continue participating in sexual exchanges with regulars – distinct from 'sex work' – because the relationship fulfills emotional, as well as financial, needs.

**Flexibility and Fluidity.** Whereas some participants expressed one-directional changes in their involvement, others participated in a more ongoing flexible and fluid manner. In this sense,

fluidity – participating more or less frequently depending on circumstance or need – can be characterized as a permanent characteristic of their involvement as opposed to a temporary condition, such as stage in their transition plan or a response to a singular incident (see Sander’s (2007) discussion of reactionary transitions). With involvement typically conceptualized as both stable and existing only in a present/absent manner, few sources have considered how workers adapt their involvement. Like the reduction in clientele discussed above, this discussion has been limited to investigations of workers’ exiting plans and processes. For example, Law (2011) discusses how her respondents often took ‘breaks’ from sex work participation as part of their transition process, returning to sex work when encountering barriers in their exiting efforts like financial need. Similarly, Sanders (2007) identifies the ‘yo-yo pattern’ as a dominant exiting pathway, whereby workers frequently drift in and out of sex work before they eventually leave for good.

Yet, sex workers do not simply start and stop participation, they also participate *differently*. Whilst demonstrating one way in which participation is dynamic, the above conceptualization of ‘breaks’ and ‘yo-yoing’ upholds the involved/exited binary in which involvement is understood only as present or absent. Provided a worker has agency over their involvement, it is reasonable to presume that, like any other activity, they will modify the nature of their involvement according to their changing needs and circumstances throughout their sex work tenure. Acknowledging participation as fluid and flexible calls attention to the circumstances shaping these changes and recognizes workers as capable of making decisions about their participation based on these circumstances.

One modification workers make is to change the amount of time they engage in sex work, participating more or less frequently depending on the situation and their respective needs. For

example, Monique, Lydia, Jane and June describe their participation as often opportunistic, accepting propositions from strangers or regular clients without prior purposeful effort. It stands to reason that their involvement would fluctuate depending on the regularity with which they are propositioned, as well as whether they were also initiating additional exchanges. Even if they have otherwise ceased initiating sexual transactions, their continued openness to spontaneous propositions means they have not taken a break from nor drifted out of involvement, understood as constituting (at least a temporary) deliberate abstinence from sexual transactions. It simply means they currently participate in a different way than is commonly thought to denote sex work and from which they previously participated, which is best characterized as opportunistic. Their current method of participation is only possible by their capacity to meet their needs with this type of involvement, with the result that purposeful effort and active initiation may increase should that capacity wane.

Additionally, June, Cat, Tara, Skylar, and Abigail's narratives indicate that they participate when other sources of income are insufficient for meeting their needs. Involvement would then increase "on days that I need money" (June), and decrease, but not necessarily disappear, when more financially stable. This is one of the factors that renders Abigail and Skylar's involvement status unclear or precarious. Although they otherwise identify as 'no longer involved', their narratives indicate that they still may work when needed:

I just want to you know support my daughter, so I uh have to go pull a date to like get her diaper money, you know, shit like that, or even to get her formula and stuff like that. Because even though we might have resources, but sometimes they're not always sufficient for us, right? And sometimes like yeah some of us get desperate times (Abigail)



I'm trying to get off working the streets. Uh just the fucking government doesn't give you enough money to live on, especially with two adults and one child, and plus the rent. So I am stuck in that position where sometimes I do have to go out and get a few extra dollars.

(Skylar)

The involvement binary is, thus, inadequate for considering the involvement of individuals like Abigail and Skylar whose participation is more fluid. Are they 'involved' simply because they have to occasionally work? Since exiting is understood as complete abstinence, their ad hoc participation renders them ineligible for exited status. If they are recognized as exited because there are periods of non-participation, would accepting one date in order to buy diapers count as (re)involvement? Does that answer change if they experience periods in which more 'regular' participation is necessary?<sup>22</sup> Financial need is itself dynamic, requiring different participation rates to manage. The nature of sex work provides the necessary flexibility to participate as desired or, recognizing additional social and economic constraints, as necessary (Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006a).

One aspect of the flexible nature of involvement is taken up by Bowen (2013), Ham & Gilmour (2017), and Law (2011) as part of their analyses of exiting. Most notably, in Bowen's discussion of "sexiting" and Law's discussion of "parallel work trajectories", both of which describe the temporary dual participation of sex workers in both sex work and 'mainstream' employment while they transition out of the trade. During this dual participation, mainstream work and sex work variably occupy more of the workers' time depending on circumstance without necessarily replacing each other, until they finally exit. Their research draws attention to the strategic participation of sex workers as part of an eventual exit strategy. It is important, however,

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<sup>22</sup> I return to this discussion in Chapter 4.

to recognize that sex workers' involvement is always dynamic, not just when attempting to exit. Although Ham and Gilmour (2017) recognize that current work practices can be strategic prior to exiting, they still identify exit plans as the factor shaping work-related decisions. However, not all sex workers view exiting as "inevitable" (p.756), as did their participants, nor are work practices *only* shaped by exiting intentions. By solely focusing on the strategic participation of sex workers towards the end of their sex work careers, researchers gain little understanding of the various strategies defining sex workers' overall comprehensive sex work careers and the motivations for these strategies in the absence of exiting intentions. The nature of their participation, including frequency and also elements like purposeful action, intent, and ratio of regular clients to new clients, is shaped by needs and circumstances – which themselves may regularly fluctuate and wane.

Although Skylar expressed a desire to stop "working the streets", it is unclear whether she desires to cease all involvement entirely (i.e. current definitions of exiting) or streetwalking activities specifically. Involvement location(s) and activities are additional variables of sex worker involvement that are subject to alteration. Participation in streetwalking activities in Edmonton are regularly impacted by external factors like weather, traffic disruptions, and construction projects. This may cause workers to relocate to different areas of the city, temporarily reduce their solicitation activities for a period of time, or rely more heavily on regular clients and online advertising sites to secure clients and avoid the elements. Workers may also alter the location of their involvement for other reasons. Cat's discussion of surveillance when recovering from an injury demonstrates such an adaptation. Her participation in dates decreased and her surveillance activities increased when injured, and then presumably changed inversely once she recovered. Cat is demonstrating adaptive participation. Offering another example, Ellie's friends occasionally rent

rooms in certain hotels in Edmonton, with the result that she occasionally replaces streetwalking with hotel work. Aspects about her involvement, thus, change according to not only traffic and weather, but also the activities of others who comprise her social network.

Although I have focused this discussion primarily on a reduction in streetwalking, I want to stress that sex workers may also increase streetwalking activities when it is seen to provide increased independence and income possibilities over other options. Even though streetwalking is frequently presented as the least desirable form of sex work, Jeffrey and MacDonald (2006a) and Abel and Fitzgerald (2012) reveal that it can be the preferred option for some sex workers. Some of the perceived advantages of street-level work identified in their research were also vocalized by my participants. For example, Cece and Stacey prefer the visual screening in-person solicitation allows, with Stacey stating, “I don’t trust [arranging dates online] because I can’t see the person I’m going to see, you know. I wouldn’t feel safer about it”. Whereas Samantha Cookie focused on the decreased autonomy and earnings created by the organizational structure of indoor work sites: “I’ve been to massage parlours, the massage parlours are pimps themselves [because they] take some of your money, right? It’s like ‘uh why work for you when I can take all the benefits from money?’ Right?”.

Involvement may also change depending on workers’ other responsibilities. When it is acknowledged that sex workers are not unceasingly involved in sexual exchanges, it becomes possible to consider how other obligations impact their involvement. For example, workers that are in school or have children in school are subject to the demands of the academic calendar and would have to modify their participation accordingly, like Cameron et al.’s (1999) male escorts. Alternatively, Tara’s involvement changed depending on whether she is also involved in mainstream labour and in an intimate relationship:

Tara: I wasn't even thinking of the sex trade for 5 months. Yeah, when I have a job I don't think of the sex trade

Me: So you don't keep both going at the same time?

Tara: I *used* to. I did when I didn't have a boyfriend [...] [Now] I'm usually just waiting for my clients, my regulars.

On face value, it seems that Tara participates in only one type of employment – sex work *or* mainstream work – at a time, unlike Bowen and Law's participants, ceasing her participation in sex work when employed in mainstream labour and recommencing when that employment ends. However, upon closer reading, it is evident that only her involvement with non-regular dates is curtailed. It is, thus, not only overall participation that can fluctuate, but also the types of exchanges that occur. She continues to see regular clients because those interactions are either differently interpreted (i.e. do not 'count' as sex work) or are perceived to generate different rewards.

Tara's discussion of relationship status also identifies another factor affecting involvement. Intimate relationships are often examined as functioning as push and pull factors influencing (initial) participation in sex work or exit from it (Bowen, 2013; Dodsworth, 2015; Drucker & Nieri, 2018; Hedin & Månsson, 2004; Oselin, 2010; Sanders, 2007). Yet, they can also affect the nature of sex workers' involvement in less absolute manners. Several of my participants modify their participation when in a relationship. This is likely the combined effect of greater financial stability, as well as the continued stigmatization of sex work involvement, as several participants indicated that their boyfriends did not approve of their participation. Yet, despite this disapproval, and contrary to many of the above research findings, they intentionally maintained some level of participation even when in a relationship, thereby altering rather than stopping participation. Tara continued to see regulars, possibly because she did not interpret such exchanges as sex work or

because they addressed a need or want not fulfilled with the intimate relationship. One such need may be independence, as was the case for Samara. Involvement provided Samara with an important source of independence and self-sufficiency that was non-negotiable:

Yeah [boyfriends] would try to get me to stop, and I was like ‘I ain’t going to beg on my knees for your fucking money, that’s for damn sure.’ That’s the last thing I’m going to do. You know, I never let a man fucking have control over me that way. Ever.

Samara’s example speaks to how involvement is shaped by social relations, including household or family relations, in addition to individual choice and physical variables. Her continued involvement, thus, represents an act of resistance against dependency and the resulting potential to be controlled by another person. With multiple participants having experienced rejection, homelessness, and other dysfunction growing up, independence and self-sufficiency became essential traits for survival. By maintaining some manner of involvement such as their connections with regulars, regardless of other life circumstances like relationships or even mainstream employment, sex workers ensure they always have the capacity to meet their needs.

The notion of sex work involvement acting as a form of social and financial ‘safety net’ was a repeated theme in participants’ narratives. It not only enabled prior survival for those who carry previous experiences of precariousness and insecurity, but continues to act as a guaranteed way for them to meet their basic needs and, thus, a rare sense of control within otherwise disempowering structural and personal power relations (Hannem, 2016). This omnipresent potential of involvement complicates binary conceptualizations of sex work involvement and contributes to the unclear or precarious status classification of Abigail, Ava, Freddie, and Skylar. Despite otherwise not participating in sexual exchanges, they were conscious and even accepting

of the ever-existing potential that they may participate at some point. This is best demonstrated in the following quote from Freddie:

Yeah, I'll work 40 hours a week, you know what I mean? I mean, it doesn't mean if the opportunity arose I wouldn't take it because I might. Um it doesn't happen too often that I'll seek it out. Some of my needs are met. *Some* not all. Some of my needs are met, others will always waiver, you know? Again, that's what keeps us coming back, you know. [...] I don't think it will ever be [a clean break], and the more I accept that, the easier it is to go back to it, out there, you know? I'll always take it with me, you know [...] So I mean I can never just walk away.

Neither 'taking a break' or 'yo-yo-ing' adequately explains Freddie's involvement and relationship with their work, because both assume the presence of an exiting or abstinence intention, which Freddie rebuffs. The involvement binary, which assumes that sex workers are either 'in' or 'out' of the sex trade, even if that status can change, remains inappropriate for the diverse relationships sex workers have with their work. Rather than an either/or, participants' narratives consistently demonstrated that sex workers can be 'both' or 'neither', depending on how they interpret their relationship with their work and the various activities it comprises. Whereas Freddie "can never just walk away", suggesting a 'both' status in which they are still involved even when they do not actively participate, Jane and Kristina evoke the 'neither' status in which they are neither 'involved', because regulars do not 'count' as sex work, or 'exited', because they continue to participate in sexual exchanges with their regulars. More importantly, the nature of their involvement changes depending on their situation, indicating that this relationship is dynamic rather than stable.

**Summary of Diversity Across Involvement.** This section examined two ways in which each sex worker's involvement may change over the course of their sex work career: working less and more selectively, and working in a flexible manner. Although one-dimensional changes are more commonly focused on in the sex work literature, specifically their alleged indication of exiting intentions or activities, it is more accurate to emphasize that most sex workers regularly modify aspects of their work in response to the multitude of variables they navigate at personal, social, and economic, and levels. As mentioned, the alternation most frequently discussed by participants is working less and more selectively. This can be summarized as often taking the form of strategic and adaptive participation.

It is true that working less and working more selectively is a theme already existing in some of the literature on sex work, particularly that which focuses on exiting. However, as I have shown, reduced (or ceased) participation does not necessarily indicate that a worker has exited, or even decided to take a 'break'. Rather, when involvement is recognized as denoting multiple dynamic forms, changes to participation indicate that sex workers adapt their current involvement according to their contemporary needs and circumstances, and may do so again when their needs or circumstances change. Interpreting changes in involvement as necessarily and solely indicating exiting intentions or efforts discounts the ways in which sex workers express agency by modifying their participation according to personal, as well as social and financial, context.

## **Chapter Summary**

Like any other activity, individuals participate in sex work differently from one another as well as over time. Rather than constituting a homogenous and stable status, participation in sex work is both diverse and dynamic. Failure to consider how and why sex workers make the decisions they do with their involvement discounts the dynamic nature of sex work involvement

and leads to programs and policies that assume participation exists in a static nature. Bowen (2013, p.87) cautions that, as researchers and policy makers, “[w]e do a disservice to those who would consider re-entering the sex industry when we disregard the considerations, the social capital, and the agency that their decisions involve”. I argue that this disservice extends to the multitude of relationships sex workers have with their work that exist in-between the categories of incessantly involved and exited.

Samantha Cookie stressed the diversity that exists within the sex industry during our interview, stating:

Like some strippers they’re there to make money to pay for schooling. Some girls that work on the internet are paying student funds off, and then they go back to their normal life and once in a while, if they need the extra cash, they won’t hesitate [to work]. *There’s difference. There’s different levels of people that are doing this, right?* (emphasis added)

Erasure of this diversity through homogenizing discussions of sex workers that present all sex workers as participating in the same way as each other and chronologically leads to one-size-fits-all policies and programs that assume a particular manifestation of involvement that does not reflect sex workers actual lives. My participants’ narratives indicate that, contrary to popular belief, not only are they not solely participating in streetwalking activities, they also do not spend the majority of every day participating in sexual exchanges. Moreover, they regularly adapt their involvement according to their changing situations and fluctuating needs. This adaptation may take the form of reduced frequency of participation, but it can also take the form of sustained but *different* participation in which they alter elements like clientele, activities, purposeful action, and even motivation according to need and circumstance. These changes are not simply reactive or unintentional, but rather purposeful and strategic decisions that are themselves worthy of scholarly



inquiry. That is because, this decision making is not simply an expression of survival, but evidence of how sex workers “mak[e] sex work *work*” for their particular lives (Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006a, p.325, emphasis added). All of this contributes to involvement as constituting a dynamic *process* rather than a stable state.

The flexibility of sex work that enables this diverse involvement needs to become part of the conversation about sex work, as well as the responses put in place to respond to it, in order to appropriately account for the multitude of relationships sex workers have with the trade. Asking what involvement ‘looks like’ for the subjects of our scholarly inquiry reveals important insight about how people participate in sex work, as well as the elements shaping their participation. With involvement meaning and looking quite different for different sex workers, researchers need to turn their attention to the implications of this for discussions of exiting. Accordingly, I build on this discussion in the next chapter by asking “What does it mean to exit?”.

## Chapter 4: What Does It Mean to Exit?

I used the last two chapters to illuminate two significant problems with the sex work status binary that operates implicitly in research and policy discussions about sex work. Focusing on the ‘involved’ side of the binary, I have argued that my participants’ relationship with sex work is far more complicated than the ‘any’ or ‘none’ categorization this binary allows. As I explicate in Chapter 2, participants’ inclusion of additional material and emotional criteria in their own definitions of what it means to be involved in sex work demonstrates that involvement is not solely determined by participation in the sex-for-money exchange upon which the binary is based. As a result, they have sex work statuses that are not captured by this categorical approach. For example, they may identify as involved because they a) see themselves as members of the sex trade community and b) have not made a deliberate decision to exit, *and* also fulfil the definitional status of exited because they are not currently participating in any sexual exchanges. Conversely, they may identify as no longer involved based on subjective assessments of what does and does not ‘count’ as sex work, *but* still participate in activities that are currently classified as sex work by dominant discourse. Alternatively, they may not fit either of the definitions of ‘involved’ or ‘exited’, or simultaneously fit both.

Furthermore, the sex work status binary assumes a homogeneity and permanency of each status that erases the diversity and flexibility that exists in practice. By ignoring the specifics of sex workers’ involvement, the literature reproduces assumptions about involvement that do not reflect the reality of many workers’ lives. This enables ‘full-time’ participation to operate as the taken-for-granted default frequency and for periods of non-participation to be automatically associated with exiting intentions and attempts. Yet, the specifics of each sex worker’s involvement differ not only from one another, but also across time and in relation to other

variables, such as relationship status and additional employment. Acknowledging these differences and the importance of context reveals important details about sex workers' lived experiences and their relationships with the sex trade.

If sex workers' involvement defies binary classification and a singular form, it stands to reason that its frequently positioned counterpoint – exited – must too. Accordingly, I further the interrogation of the status binary's shortcomings in this chapter by asking: if involvement already refers to a variety of alterable sex work arrangements, *what does it mean to exit?* To address this question, I begin by examining current conceptualizations of exit in the sex work literature and highlight the unspoken assumptions such conceptualizations reproduce. I then draw on my participants' narratives to challenge these assumptions and reveal the complex lived experiences currently suppressed by the categorical framework that informs the status binary. This complexity compels a new intellectual approach that recognizes involvement as a dynamic practice, rather than a fixed category description. Subsequently, rather than endorsing an alternate definition of exit – that may have more inclusive, yet still inflexible, status categories – I conclude this chapter by advancing a more process-based approach for thinking about sex work involvement. Instead of a binary that maintains two mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories to describe the presence or absence of participation, I advocate for sex work involvement to be conceptualized as describing the intersection of multiple dynamic and open-ended *vectors* that attend to the multiple dimensions of involvement, with the result that involvement is recognized as simply the umbrella term for a plurality of relationships with sex work. As part of this, I recommend the replacement of the term exit in sex work discourse with *dis-involvement*, which rather than existing in opposition to involvement, describes the modification, reduction, or disruption/interruption of that involvement, which may or may not ever take the form of complete abstinence.

This non-binary reconceptualization of sex work participation was inspired by my conversation with Freddie and the following statement in particular. When asked how they felt the federal government should respond to the sex trade<sup>23</sup>, Freddie responded:

*People never really exit, they just kind of move on. You can't exit when something's just a part of you now. You just got to learn to live with it and accept it and work around it.*  
(emphasis added)

Their statement is significant for multiple reasons. First, it constitutes the only instance in which the term 'exit' was expressed by my participants during our interviews. This is surprisingly because the prevalence of the subject in scholarly and political conversations about sex work (c.f. Baker et al., 2010; Benoit & Miller, 2001; Dalla, 2006; Government of Canada, 2014; Hedin & Månsson, 2004; Månsson & Hedin, 1999; Mayhew & Mossman, 2007; Moran & Farley, 2019; Sanders, 2007; Williamson, 2000), in tandem with the widely accepted postulation that exit is universally and enthusiastically desired by those currently participating in the sex trade (Matthews et al., 2014; Mayhew & Mossman, 2007; Moran & Farley, 2019), foster an expectation that this term would be articulated with greater frequency. However, as I discuss in more detail below, my participants held a range of attitudes about and intentions regarding continued participation that dispute the current legislative and research focus on exit.

More important to this discussion, however, is what it tells us about the multiple dimensions of involvement. When contextualized with the preceding nuancing of sex work participation, Freddie's proclamation that "people never really exit" encourages substantial reflection on what we – as researchers, policy makers, and service providers – understand sex work

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<sup>23</sup> Interviews were performed after the sections of the *Criminal Code of Canada* had been struck down as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of Canada, but before the release of the revised legislation, *Bill C36: Protection of Communities and Sexually Exploited Persons Act*.

involvement to mean and, subsequently, what it means to no longer be involved. As I argue in the preceding chapters, rigid homogenizing and dichotomous status categories are inadequate for appreciating the multiple and multifaceted relationships individuals have with the sex trade and limit nuanced understandings of sex work experience. Involvement describes not only a physical act, but also an income source, a personal identity, and the foundation of social relationships that comprise the sex work community. Freddie's denunciation of 'exit' shifts our attention away from conceptualizing involvement in a categorical manner, to recognizing that it may persist as part of an individual's identity and social network even when that person may not be actively participating.

#### A note on language

My discussion of exiting in this chapter reflects the dominant use of the term: the opposite of involvement and the absence of participation. Although I engage in substantial critique of this definition's accuracy and utility for describing people's relationships with sex work, I refrain from offering an amended definition of this concept precisely because I argue against the establishment of a singular definition that constructs boundaries about what is included, and subsequently renders unintelligible that which is excluded regardless of how inclusive it attempts to be. In addition, I contend that 'exit's' explanatory value for describing sex worker identity and activity is dramatically reduced when involvement itself is acknowledged as existing in diverse, irregular, and fluid manners and denoting more than simply participation in a sexual exchange. If involvement is not simply present or absent, but something that is practiced as well as embodied differently for each sex worker, 'exit' becomes a concept that actually limits rather than contributes to our understanding of the various dimensions of involvement, including those not actively participating.

## How Exiting is Currently Understood

The subject of exiting plays a central role in sex work discourse. It is the topic of many research endeavours (Baker et al., 2010; Benoit & Miller, 2001; Bowen, 2013, 2015; Carline, 2011; Cascio, 2017; Cimino, 2012; Hick, 2014; Prostitution Awareness and Action Foundation of Edmonton, 2005; Dalla, 2006; Drucker & Nieri, 2018; Ham & Gilmour, 2017; Hedin & Månsson, 2004; Hickle, 2017; Law, 2011, 2013; Månsson & Hedin, 1999; Matthews et al., 2014; Murphy, 2010; Oselin, 2009, 2010, 2014; Ouspenski, 2014; Strega et al., 2014; Sanders, 2007; Williamson, 2000) and a political priority in Canada with the introduction of *PCEPA* and accompanying financial commitment for exiting programming and initiatives (Government of Canada, 2014). Similar to involvement, however, it is rarely defined in policy, practice, or research. Also similar to involvement, exiting conversations tend to be dominated by non-experiential voices, as sex workers are rarely asked for their own definitions or to self-classify.

Although most researchers and political officials do not offer any definition as part of their discussion of ‘exit’, a few do. Drucker and Nieri (2018), Ham and Gilmour (2007), and Matthews *et al* (2014) explicitly define exit as the “cessation” of sexual service participation. More commonly, researchers offer indirect definitions. For example, although neither Hickle (2017) nor Cimino (2012) provide a specific definition of exit, they infer their definition when discussing their methodology and objectives: Hickle’s exit study sample recruited individuals who “self-reported that a minimum of two years’ time has passed since they last sold or traded sex” (p.306), while Cimino’s predictive theory aims to explain “a woman’s decision to exit or continue street-level prostitution” (p.1244). Alternatively, authors imply the meaning of exit when used interchangeably with phrasing like “leaving the sex trade” (Dalla, 2006, p.276; also Hedin & Månsson, 2004; Månsson & Hedin, 1999; Murphy & Venkatesh, 2006; Oselin, 2009, 2014;

Williamson & Folaron, 2003), “ending sex work careers” (Cusick et al., 2001 p.145; also Read, 2014), and “stopping sex work” (Gaines et al., 2015, p.68; also Farley, 2004; Hedin & Månsson, 2004). In all cases, whether explicit or implicit, exit is conceptualized as involvement’s antithesis: exit is ‘not involvement’ and involvement is ‘not exited’. Importantly, the language used when referencing exit is also highly active, which suggests an emphasis on intent and purposeful action. Whereas Hickle’s definition is more passive in nature (period of non-participation), most commentators seem to imply a more deliberate abstinence (leaving, ceasing, deciding, stopping, etc.).

With any and all participation in activities falling under the sex work umbrella currently classified as ‘involved’, the discursive dichotomization results in only the complete absence of participation qualifying as ‘exited’. This is further demonstrated by the linguistic differentiation between participation that occurs prior to exit and that which occurs after exit has been ‘achieved’.<sup>24</sup> Whereas ‘pre-exit’ participation - that which occurs while an individual is still involved – is referred to simply as participation without any additional stipulation or special language, ‘post-exit’ participation – that which occurs after exit is achieved, even though this status is unclear – is given a distinct label and meaning.

In the sex work literature, post-exit participation is branded ‘re-entry’ (Baker et al., 2010; Bowen, 2013; Cimino, 2012; Dalla, 2006; Learmonth et al., 2015; Sanders, 2007; Williamson & Folaron, 2003) ‘relapse’ (Baker et al., 2010; Dalla, 2002; Månsson & Hedin, 1999; Matthews et al., 2014; Wilson & Nochajski, 2018), or ‘recidivism’ (Falegan, 2016; Hickle, 2014), the latter two reflecting the historical location of sex work within criminology and the conflation of sex work

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<sup>24</sup> I use scare quotes around achieve because, similar to the concept of exit generally, there is no specification in the literature of how or when individuals ‘achieve’ exit. In other words, it remains unclear when the exiting moves from a *process in progress* to an *accomplished status*. Exiting status, thus, remains an implied designation and often externally ascribed. Further reference to exit achievement should be understood as occurring within scare quotes.

and other deviantized behaviours like addiction and crime. Incompatible with exiting's prevailing criterion of zero involvement, post-exit participation is taken to both signify and prompt an automatic disqualification from exit status. The presence or absence of post-exit participation is taken as the primary determining factor for deciding whether to label a particular individual's exit attempt 'successful'<sup>25</sup> or brand it 'unsuccessful', 'failed', or otherwise 'incomplete' – all of which remain frequently used but un-operationalized qualifications (Baker et al., 2010; Dodsworth, 2015; Drucker & Nieri, 2018; Hickie, 2014; Learmonth et al., 2015; Månsson & Hedin, 1999; Sanders, 2007; Sandwith, 2011). The binary framework for thinking about sex work involvement maintains such rigid boundaries that *any* participation post-exit, even from a person who otherwise abstains from sex work activity, is interpreted by researchers as denoting re-involvement. Involvement and exit remain fundamentally incompatible states.

While it is true that researchers are increasingly recognizing that sex workers may continue to participate in sexual exchanges after making the decision to exit, and even commencing the exit process (c.f. Bowen, 2013, 2015; Law, 2011, 2013; Sanders, 2007), this participation escapes re-branding because it is interpreted as occurring pre-exit, thus leaving the status binary intact. For example, Sanders (2007, p.81) identifies 'gradual exit' – whereby individuals reduce the frequency of participation or number of clients – as one of the transition strategies sex workers participate in "before complete removal". Similarly, Bowen (2015, p.442) advances the term 'sexiting' to describe the process of maintaining participation in sex to fund their transition into 'square lives' "before leaving the industry completely". Gradual exit and sexiting are, thus, pre-exit activities that may facilitate the process of transitioning from involved to exited, but are expected to stop

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<sup>25</sup> Further reference to success in the context of exit should be understood as occurring within scare quotes.



once that boundary is crossed, after which point that participation is classified as post-exit, and thus signifying (re)involvement.

Importantly, this discursive (re)involvement of sex workers portrays them not only as involved *again*, but also as returning to their *initial stages of involvement*. This logic is evident in the cyclical metaphor often used to describe this reclassification. By characterizing sex work participation as “a cycle of entry, exit, and re-entry” (Cimino, 2010, p.1235; also Dalla, 2006), an individual is portrayed as having come ‘full circle’ to his or her original state by engaging in post-exit participation. This is even more apparent in Baker et al.’s (2010) integrated model for exiting. Whereas ‘immersion’ constitutes the first stage of this model, defined as “the starting point wherein a woman is totally immersed in prostitution and has no thoughts of leaving or any conscious awareness of the need to change” (p.590), a sex worker who engages in post-exit participation is said to move to the ‘re-entry’ stage, resulting in “a complete *reimmersion* in the street-level sex trade” from which he or she must “recycle through each of the stages” of exit, as if starting anew (p.592). In accordance with this framing, post-exit participation is not only completely prohibited for a sex worker to maintain exit status once achieved, violations of this prerequisite subsequently expunge all previous modifications in participation and progress made towards exiting and the sex worker is theorized as returning ‘back to where they started from’. This is further evidenced by Matthews et al.’s (2014, p.39) reference to post-exit participation as “lapses and reversals”.

This way of thinking about involvement, exit, and post-exit participation specifically, has multiple implications. First, since exit is understood as the absence of participation and any or all participation is classified as involvement, a singular act of participation is theoretically sufficient for a person to be disqualified from exited status. This framing maintains that an individual who

otherwise fits dominant perceptions of exiting (i.e. no involvement) but subsequently participates in one sexual exchange voids his or her exited status. Context of the exchange and the subject's motivation, variables that influence participants' understanding of involvement as I demonstrate in Chapter 2, are treated as irrelevant. In other words, it is treated as inconsequential whether a person continues to see regulars on a consistent basis or accepts a single date because they are otherwise unable to afford their rent this month. In both scenarios the person would be considered to be (re)involved because they violated the *no* involvement requirement of exit status.

Second, and seemingly operating in contradiction to the first, post-exit participation is assumed to *not* take the form of an isolated, singular, or otherwise infrequent act. Instead, as explicated in the cyclical metaphor, when a sex worker is said to have relapsed or become (re)involved, it is because their post-exit participation is presumed to take the same frequency that informs the default perception of pre-exit participation. In other words, since sex work discourse rarely recognizes sex work involvement as occurring in forms other than full-time ongoing participation, a (re)involved sex worker is automatically assumed to be (re)participating at a full-time consistent rate, which explains why Baker et al. (2010) claim they must recycle through all the stages of exit. Post-exit participation is, thus, assumed to always constitute *(re)immersion*. With this logic, an individual is interpreted not as having taken a step 'backwards',<sup>26</sup> such as from full abstinence to mostly abstinent, but rather returning to a state where sex work occupies the majority of their daily activities.

Third, because exiting is defined by non-participation, exiting intentions are assumed synonymous with abstinence intentions. When sex workers are not asked for their own

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<sup>26</sup>I am not suggesting that post-exit participation indicates regression, but that the literature currently promotes this interpretation. Post-exit participation should only be considered a 'step backwards' for sex workers if the individual him/herself identifies abstinence as a goal.

interpretations of exiting, researchers assume that a universal definition of sex work exists and that sex workers share this interpretation. Abstinence is, thus, assumed to play a central role in what sex workers understand exit to mean and, subsequently, what they want their own exit to look like. Researchers assume that sex workers, like the researchers themselves, interpret post-exit participation as denoting an unsuccessful or incomplete exit. This is why the exiting literature typically treats post-exit participation as an unintended and undesirable occurrence (Bowen, 2013). Missing from this conversation, however, is the potential that some sex workers may not be failing at abstinence when engaging in post-exit participation, but downplaying its significance for their own definitions of exiting or rejecting it altogether.

In the next section, I use participants' narratives and my previous discussion of involvement to reveal how these assertions restrict our understanding of the diverse ways sex workers engage with their work and make sense of this engagement. I then use the resulting critique to craft my argument for the reconceptualization of sex work status from a binary categorical model that implies homogenous and stable behaviour (or lack thereof) to a process-based one that recognizes multiple and dynamic arrangements. This includes the rejection of the term exit and the way it is employed as only denoting the complete and enduring absence of involvement because, as I will show, this term is imbued with and derived from inaccurate assumptions regarding what sex work means and looks like. Discarding this concept and the binary framework it reproduces permits recognition of the diverse relationships people have with the sex trade and encourages investigation into the specifics of their participation.

### **How My Participants Think About Exit and Post-Exit Participation**

In this section, I use participants' voices to challenge each implication outlined above, exposing the faulty rhetoric that enables these insinuations and diversity of sex work participation

that is subsequently overlooked. This work is necessary to contextualize participants' thoughts on exiting and the atypical forms this practice often takes in real life. It should be reiterated that exiting was not a theme that was directly explored in all interviews. Participants were only asked if they had "ever thought about or tried to leave the trade" and, subsequently, what either facilitated or prevented them from leaving, if their narratives invited this line of questioning and if they otherwise permitted this inclusion<sup>27</sup>. Among the interviews that did explore this theme, a few participants explicitly introduced this topic, whereas others have alluded to it as part of their general narrative. This is not surprising, as exit is a frequent theme of research endeavours, service provision, and political discourse, with the result that many participants have come to anticipate being asked about this topic. However, as I will show when discussing participants' exit intentions, attitudes about and intentions to exit – at least in the dominant meaning of no participation – took far less predictable forms.

### ***A Single Act: The Difference Between a Hurdle and a Blockade***

If any and all participation is considered involvement, and exit is accepted as denoting the opposite state of involvement, exit can only refer to an absence of participation. Consequently, a singular act is theoretically sufficient for a person, who prior to this act was classified as exited, to be deemed (re)involved. While this inference facilitates conversations about exiting by establishing clear boundaries around exit status, when applied to actual lives of those involved this way of thinking about exit overly responsabilizes sex workers while downplaying the significance of the barriers they encounter. The significance of a single act for assessments of sex work status becomes especially clear in the different theorization of "barriers" in the exit literature.

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<sup>27</sup> Participants were free to direct the topics addressed during the interview, refuse to answer questions about particular topics, and end the interview at any time. The decision of whether to permit this inclusion was both the participant's, as well as a personal judgment call on my part.

Within the exiting literature, factors that negatively impact the achievement and maintenance of successful exits are typically referred to as barriers (Baker et al., 2010; Benoit & Miller, 2001; Cimino, 2012; Dalla, 2006; Farley et al., 2004; Learmonth et al., 2015; Månsson & Hedin, 1999; Matthews et al., 2014; Sanders, 2007). Often cited are the three categories of forces identified by Månsson & Hedin (1999): structural (i.e. socio-economic circumstances and available resources), relational (i.e. social networks and personal relationships), and individual (i.e. personal driving forces and commitment). Baker et al. (2010) expand on the model with a fourth force: societal, which they say comprises social perceptions and their effects (i.e. discrimination and stigma). Recognition of the existence and impact of these barriers has advanced conversations about exiting through lessening the degree to which sex workers are entirely responsabilized for the relative success or failure of their exiting attempts. However, the degree to which responsabilization of sex workers still exists differs substantially depending on the connotation affixed to the term barrier and the vastly different implications these connotations have for theorizing the significance of individual acts.

A barrier can be understood as denoting either a hurdle or a blockade. Whereas the first connotation refers to something that makes an action or a process more challenging but still accomplishable, the second describes an impasse that precludes realization of that action or process. When used in the context of sex work status, and exiting specifically, the former interprets barriers as issues that sex workers must *navigate* as part of their exit (both achieving and maintaining exit), while the latter theorizes barriers as issues that *prevent* a successful exit from being achieved or maintained. The resulting implication is that a single act can either be acknowledged as a strategy employed to navigate a barrier experienced during exit or while exited, or, conversely, positioned as the incident that disqualifies an individual from exited status and

signifies their (re)involvement. This distinction, and its interpretation of a single act, will become clear as I interrogate the assertions informing each connotation, beginning with the most prevalent: a blockade.

**Barriers as Blockades.** The most common interpretation of barriers within the exiting literature implies a blockade. This interpretation is typically expressed in the phrasing “barriers to” exit (Baker et al., 2010; Cimino, 2012; Learmonth et al., 2015; Matthews et al., 2014; Sanders, 2007) or “barriers preventing” exit (Benoit & Miller, 2001; Nowlan, 2007). Authors employing this framing position poverty, housing insecurity, racism, transphobia, homophobia, colonization, addiction, mental health issues, familial obligations, isolation, and other stigmas as factors that prevent an individual from successfully exiting the sex trade because the individual was unable to overcome those barriers without sex work participation, which is subsequently interpreted as (re)involvement (Baker et al., 2010; Benoit & Miller, 2001; Cimino, 2012; Dalla, 2006; Farley et al., 2004; Learmonth et al., 2015; Månsson & Hedin, 1999; Matthews et al., 2014; Nowlan, 2007; Sanders, 2007). Barriers, thus, “challenge [the] permanent behavior change” that is required for exit status: abstinence (Baker et al., 2010, p.590).

It is here we can see the overemphasis placed on a single act. According to those who adopt this framing, no participation is permitted in order for and once an individual has crossed the binary from involved to exited. For an exit to be successful, an individual must overcome or manage the adversity they experience in the straight world without sex work. If, for example, a person is unable to afford rent, thereby placing him or her at risk of eviction and homelessness, he or she is not permitted to secure the extra money through a sexual exchange, because that would constitute a “return to old behaviors” (Dalla, 2006, p.284). Circumstance, context, and even whether the

individual interprets that act as sex work are treated as irrelevant because a successful exit prohibits any involvement.

It is this perspective on post-exit participation and barriers that made my attempts to classify Skylar and Abigail's sex work status difficult. Even though both participants have greatly decreased their involvement, they sometimes have difficulty meeting the financial demands of motherhood without the supplemental income from sex work. So although they otherwise refrain from sexual exchanges, they do accept the occasional date to make ends meet.<sup>28</sup>

It is still very tight what I live off, what we live off, after the rent's paid [...] I'm trying to get off working the streets but the fucking government doesn't give you enough money to live on [...] So I am stuck in that position where sometimes I do have to go out and get a few extra dollars (Skylar)

I just want to, you know, support my daughter ... like get her diaper money... or even get her formula and stuff like that, because even though we might have resources, but sometimes they're not always sufficient for us, right? And sometimes, like yeah, some of us get desperate times. [...] You know I wish that some of the funds would come from the government, like what they give us on social assistance isn't enough to fucking like feed us and that's why most of the girls are on welfare but they supplement themselves through working through the month, you know [...] Because we want to give our kids the best things that we can you know and I'm really grateful to live in Canada but at the same time it's like our kids are still in poverty, you know, like a lot of us have to support our kids through fucking tricking. (Abigail)

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<sup>28</sup> Some aspects of these quotations were included early in the dissertation. They are also included here because they take on additional significance with this new discussion.

With the blockade framing, financial and familial constraints are, thus, the barriers preventing their successful exits, because they are responded to with sex work participation. Skylar and Abigail *almost* fit the dominant definition of exit, refraining from participation except for when necessary. However, when classifying Skylar and Abigail with the dominant sex work status binary (Table 2, Chapter 2), I am coerced into labeling both as involved, regardless of the frequency of their participation and the fact that involvement is assumed to denote full-time participation, because exit requires *no* participation. They are theorized as (re)involved the moment they accept a date, even if no additional participation takes place. This drastically overemphasizes the significance of individual acts to sex work status classification, particularly when no additional options are available in the absence of sex work<sup>29</sup>. Suggesting that their exit is unsuccessful or that they are (re)immersed in sex work simply because they “sometimes have to go out and get a few extra dollars” completely disregards how the only reference to active sex work participation during their interviews was in the context of occasional necessity. The sex work status binary, and corresponding rigid definition of exit, is simply unable to properly account for people like Skylar and Abigail who *otherwise* do not participate, but do not meet the standard of complete abstinence.

Upholding a single act as the determining factor for whether sex workers are exited or (re)involved, thus, continues to responsabilize them for entering, remaining, and leaving the sex industry, while simultaneously denying their agency in managing the barriers they encounter during the exit process and once exit is achieved. The responsabilization agenda holds sex workers accountable for the choices they make at the same time that it limits those deemed acceptable. For

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<sup>29</sup> Unemployment and/or an inability to work is a condition of some social assistance programs. This means a recipient is prohibited from securing extra income through mainstream work or risk disqualification from that assistance. If employment is permitted, assistance amounts may be reduced relative to income, with the result that financial constraints persist.



example, Månsson & Hedin (1999) identify a sex worker's "own coping strategies" (p.76) as the most important factor determining a successful exit, but theorize post-exit participation as relapse signifying an "incomplete breakaway" (p.75), and, consequently, an unacceptable coping strategy. The result of this responsabilization is greater scrutiny of sex workers' actions than the barriers to which their actions are responding (Sanders, 2007; McCracken, 2010). This can be seen in Dalla's (2006) article where, despite recounting the 'significant challenges' her participants encountered during the exit process, she concludes: "It was discouraging to learn that only 5 of the 18 (27%) women located for this study *had maintained their exit efforts* for a significant amount of time" (p.289, emphasis added). Directing disappointment at her participants' inability to remain abstinent despite their challenges, rather than on the presence and endurance of these challenges themselves, Dalla places the responsibility for maintaining exit efforts entirely on her participants. This is further evidenced in her closing declaration, which also demonstrates the strong normative lens in this area of work:

It is likely that each time a woman attempts to exit, she becomes a little stronger, a little more confident, and a little more committed to making a permanent lifestyle change [...]

The exit process is clearly complex and the challenges significant, but change is possible, as evidenced by Marlee, Kiley, Amy, Yolanda, and Rachel. (pp.289-290)

It is clear that, under this framing, sex work remains an always unacceptable response to the difficulties encountered once an exit is achieved. Individuals who maintain sex work as an option, even as an isolated act, are considered by those assessing them to be not fully or successfully exited. Even worse, they are accused of being "trapped" in the sex work lifestyle (Månsson & Hedin, 1999; Sanders, 2007), "lack[ing] the confidence, initiative, coping skills, or necessary resources" to abide by the abstinence expected of them (Baker et al., 2010, p.593).

If a singular act committed at any point after achieving exit is all that is necessary to render an exit unsuccessful, exit becomes an almost impossible status to achieve, let alone maintain, particularly for those experiencing multiple adversities. This can make exiting an undesirable goal for sex workers, for whom the potential of success is so limited and the potential of ‘failure’ – and, consequently, to be ‘failures’ – is so high. With the scrutiny directed at sex workers’ inability to remain abstinent regardless of the barriers they experience, rather than on the difficulty of overcoming a barrier without sex work participation, individuals who resort to sex work are perceived to have not only failed to conduct themselves according to the standard of abstinence required by dominant definitions of exit, but as failures themselves. The discursive celebration of “women who successfully exited” is bolstered by the disparagement of “[t]heir unsuccessful peers” (Dalla, 2006, p.288), with the result that the stigma of an unsuccessful exit attempt is affixed not only to a sex worker’s actions, but also the worker him or her-self. Informing this assessment of success is an assumption that there is only one legitimate type of exit and that sex workers also affix an abstinent criterion to their personal definitions of exit (I return to this when discussing the conflation of exit and abstinence intentions). In addition, this framing takes for granted that sex workers inevitably interpret any post-exit participation as sex work, which is not necessarily the case.

**Barriers as Hurdles.** The overemphasis of individual acts in the preceding discussion can be contrasted with the de-emphasis of these acts made possible by the alternate conceptualization of barriers: as hurdles. When theorized as hurdles, poverty, housing insecurity, racism, transphobia, homophobia, colonization, addiction, mental health issues, familial obligations, isolation, and other stigmas are theorized as things that make exiting difficult or complicated, but not unattainable or unsustainable. The focus is not necessarily overcoming these barriers without

sex work, but rather *navigating* them and often in an ongoing manner. For those with limited options and often intersecting oppressions, post-exit participation may offer the best and sometimes only effective navigation strategy. Whilst the literature repeatedly contextualizes sex workers' involvement as the result of, if not at least influenced by, familial, structural, material, and financial constraints (Dalla, 2000, 2006; Dodsworth, 2015; Farley et al., 2005; Learmonth et al., 2015; Oselin, 2014; Tutty & Nixon, 2003; Native Women's Association of Canada, 2014; Månsson & Hedin, 1999; Murphy, 2010; Rocke & MacKenzie, 2017; Williamson & Folaron, 2003), the permanency of these constraints once exited is underappreciated. Many of these barriers do not simply disappear once an individual crosses the binary, but continue to affect his or her life regardless of involvement status. This is unacknowledged in the previous framing.

For some, post-exit participation may constitute a strategic act that enables an individual to subsequently achieve and maintain a state of relative non-involvement. Extending this argument, a single act (or more) may provide immediate remedy to a problem without necessarily indicating, nor requiring, (re)involvement in the full-time immersive sense assumed to be the standard of sex trade participation. I will demonstrate this point using Skylar's occasional participation for rent money. Imagine that Skylar encountered an unexpected additional expense that jeopardized her ability to afford this month's rent. If the income earned from one or two dates is enough to make up the shortfall, she could participate in those dates and avoid the risk of eviction for failing to pay rent and potential homelessness for her family. Conversely, however, if she cannot secure the additional income and is subsequently evicted, she could find herself in a situation where she must participate at a more frequent rate to secure the necessary accommodation funds for her and her family (e.g. first month's rent and security deposit for a new apartment or daily costs for a motel). By participating in one or two dates to navigate the hurdle of insufficient

capital, Skylar can avoid eviction *as well as* the additional participation alternate accommodation would require. She can, thus, strategically participate to otherwise enable non-involvement and, in doing so, more closely resemble the dominant definition of exit than the default form of involvement.

Skylar's hypothetical strategic post-exit participation resembles Bowen (2013) and Law's (2011) respective discussions of 'sexiting' and 'parallel trajectories', whereby an individual temporarily participates in sex work as a strategy to facilitate or support their transition, but what I am proposing is distinct in an important way. With sexiting and parallel trajectories, the inference is that this activity ceases once that transition from involved to exit is complete, whereas strategic participation may continue even after a person considers themselves exited to help them maintain their version of exit, without disqualifying them from exit status or denoting (re)involvement. This same distinction also differentiates strategic participation from Bowen's (2013) concept of 'duality', which describes the ongoing simultaneous participation in both straight work and sex work. Like sexiting and parallel trajectory, duality is constructed as a state of involvement – "the best way to be involved in sex work" (p.74) – with dual participants distinguished from Bowen's other two subsamples of participants "who had exited" (p.89). Thus, duality is not intended to describe participation that occurs post-exit or among individuals that identify as exited. In contrast, strategic participation makes space for people that do not consider themselves involved *and* still strategically participate without insinuating a corresponding (re)involvement.

In addition, although not explicitly indicated, Bowen's discussion of duality implies a more regular occurrence of participation that is more similar to the default mode of involvement, than the occasional necessity-based participation in Skylar and Abigail's narratives. A distinction is made between 'alternate' and 'simultaneous' participation in sex work and square work (p.72) and

dual participants are described as “living a dual life” (p.73) and receiving “income from more than one source” (p.73). Yet, strategic participation need not be a regular event, nor affiliated with involvement more generally. Skylar and Abigail’s current participation is ad hoc, strategic, and necessity-based. It exists independent of (re)involvement because involvement encompasses more than just the sexual exchange. It is unlikely that either would describe their situation as ‘living a dual life’ because it is not consistent with their subjective interpretations of what involvement means, nor their current motives for participating. They are also neither participating in sex work and mainstream work alternatively or simultaneously in any ongoing state. So while duality may accurately describe the state of some individuals who maintain some level of participation post-exit, it can over-emphasize the frequency and inaccurately deduce the meaning and significance of these acts for others

By de-emphasizing the significance of the exchange in assessments of involvement status, this framing better acknowledges the often intersecting barriers individuals encounter, regardless of their sex work status, that constrain the choices that are available to them, as well as those perceived as preferential, without imposing normative judgments about the legitimacy or implications of the strategies used to navigate them (Hannem, 2016; Roche et al., 2005; Showden, 2011). It also recognizes that these hurdles frequently persist after an individual has exited and, thus, require ongoing navigation with often fewer tools (i.e. in the absence of regular sex work income or social networks). Leigh humorously described the persistence of financial hurdles after ceasing participation, stating: “We got no fucking pension [*laughs*], it’s not like ‘Oh I worked the street for 25 years can I get some CPP<sup>30</sup>?’ you know?” Even though Leigh personally refrains from sex work, relying on the income of other activities like selling drugs or picking bottles, her quote

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<sup>30</sup> Canadian Pension Plan is a monthly taxable benefit received after retirement from the workforce.

demonstrates the complexity and longevity of hurdles and the constrained capacity to navigate them that characterizes sex workers' lived experiences.

**Summary of Barriers.** When theorized as blockades, barriers prevent an individual from achieving or maintaining exit if they stimulate post-exit participation. This interpretation maintains any and all participation as (re)involvement, with the result that a single act determines a person's sex work status. When theorized as hurdles, however, those barriers can be reimagined as issues that individuals continually navigate to achieve and maintain exit, sometimes with strategic participation independent of involvement on a larger scale. By de-emphasizing the significance of individual acts and rejecting normative assessments of the legitimacy of potential strategies, post-exit participation can be conceptualized as an agentic act rather than its current interpretation in the sex work literature: a failure. This reduces the extent to which sex workers are doubly penalized: first, by the barrier and second, by their attempt to navigate it.

As it currently stands, those who maintain sex work as a possible option to navigate the barriers they face are labeled unsuccessful, uncommitted, and lacking initiative (Dalla, 2006; Månsson & Hedin, 1999). This significantly discounts the inequalities marginalized populations experience, as well the fact that those experiencing inequalities have one less resource and one fewer source of support if that participation is discontinued. For some, sex work participation may remain the most accessible, preferred, or even only option available to them. As Showden (2011) argues in her discussion of sex work and agency, there is no social justice in punishing sex workers for exerting agency with the often painfully constrained choices available to them.

The sociology of gender and work offers a labyrinth metaphor as a replacement for the glass ceiling to better theorize the multiple, complex, and varying constraints that confront women throughout their career, all requiring continual navigation (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Echoing what I

propose above, the narrative around gender-based workplace obstacles has progressed from recognizing singular and stable barriers that, while surmountable, only affect women at a singular career stage, to acknowledging plurality, persistence, and variation. Sex work research could benefit from a similar appreciation. Particularly as, in addition to persisting after exit, some hurdles may even intensify or even appear for the first time after exited. For example, an individual may experience more transphobia in a straight workplace than in the sex trade where they were part of a transgender sub-community. To the best of my knowledge this possibility has yet to be examined in any substantial manner. Should researchers take on this task, the hurdle framing provides the flexibility most suitable for interrogating navigation strategies and acknowledging agentic acts when they occur.

### ***Re-immersion: The Default for Theorizing Post-Exit Participation***

At the same time that a singular act is implicitly accepted by sex work discourse as sufficient for disqualification of exit status and to denote reinvolved, post-exit participation is rarely acknowledged as taking a solitary form. Instead, post-exit participation is either articulated or implied as constituting (re)immersion, whereby sex work occupies a significant portion of their daily activities and becomes their primary income source. In other words, when an individual is said to have relapsed or re-entered, the inference is that they are (re)participating in the same manner they did prior to exit. Since consistent full-time current operates as the default mode for sex work involvement, when an individual is said to have “return[ed] to old behaviors” (Dalla, 2006, p.284) it is to this full-time consistent participation that they are assumed to have reverted.

Sex work involvement is rarely recognized as occurring in a seasonal, temporary, ad-hoc, or irregular manner. The disregard paid to the diverse relationships individuals can have with sex work *prior* to exit severely restricts researchers’ ability to acknowledge alternate participation rates

*post* exit. The possibility that someone may engage in isolated or occasional acts of sex work remains not just implausible, but fundamentally unimaginable to exiting scholars. This contributes to the overemphasis placed on individual acts of participation, because each act is assumed to denote or set in motion a wider pattern of participation that more closely resembles the form that is taken-for-granted as the standard rate. Post-exit participation remains fundamentally incompatible with exit because this participation is assumed to always and only be extensive and recurrent. This enables generalizing statements to be made about sex workers' involvement based on mode of participation that only describe the experience of some workers.

Thus, post-exit participation is theorized as inevitably indicating a regression into a state “wherein a woman is totally immersed in prostitution and has no thoughts of leaving or any conscious awareness of the need to change” and from which exit can only be re-achieved by “recycl[ing] through each of the states” of the exit process anew (Baker et al., 2010, pp. 590, 593). Post-exit participation is always theorized as a backward slide and, subsequently, negative occurrence, rather than an isolated occurrence, strategic act, or temporary concession. This mistaken inference subsequently justifies what Agustín (2007) calls ‘the rescue industry’, in which sex workers are assumed to require coercive assistance enacting and maintaining abstinence, often through criminal justice intervention, because they otherwise cannot avoid re-immersion (also Ham & Gilmour, 2017; Sanders, 2007).

However, as I discuss in Chapter 3, sex workers already participate in sex work in diverse and often infrequent manners *before* they begin the exiting process. This means that many sex workers' involvement is already non-immersive prior to, and independent of, their decision to exit. Many of my participants already restricted their participation to regular clients and opportunistic exchanges, or on an as needed basis. Consequently, there is no reason to assume that their post-



exit participation would take a more immersive or frequent form than their pre-exit participation did. As Samantha Cookie explains, participation can be both intended and interpreted as isolated acts, unrepresentative of larger entanglement in the sex trade:

I can say that one client [is] good enough for me, because I wouldn't say that I'm addicted. I have a weird personality: I could do [a date] today and then I'm ok tomorrow. [...] If I do it for one night, ok, I'm still going to [maintain current role in straight world]<sup>31</sup>. But going back to it full[-time]? Fuck that.

By indicating her ability to “do it for one night” at the same time as actively rejecting the possibility of “going back to it full-time”, Samantha Cookie refutes the suggestion that participation – and by extension, post-exit participation – inevitably denotes immersion in the sex trade. At the same time, she also invalidates the insinuation that sex work participation prohibits or otherwise disrupts her participation in the straight world. Although she does not identify as exited, her current capacity to “do a date tonight” and not repeat it the next day or return to full-time involvement suggests that she could likely engage in isolated acts of post-exit participation without it leading to (re)immersion if she was to exit. At the same time, however, by individualizing this capacity and attributing it to her personality, rather than as describing a common mode of participation, her quote demonstrates the hegemony of this immersion stereotype, as it is even internalized within the sex work community.

Not only can the physical expression of sex work look different from what is commonly assumed, my participants' discussion of what sex work involvement means reveals the additional non-physical dimensions of sex work involvement that that must be taken into consideration when theorizing exit, and subsequent (re)involvement. The suggestion that post-exit participation

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<sup>31</sup> Details withheld to preserve anonymity.

denotes or leads to (re)immersion would require that exited individuals not only (re)participate in sexual exchanges but also interpret that act as ‘counting’ as sex work. Additionally, it would require that that exited individuals also (re)identify 1) as sex workers and 2) as members of the sex trade community. Yet, some individuals never personally nor collectively identify as sex workers despite participating in sexual exchanges, making this identification post-exit – in the absence of larger changes in motivation and context – improbable.

There are multiple reasons why an individual may not identify with the identity associated with their behaviour, and particularly for those in ‘dirty’ occupations. Some may not identify because their participation in sexual exchanges is proportionally so much smaller than their participation in other non-sex work activities, or because sex work revenue denotes such a small portion of their total income, and they otherwise identify with the activity occupying the largest percent of their time or greatest percent of their income. In Cat’s case, her affiliation with the sex trade community, in addition to her personal identification as a sex worker, is curtailed by the pretence that she is no longer involved, with the result that her participation remains unknown even to other sex workers and the services she interacts with:

There are those who don’t know that I still work because I’m housed now and I’m on/not on the street [...] I’m very very good at keeping private, yeah I can’t/ if someone/ I think if someone were even to say to [a service provider] ‘I’m pretty sure I saw Cat on 118’, she would not think I was working. So I don’t want/ I don’t want the perception of me to change. (Cat)

Although Cat maintains a level of involvement in the sex trade, continuing to see regulars she interprets as friends, the subjective line she draws between what does and does not ‘count’ as sex work and the context in which that participation occurs informs her lack of personal and collective

identification with sex workers. Since she does not primarily identify as a sex worker or member of the sex trade community, she wants to avoid being identified as such by others. Her lack of identification, particularly when coupled with her infrequent and selective participation, rebuffs the stereotype of ‘complete immersion’, and since she identifies as not involved, this non-immersion can be said to characterize her post-exit participation.

If involvement in sex work refers to more than physical participation in a sexual exchange and can occur independent from a greater immersion in the sex trade, there are significant implications for how we make sense of what it means to no longer be involved. Yet, to my knowledge, no comprehensive review of what post-exit participation ‘looks like’ and the multiple meanings participants affix to it has been undertaken. Since sex work discourse currently operates with an understanding of involvement and exiting as denoting singular homogenous forms – full-time consistent and absolute abstinence, respectively – there is little need seen to interrogate what post-exit participation actually looks like for sex workers and how that expands the various relationships individuals have with the sex trade. As a result, those participating post-exit in irregular, infrequent, or strategic manners – i.e. forms that differ from the (re)immersion mode currently accepted as standard – are rendered invisible in sex work discourse.

When research and policy adopt a particular framework to describe post-exit participation, they assume that framework applies to all sex workers and their relationships to sex work. Post-exit participation is assumed to automatically and universally indicate a form of (re)involvement even though that form does not accurately describe the situation for those who participate differently. Those participating post-exit in irregular, infrequent, or strategic manners are currently dismissed as exceptions to the standard, if acknowledged at all. However, as has been argued in

this and the preceding section, post-exit participation does not necessarily preclude someone from exited status because it doesn't necessarily indicate (re)involvement as it is currently understood.

### ***Abstinence Intentions: The Conflation of Desire and Intention***

Sex work discourse operates with a taken-for-granted assumption that everyone – researchers and sex workers alike – shares the same understanding of what exiting means and looks like in practice. Accordingly, it is rare that sex workers are directly asked about their own interpretations of exit and the relevance of it for their particular relationship with sex work (see Bowen, 2013; Drucker & Nieri, 2018; Ham & Gilmour, 2017; Law, 2011 for exceptions). This enables the conflation of the concepts of 'exiting' and 'abstinence', so that *attitudes* towards non-participation are conflated with non-participation *intentions*. At the same time, a lack of participation is theorized as always the result of an active choice to abstain – either wanting to quit or taking a break – rather than the passive result of, for example, being occupied by other responsibilities. The potential misinterpretation of attitudes and intentions, and exiting *as* abstinence, have significant implications because of the universality with which the exit status is assumed to be desired by sex workers and because of the multiple factors that influence participation (or lack thereof) independent of intent of active abstinence.

Exiting desire and meaning can function in a taken-for-granted way in the sex work literature because of their coherency with the larger narrative about sex work argued by the sex work-as-exploitation perspective. If sex work is inherently exploitative and participated in only because of coercion and desperation, it logically follows that those involved would want to cease all participation if able. Accordingly, sex work is portrayed as “an unintelligible life choice”, something no one would ever choose to participate in and something that everyone should want to avoid (Carline, 2011, p.71). Using this logic, scholars make generalizing statements about “the

growing realization” (Matthews et al., 2014, p.1) or “general agreement” (Moran & Farley, 2019, p.1951) that “many sex workers want to exit in principle at least” (Mayhew & Mossman, 2007, p.19). Even more often, research discusses exiting without addressing sex worker intent or desire, as if the universality of this goal is indisputable.

The assumption that exit is always desirable thus mirrors the normative view of sex work as always undesirable. Unlike other forms of work, whose desirability may be considered subjective and variable, sex work is generally presented as fundamentally negative. Sex workers who have not exited or who participate post-exit are, subsequently, constructed as remaining involved not because of a *desire to continue*, but rather an *inability to successfully exit*. This logic is demonstrated by Moran and Farley (2019, p.1951) in their denunciation of ‘pro-sex work advocates’:

[They] don’t seem to understand that [...] almost everyone wants out, and when they can’t escape because of their poverty and the sexism, racism, and other structural oppressions that cage them in then they seek out anyone who can offer them the choice they seek: to survive without prostitution.

Because scholars enter into their research assuming that sex workers want to exit, the focus of the research centres on the barriers preventing the obviously desired rather than their subjects’ attitudes towards participation and the elements informing their (continued) involvement.

The taken-for-granted desire to exit is further reinforced by the denial of legitimate alternative stances from sex workers. Probing research subjects’ exiting desire and meaning remains unnecessary if there is only one correct interpretation of involvement: negative. In this way, researchers’ opinions about the sex trade and the universal desirability of exit are privileged

at the expense of sex workers' own attitudes and objectives. This can be seen in Cimino's (2012, p.1246) discussion of the implications of her theoretical model of exit prediction:

[Exit] interventions can be tailor-made to address their specific needs. For example, *if a prostituted woman has not formed intentions to exit, interventions can be developed to address and change her attitudes, norms, or self-efficiency.* For instance, if it appears that a prostituted woman's attitude toward prostitution is positive, suggesting she is still glamorizing the life, an appropriate intervention could focus on the negative outcomes of prostitution. (emphasis added)

Inherent to Cimino's model is the belief that sex work is never an intelligible choice. Accordingly, those who have not formed intentions to exit because they hold positive attitudes regarding involvement (i.e. "glamourizing the life") do not just think differently, but mistakenly. Consequently, researchers and service providers are authorized in their interventions to "change [sex workers'] attitudes, norms, or self-efficiency" to bring them in accordance with that which the researcher or service provider deems acceptable (i.e. "the negative outcomes").

Also present in Cimino's assertion is the common conflation of exiting desire – i.e. attitude towards exit – and exit intention – i.e. the decision to act on exit. Few authors differentiate exiting desire from exiting intentions, seemingly confusing the expression of a favourable attitude towards exiting with an indication that the person actively wants to realize that outcome. Yet, as Drucker and Nieri's (2018) research demonstrates, these things are not synonymous and certainly not always concurrent. They asked their participants to indicate both the desirability of exit (i.e. whether they view exit as positive or negative) as well as their intentions to exit (i.e. whether they plan to exit or not), and found no clear relationship between the two. Instead, they found that sex workers can perceive exit as desirable but have no (immediate) intentions to exit or perceive exit

to be undesirable yet still intend to exit. Although the article does not go into much detail on the possible reasons for this apparent incongruency, it is likely that attitudes towards exit and exit intentions are both shaped by the nature of participants' involvement, as well as available alternate options. Importantly, their work also draws attention to the multiple dimensions of exit desirability, encouraging conversations about sex work to consider how sex workers' attitudes towards exit may differ depending on whether they are asked about exit as a general concept (i.e. the idea of ceasing participation), an immediate goal (i.e. wanting to cease participation in the near future), or eventual outcome (i.e. planning to cease participation 'someday'). However, this needs to be teased out in more detail in future research.

The distinctions between desire and intention, as well among the multiple dimensions of exit, must be taken into consideration when assessing research claims about the desirability of exit, even among a particular research population. For example, when Farley (2005, p.962) states "89% of 854 women we interviewed said that they wanted to escape prostitution", it cannot be assumed that the desire expressed is towards abstinence specifically nor indicative of an actual intention to exit. Few studies reveal their interview guide or operationalize their use of terms, so it remains unclear whether participants are asked about the desirability of exit or an actual intention to exit, as well as how they understood exit more generally (both its meaning and its dimensions). Consequently, the results presented may not actually indicate the findings researchers propose.

This probability increases when acknowledging that sex workers already assign different meaning to both sex work and sex work involvement than those studying them, which would necessarily impact how they interpret no longer participating. If an individual perceives themselves as no longer involved even though they still participate in dates with regulars, this will impact the perceived desirability of exit as well as their intentions to act. If the individual does not currently

participate in sexual exchanges but still identifies as part of the sex work community, this will also impact exiting's desire and intention. It may also mean that exiting takes on additional meanings than simply "no participation" or the choice to remain abstinent. This is why it is important for researchers to ask their participants about how they understand the different dimensions of sex work involvement. Whereas prevailing narratives about involvement restrict its meaning to the physical act, with the result that exit is defined by and achieved solely through an absence of participation, my participants demonstrate that it holds multiple meanings for those involved, with the result that so too does an exit from it. Yes, involvement includes actual physical participation, but it also encompasses personal identity, financial benefit, and networks of social relationships.

Unlike other forms of work, research has yet to consider the multiple meanings attached to sex work involvement and how they shape both an individual's motivation for working and the particular form or arrangement that work takes. By not imposing a normative lens about sex work onto the research project, the narrative of exiting conversations can change from 'all sex workers must want to exit' to 'what are sex workers' perspectives on exiting and what does this tell us about their relationship to sex work?'. In contrast to the assumed universality of exiting and abstinence desire, as should be expected when working with any diverse sample, my research reveals a wider range of attitudes about exiting and what that looks like in practice.<sup>32</sup> I now turn to those attitudes and expressions, beginning with that which challenges the dominant narrative: a disinterest in exit.

**A Disinterest in Exiting.**<sup>33</sup> Several of my participants expressed an explicit disinterest in ceasing their participation, directly rebuffing the suggested agreement that sex workers "want to

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<sup>32</sup> It should be reiterated that not all participants spoke to this theme during their interview.

<sup>33</sup> Even though only one participant used the term 'exit' during their interview, I continue to use the term exit here because it is the term currently used to discuss non-involvement. Based on this discussion, in tandem with the other points raised in the dissertation, I recommend an alternate term in the next section.



exit in principle at least” (Mayhew & Mossman, 2007, p.19). Lydia was particularly vocal about her intent to continue her involvement. When asked if she ever thought about ceasing participation, she replied:

No, because it’s extra money and I’m comfortable with what I do. Like I’m not in a desperate hole that I will never see the light. Like I see the light and I’m happy. I’m comfortable. I have a fiancé. I have a home. I don’t have anything immediately to worry about. It’s not a struggle that I have to fucking suck cock the rest of my life. It’s nothing like that... I’m not trapped. It’s just nice. If I was to close the door, if I ever thought of closing the door, I’d be like having less money [*laughs*].

When explaining her position, Lydia repetitively distances herself from the prevailing sex work-as-exploitation narrative by indicating that she is “comfortable” and “happy” with her involvement. Her explicit rejection of being “trapped” or “in a desperate hole” is significant because of the recurrent tendency of the sex work-as-exploitation narrative’s to frame exiting as ‘escape’ and those who exit ‘survivors’ (Bindel, 2017; Cimino, 2012; Farley, 2005; Farley et al., 2005; Hedin & Månsson, 2004; Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2014; Moran & Farley, 2019). Suggesting that sex work involvement is something from which individuals must ‘survive’ and ‘escape’ cements sex work as “an ominous, exponentially expanding entity that ensnares vulnerable women” (Ham & Gilmour, 2017, p.752). This not only implies a need to exit, but also an urgency. It is this need and urgency that subsequently justifies ‘the rescue industry’ and the accompanying forceful interventions used to ‘save’ those unable to ‘help themselves’ by exiting (Agustín, 2007). With the decision to leave sex work characterized as “the first time that women involved in prostitution begin to exercise real choice” (Matthews et al., 2014, p.127), the possibility that individuals could purposely choose to continue is adamantly precluded.

This framing of exit operates on the assumption that sex workers have a particular relationship with the sex trade. Namely, that they are involved in the stereotypical manner assumed to represent the default for sex work involvement. However, unlike the dominant presentation of street-level sex workers, Lydia is not actively engaged in streetwalking, solely dependent on sex work earnings, nor participating in sex work on a full-time basis. Already participating in a selective manner – typically with regulars or opportunistically – it can be argued that Lydia has adjusted her participation to what she considers to be desirable or necessary for her current situation, making abstinence (“closing the door”) not only unwanted but also disagreeable because it would require that she forfeit the extra income and personal relationships with regulars that her involvement provides and that she currently enjoys.

Even though Lydia is not solely dependent on sex work income, the extra financial stability sex work can provide should not be overlooked. The impact of the loss of income from sex work depends on workers’ other sources of income. Individuals participating in sex work on a part-time or occasional basis, and who already have access to other sources of income, may be less reliant on sexual transaction earnings than those for whom sex work constitutes their only revenue. Nevertheless, sex work earnings offer money on an as-needed and immediate basis. June explains: “[living] month to month is hard, to live month by month, which is why I have my regular dates that call me in between these certain times because I do need the money”. Whereas mainstream employment or social assistance may provide income on a set schedule, sex work provides workers with money on demand.

It is difficult to gain a sense of income potential of street-level sex work because of its criminalized nature and it can be hard to imagine that workers can make a meaningful amount of

money when the costs of services are as low as \$20<sup>34</sup>. However, according to the National Task Force on Prostitution, the average annual income of ‘full-time’ street-level sex workers in the United States in 2008 was between \$20,000 and \$50,000 (as cited in Murphy, 2010).<sup>35</sup> Although my participants would likely not meet the criteria for ‘full-time’ work based on their reduced and selective participation, if the indicated range is accurate even part-time or ad-hoc involvement offers significant revenue. This is supported by Jeffrey and MacDonald’s (2006a) research on sex workers in the Maritimes, which found that street-level sex workers in Halifax earned between \$40 and \$300 per night. Whilst highly contextual and subsequently ungeneralizable to other locations and populations, my purpose in including these numbers is to demonstrate that continued involvement, even when not in a full-time manner, may remain economically advantageous for some individuals. Sex work can provide substantial enough earnings that complete disengagement may be financially ‘costly’ to those who depend to that extra income. Subsequently, sex workers may choose to modify the level and nature of their involvement according to current need and circumstance rather than exit entirely.

Whereas Lydia’s opposition to cessation is rooted in the positive outcomes she associated with involvement (i.e. sex work is desirable), Olivia’s disinclination to exit is informed by the relative advantages she feels sex work provides over its alternative: mainstream labour (i.e. mainstream work is not desirable). The rescue industry currently operates with an implicit and unsubstantiated assumption that the ‘straight world’, and mainstream jobs in particular, offer sex workers a less exploitative, violent, and degrading income source. This assumption is necessary to

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<sup>34</sup> This was expressed as the lowest current rate characterizing sexual exchanges in Edmonton. Rates vary considerably by worker characteristics, client characteristics, location, competition, weather, and other variables. Many participants indicated that they refused to accept rates this low.

<sup>35</sup> I was unable to access the original document to which Murphy refers and therefore unable to clarify how The National Task Force on Prostitution defines ‘full-time’ work or verify the income claim.

justify coercive exiting initiatives and rebuff the positioning of sex work as a legitimate employment option. However, when attention is paid to the labour opportunities available to those with limited occupational and educational qualifications, the potential that mainstream jobs may also be exploitative, violent, or degrading cannot be ignored. This characterizes Olivia's experiences with mainstream work. Straight employment provided Olivia with neither protection from sexual violence, nor guaranteed payment for services provided, leaving her frustrated and dissatisfied with mainstream options:

I've tried straight jobs now ... I was told, you know "Why don't you try a straight job?", "Why don't you get a real job?". I get told that all the time [...] So I did, and I worked like a dog for 15 hours and I was supposed to get paid at the end of the day. In the end they screwed me over. I didn't get paid nothing after all that work. [...] It seems that every time I try and do a straight job, every time I try and do the *right thing* – whatever that is – I get screwed around. They don't recognize my efforts *at all* [...] I'm just going to stick to what I know.

Rather than inciting a desire to quit sex work, Olivia's experiences with straight jobs provoked a desire to return to the form of work whose norms were more familial ("what I know"). Her positioning of sex work as preferential to mainstream options defies prevailing ideas about the assumed undesirability of sex work participation. However, similar views can be found in other studies. For example, more than one quarter of Murphy and Venkatesh's (2006) participants identified sex work as better than their other job experiences and nearly one-quarter of Bowen's (2013) participants describe dual participation in sex work and straight work as "an ideal way of being in the world" (p.75). In addition, several of Ham and Gilmour's (2017) respondents chose

to re-enter the sex industry after exit because their experience of sex work was preferential to that which they encountered in straight work.

The preference for sex work becomes increasingly comprehensible when contextualized in a socioeconomic climate where accessible straight employment options frequently remain precarious, underpaid, and menial. More than half of employed women in Canada work in traditionally-female occupations defined by the “5 Cs”: caring, clerical, catering, cashiering, and cleaning (Moyser, 2017). They also represent three-quarters of those in part-time employment (Moyser, 2017) and are more likely to have a casual, term, or contract job (Statistics Canada, 2019b). Approximately 6 out of 10 minimum wage workers are female and nearly half of women with full-time status earned minimum wage (Dionne-Simard & Miller, 2019). Moreover, even if a job pays well and offers full-time employment, it may lack desirable intrinsic benefits – such as a sense of pride, control over working conditions (hours, rates, etc.), personal interest in work, or recognition of performance (Krahn et al., 2020) – that sex work may provide. The meaningful employment of Indigenous women is further constrained by the intersection of sexism with racism and the effects of colonial practice and policies. Yet, potential dissatisfaction with available mainstream job opportunities and characteristics is routinely disregarded by those promoting rescue interventions and exit more generally.

When conceded by researchers, lack of intent to exit – or alternatively, intent to continue participation – is typically framed as an unacceptable or inauthentic stance for sex workers to hold. Its legitimacy is dismissed through claims that sex workers are simply “unaware of their problem behaviour” (Baker et al., 2010, p.580) or, if aware, they lack “commitment” to a pro-social life (Baker et al., 2010; Dalla, 2006; Månsson & Hedin, 1999). Absent is any consideration that (continued) involvement may be the desired outcome for some individuals, not because they are unaware of

the assumed issues with their involvement, but rather because they do not interpret their involvement through the same lens as the researchers studying them, in part because their participation takes forms other than that which is assumed. Researchers frequently assume sex workers want to exit because they hold negative views of involvement, but it is highly possible that some sex workers perceive their involvement as unproblematic or at least no more problematic than their alternate options. Others may have already adjusted their participation to a more desirable state. Acknowledging this does not, as Farley (2004, p.1096) claims, “make[] invisible their strong desire to escape prostitution”, but rather permits sex workers to hold and offer their own interpretations and objectives.

Olivia and Lydia both challenge the assumed certainty of exiting objectives, even though they differ on their reasons for wanting to continue. They demonstrate that intentions to participate (i.e. lack of intent to exit) can be influenced both by enjoyment of the experience or its associated benefits, as well as a greater dislike of available alternatives. So, if as Cimino (2019, p.607) proposes, “[e]xiting is a process whereby the realization that selling sex is no longer beneficial”, involvement can be accepted as the belief that particular modes of selling sex *are* beneficial for particular objectives or rewards. It is not that sex workers simply remain unaware of sex work’s detriments, but that they may not agree with them, do not affix the same significance to them, or rationalize acceptance of them because sex work is seen as still superior to other options available to them.

**Desiring ‘Exit’.** More consistent with the prevailing literature on exit, some participants positively discussed ceasing their involvement in sex work. An interest in ceasing participation is often presented as evidence of the undesirable nature of the sex trade. For example, Farley (2005, p.962) uses the high percentage of respondents in her research expressing a desire to exit to

conclude that sex work “is profoundly harmful”. Thus, similar to Cimino’s (2019) claim above, exiting desire is theorized as acknowledgment of the negative nature of involvement. This is perhaps most evident in the following lengthy excerpt from Williamson and Folaron (2003, p.283) describing what they call the ‘exit phase’ of a sex worker’s career:

Exiting the lifestyle requires a time of reflection. Nearing the exit, the women contemplate what will happen to them if they continue to live as a drug addict prostitute or a prostitute with chronic depression. They recognize that what they have accumulated as a result of their financial dream, amounts to little but a collection of arrest records, a blur of experiences, and a path of abandonment by those whom they cared about. They realize that the skills they have learned while in prostitution are not marketable.

When women finally make the decision that they can no longer hurt themselves and their families, they experience intense remorse for the prostitution activities that have hurt their children and other loved ones. They set out to repair broken and abandoned relationships. They want something better. Working the streets has become too dangerous and degrading. They can no longer tolerate their lives or themselves and develop a disdain for what they have become.

In addition to the intense responsabilization narrative (“make the decision they can no longer hurt themselves and their families”), this framing of exit motivation assumes that exiting decisions are always the result of sex workers’ contempt for the sex trade and their role within it (“can no longer tolerate their lives or themselves and develop a disdain for what they have become”). Like other claims about sex work involvement, such assertions typically escape any interrogation about accuracy or generalizability because sex workers are treated as a homogenous population

participating in an identical manner. Consequently, unsubstantiated generalizations – arguably the entire passage quoted above – are passed off as universal truths.

Yet, in contrast to this framing, my participants' favourable attitudes towards exiting were not motivated by a distaste for sex work or “the sum of daily hassles, acute traumas, and chronic conditions” from their involvement (Williamson & Folaron, 2003, p.283). They also did not describe their exit as an ‘escape’, nor infer an urgency to their decision. Instead, those who positively discussed participation cessation framed it as a natural life progression or subsequent phase in their personal journeys. For example, Tara described her transition out of the trade as a symptom of maturation and entering the next stage in her life.

So now I'm all grown up. Well, kind of grown up [*laughs*], you know? And um I'm more mature. I mean, like, and thinking about it maturely, like what am I going to do with the rest of my life? That's what I want to know.

Tara's attitude towards exit is not expressed as being the result of her dislike of participation or the need to escape, but rather the product of a larger existential reflection on what she wants to do with her life and how she makes sense of her identity and role within the world at this particular moment. Since her entire identity is not tied to sex work, she desires an exploration of alternate experiences available to her, similar to non-sex workers. Abigail also referenced maturation and succession when describing her current relationship with the sex trade, stating: “I don't think I was ready to start growing up again until like recently. Like I feel I'm at a different level”.

Researchers are beginning to consider how labour concepts like mobility and trajectory operate within the sex industry by theorizing sex work as a form of labour like any other (Bowen, 2013; Ham & Gilmour, 2017; Law, 2011). Like employees of other occupational fields, they find that sex workers regularly reflect on their current situation and how their needs or desires are best



served. Some individuals may always intend for their sex work involvement to be temporary (Ham & Gilmour, 2017; Law, 2011), whereas others may participate indeterminately, altering the specifics of their involvement – including ceasing involvement altogether – as their needs or situations change. The latter situation describes June. At 47, and involved since youth, June is considering discontinuing her involvement because she wants to spend more time with her partner:

I'm at that point where I'm ready to retire. Like even seeing my regulars is / you know I'm 47. I'm just tired. Tired of it. Tired of it. I want to start, you know, living my life. I just finally got my apartment [...] and I want to continue being happy with my husband and, you know, not have to look that way anymore.

The language she uses is significant. Retirement is a common concept in the labour literature that describes “changes in the temporal and spatial structuration of everyday lives, away from workplaces and working hours” (Wanka, 2019, p.7). Yet, it is virtually absent in conversations about exiting.<sup>36</sup> The primary reason for its absence lies in the prevailing narrative’s refusal to concede sex work as ‘work’. Constituting a form of violence against women, proponents of the sex work-as-exploitation perspective disallow labour theories and concepts in conversations about sex work, because doing so is interpreted to be “the commercialization and commodification of women’s embodied sexuality” (Longworth, 2010, p.58; also Moran & Farley, 2019). With a few notable exceptions (Benoit & Miller, 2007; Drucker & Nieri, 2018; Parsons et al., 2007; Sanders, 2007), sex work discourse largely constructs sex work as distinct from other occupational areas, with the result that movement in and out of the sex trade is constructed as fundamentally different from movement in mainstream workforces. In particular, sex workers are denied the co-

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<sup>36</sup> Rickard (2001) offers a rare exception, presenting retirement as complete disengagement with sex work (“cut themselves off” (p.125).

existence of both structural (e.g. critical life events and socioeconomic status) and individual agentic (e.g. appeal of work) factors in decision making processes regarding their work (see Benoit et al., 2017).

The framing of exit as escape and exited individuals as survivors also distinguishes sex work from other forms of work because of the sense of desperation and urgency these terms evoke. As Law (2011) notes, for no other occupation is there this level of research directed at helping them ‘quit’, nor is its cessation framed as exit or escape. Because exit is assumed to be both the logical objective of sex workers, as well as the only outcome that can ‘protect’ sex workers from the exploitation and violence associated with the sex industry (Farley, 2004, 2005; Moran & Farley, 2019), its realization for all sex workers is treated as simultaneously predestined, inescapable, and immediate regardless of individual sex worker desire or intent. Unlike retirement, which is recognized as including at least some level of personal initiation and direction, the rescue framework emerging from the sex-work-as-exploitation narrative “suggests that exiting sex work is predominantly achieved by coaxing or forcing women out of sex work” (Ham & Gilmour, 2017, p.751). Yet, as evidenced in Tara’s above discussion of maturation and by Ham and Gilmour (2017) and Sanders (2007), this dismisses the fact that, for some sex workers, exit may actually be perceived as simply “a natural point in their working career when it was time to stop and do something else” (Sanders, 2007, p.86) rather than a pressing imperative. Subsequently, sex work is often intended to be a temporary activity with an eventual end date, whether that end date is chosen by the sex worker because of other interests or dictated by the industry itself, as was the case for several of Ham and Gilmour’s (2017, p.572) respondents, who reported preparing for their eventual “exclusion *from* sex work”, an outcome shaped by an industry that discriminates by appearance (including age).

The lack of urgency behind Tara and June's positive attitudes towards exit demonstrates the distinction between exiting desire and intentions. As previously mentioned, favourable attitudes towards exit are not tantamount to, nor necessarily accompanied by, a resolution to exit. Even though both participants positively discussed movement to the 'next stage' in their life, neither expressed that they intend to realize that next stage at the time of the interview, nor within any specified timeframe. So when June states that she is "at that point where I am ready to retire", the absence of a timeline or established plans for exiting suggests that she may be ready to *perceive* retirement positively, but not necessarily *act* on it. This is further supported by her openness to participate in other sex work activity (see below). This distinction between support for exiting as a concept or inevitable stage (i.e. attitude or future intention), and the actual decision to exit (immediate intention), works to contradict the desperation and urgency commonly affixed to exit in the literature. A significant explanatory element to this is the diverse labour arrangements already participated in by sex workers. If a sex worker has already reduced their participation to favoured regulars or as needed, this reveals a degree of agency over their involvement that disputes the need for intrusive 'rescue' interventions.

Lastly, exit is theorized as a complete disengagement with the sex trade with the result that any form of post-exit participation is prohibited even if under different conditions, whereas retirement discourse is more nuanced. Within the sociology of work literature, retirement encompasses both a withdrawal from a particular occupation, regardless of whether the individual continues to work in another capacity, as well as substantive withdrawal from the workforce as a whole (i.e. any paid work). (Lawrie, 2018). Concerning the former, the labour literature uses the term "bridge employment" for any additional employment (including temporary or part-time) that occurs after a person retires from a long-term job (Feldman & Seongsu, 2000; Gobeski & Beehr,

2008). Bridge employment may occur in the same occupation category or even same job as pre-retirement ('career bridge employment'), or in a different occupational field entirely ('non-career bridge employment') (Gobeski & Beehr, 2008). Unlike (re)involvement, 'unretirement' – the term used to describe a return to the workforce after retirement - is not necessarily perceived as a negative event, even in cases of career bridge employment. Instead it is recognized as often anticipated and planned for, denoting an "alternate type of retirement path" (Maestas, 2010, p.744) as opposed to a 'failure' or 'unsuccessful' retirement like with post-exit participation.

Conversely, within the sex work literature, legitimate retirement (i.e. exit) paths are significantly diminished. Career-bridge employment (post-exit participation) is explicitly prohibited, branded not just an improper form of post-retirement behaviour, but as an action that voids that retirement altogether. Yet, June's conception of retirement does not preclude potential sex work employment. She remains open to participating *differently*:

I don't care if I say 'I quit', there might be a good offer [*laughs*] let's say further down the road for me to try something different, right? Now they have video cameras out and stuff like that. You go on video, video online, and stuff like that. So that would be easier for me than standing out in the freezing cold, right?

Sex work discourse does not currently offer the language to make sense of June's continued openness to sex trade involvement despite a desired retirement. Consequently, her inclination is likely to be classified as both (re)involvement and 'lacking commitment to change'. However, it is clear that June maintains potential involvement in sex work as a legitimate retirement path. Participating in online sex work after she retires is not perceived as regression, or a failure, but instead as distinct from her current involvement and a form of career advancement.

Mobility that occurs *within* the sex industry is under researched because involvement is typically treated as a single uniform behaviour. However, important insight can be gained when researcher assumptions about exiting are put aside and sex workers are directly asked about their intentions regarding their participation (including non-participation) and how they make sense of current and desired mobility within, as well as out of, the industry. If researchers invalidate a sex worker's exit simply because he or she engages in post-exit participation, automatically theorizing it as (re)involvement, they overlook the variation in exit practices that may more accurately describe sex workers' lived experience of exit than the singular exclusionary model currently accepted.

**Indifference and Ambiguity Towards 'Exit'.** Whether sex workers are said to be desperate to escape sex work or remain oblivious to the profound harmfulness of their involvement, sex work discourse tends to assume that individuals hold assured and unwavering opinions about the desirability of exit. However, as several other of my participants demonstrate, attitudes towards sex work are often more nuanced and vague. This vagueness is apparent in this excerpt from Chloe's interview:

Me: Have you ever thought about leaving or tried to leave?

Chloe: Yeah I did. You get bored of it, do something else. I just don't want to do it or I'm sick of it. [...]

Me: Yeah? So, what sort of prevents you from leaving or makes you return?

Chloe: Nothing I just get bored [*laughs*]

Me: You get bored of doing something else?

Chloe: Get bored of doing it or get bored of not doing it, staying home, doing nothing but watching TV. I'm getting sick of it

Me: Yeah? So, there's nothing really to take that spot?

Chloe: Well it's just quick money, when you need it. Me, I always like money on me.

Chloe discussion of both her involvement and its potential cessation can best be described as ambivalent. She is neither invested in continuing in sex work, nor remaining abstinent from it. Similar to Muehlenhard and Peterson's (2005) discourse of ambivalence regarding sexual consent, sex workers' ambivalence may be expressed as the result of simultaneously wanting to cease *and* wanting to continue involvement, *neither* wanting to cease *nor* continue, or general indifference. Ambivalence also best describes the manner with which Cat discussed her involvement:

[I told myself] I would quit when [my kids] were [in school] [*laughs*] ... and then it was 'when they graduate I swear I'll quit, yeah', then 'when my first grandchild comes along I swear I'll quit', 'when my sixth grandchild comes along, maybe I'll quit', you know? I don't even know how to quit anymore. It's not a driving force like it used to be, but then the need to quit was never personal. It was always legal, something forced.

Current exit models (i.e. Baker et al., 2010; Månsson & Hedin, 1999) would interpret Chloe and Cat's ambivalence as either a lack of commitment to change or inability to see that their behaviour is problematic. Yet, to do so is to impose externally-informed explanations that ignore their own interpretations of their situations. This is perhaps most evident with Cat, for whom involvement holds additional meaning than simply the physical act and for whom the motivation to participate is not strictly financial:

Unfortunately when you've lived that long working, you don't have a social life. Um like I no longer work on the street, I now have regulars that come to my home, that I trust to come to my home, that um, you know, they're almost my social life. You know it's like friends with benefits that give me money.

Although Cat contemplated ending her participation at various moments throughout her journey, she has taken no action to realize it. Moreover, the language she uses to describe her intentions became increasingly less committal – from “when my first grandchild comes along I *swear* I’ll quit” to “when my sixth grandchild comes along, *maybe* I’ll quit” – offering another example of the distinction between exit attitudes and actual exit intentions.

Her ambivalent attitude regarding exit can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that she interprets involvement as her ‘social life’. Attitudes regarding exit are not necessarily stable nor certain because involvement encompasses multiple dimensions, each being differently valued and having varying influence at different points in the lives or in response to changing contexts. When we recognize that relationships with sex work are multi-dimensional, we can see that attitudes towards ending that relationship can be both favourable and unfavourable at the same time. For example, it is possible that Cat may simultaneously desire exit for one reason – e.g. to have more time to spend with her kids – and not want to exit for another – e.g. because she is unwilling to sacrifice her social life. The emotional aspects of involvement, particularly what Murphy (2010) calls the ‘social network of prostitution’, is an important factor influencing sex work tenure and should be analyzed as such when making sense of Cat’s attitudes towards exiting. Completely disengaging with the sex trade would mean not only the forfeiting of income, but the sacrifice of her current social network. Since involvement means more to Cat than physical participation, so too does exit.

The emotional aspects of involvement also hold importance for Samara, who despite not actively participating at the time of the interview, previously sustained involvement primarily for social reasons:

I lived on the streets for a really long time and I was in the industry for a long, long time, obviously, and when I wanted to quit I couldn't quit. I had money [but] I couldn't quit. [...] It wasn't about the money, it was about the lifestyle that it brings, I think. The people, just being out there, that was my only way of connecting with people, yeah, because that was my social world. Like that was the only time I would ever get out, you know, 'cause I'd never go anywhere.

Samara explicitly emphasized that “it wasn't for the money, it was about the lifestyle it brings”, accentuating the primary motivation of her involvement being social in nature. In her analysis of youth involvement in the sex trade, Downe (2003) states that disengagement may be undesirable or even unthinkable for those whose sense of self is rooted in the sex trade community. Similarly, Murphy (2010) finds that many individuals remain involved in sex work because of fear of losing what is often their only source of social support. Recognizing that involvement comprises more than the physical acts of sex work, researchers need to consider how rigid boundaries around exit end up excluding those whose relationship to their work is multifaceted and emotionally embodied.

Freddie also expressed indifference towards exiting. Despite working in a mainstream occupation and not actively participating in the sex trade at the time of the interview – arguably fulfilling the dominant definition of exit – they admit a willingness to maintain involvement even if rarely initiated on their end. Unlike Cat, Freddie does not hold simultaneously opposing attitudes towards exit, but is instead apathetic. Their apathy is both the subjective result of how they make sense of their involvement, as well as the specific disinterest in the form of exit demanded of them. For Freddie, the conversation is less about ceasing participation completely than about finding the right balance of participation for their desired lifestyle:



Yeah I'll work [in a straight job] 40 hours a week, you know what I mean? I mean it doesn't mean if the opportunity arose [to participate in sex work] I wouldn't take it, because I might. Um it doesn't happen too often that I'll seek it out. [...] I mean I'm still working to balance out the cycle.<sup>37</sup> I balanced it out, I added to it, you know, because it's all one big cycle. I'm not working out there, right, but it's never just "oh I have a job", go straight to there. [...] [But] I mean I'm not out so any time I could go back in.

Similar to June, Freddie does not refute the possibility of future participation, despite not currently participating, complicating both the assumption of abstinence and urgency, as well as the 'clean break suggested by dominant exit narratives (Law, 2011). Their indifference towards exiting is informed by their rejection of the sex work status binary for making sense of people's relationships to the sex trade. By rejecting the status binary, they cast doubt on the accepted desirability of exit, in addition to the very possibility of it, at least as traditionally understood:

People never really exit, they just kind of move on. You can't exit when something's just a part of you now. You just got to learn to live with it and accept it and work around it. Hope your friends don't show up at work. Hope you make it to the bus at night so you don't wander down the street because you're bored. All the things like that.

The statement "people never really exit, they just kind of move on" points to the possibility that exiting, as researchers and policy makers presently understand and employ it, is less relevant to the lives of those involved in sex work than is currently assumed. Making distinctions among the various dimensions of involvement, Freddie draws our attention to how it can continue to inform one's personal and social identities ("I'm not out", "just a part of you now"), even when not at the

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<sup>37</sup> The cycle to which Freddie refers is the balancing of multiple activities, not the cycle of (re)involvement mentioned in the exit literature.

level of master status, even when the physical expression of it stops. They remain indifferent to exit because they recognize additional options than ‘in’ or ‘out’ of the trade and, instead, recognize involvement as dynamic, multifaceted, and strongly shaped by current circumstances and motivations. For this reason, they – and others who share similar understandings of involvement – may never fulfill what is held the final phase of a successful exit in research and exiting programs: the adoption of a ‘new’ identity that explicitly excludes affiliation with the sex worker identity and/or community (Hedin & Månsson, 2004; Månsson & Hedin, 1999; Public Safety Canada, 2018; Sanders, 2007).

**Summary of Attitudes Towards Exiting.** Although it is asserted that most sex workers desire exit, even if they do not immediately intend to realize it, my participants expressed a range of views towards exit that also included both disinclination and ambivalence. Such attitudes are not unique to my participants. My findings complement other studies that challenge the supposed universal desire to exit, including the close to 50% of participants who classified exiting as either undesirable or as neither desirable or undesirable in Drucker and Nieri’s (2018) research. When involvement is recognized as comprising multiple dimensions of differing magnitudes for each sex worker, the variation of attitudes and intentions becomes both more evident and contextualized.

With involvement referring to plurality of participation forms and frequencies, varying with regards to both context and motivation, it is probable that many of those expressing disinterest or indifference towards exiting have already adjusted the nature of their involvement to what is considered to be desirable and necessary for their current needs and circumstances or, alternatively, envision a different form of retirement than complete abstinence. When researchers reproduce rigid boundaries around status categories and start conflating distinct even if related issues (like desire and intent, non-participation and abstinence), conversations about involvement actively

ignore the diverse relationships that individuals have and can have with sex work and silence the voices of those whose involvement deviates from the hegemonic forms that remain unchallenged despite their limited accuracy.

### **Vectors and Dis-involvement: Alternate Frameworks for Conceptualizing Sex Work**

The preceding discussion provides a comprehensive examination of the inadequacies of current conceptualizations of exit that reinforce the all or nothing involvement binary. Exit becomes an extremely exclusive status whose eligibility is determined by a single act of participation, overemphasizing the significance of individual acts and dismissing strategic action. At the same time, post-exit participation is never recognized as a single act and instead assumed to always denote a (re)immersion in the sex trade, which ignores the varied ways people participate before and after exit. Additionally, exit – in the form of abstinence – is assumed to be universally desired and actionable by the sex worker population, while alternate opinions that provide valuable insight about the multidimensional nature of involvement are ignored. Taken in tandem with the previously identified inadequacies of current conceptualizations of involvement, this discussion offers powerful evidence of the limitation of the categorical approach of the sex work status binary.

Simply put, the sex work status binary cannot account for the diverse relationships sex workers have with sex work. Adopting this binary ignores and misclassifies the different form, frequency, and significance of sex workers' participation creating a one-dimensional understanding of sex workers' lived experiences and work arrangements. This is problematic at the research level because the literature fails to provide a nuanced representation of sex work in practice; however, it becomes especially problematic when that knowledge is translated into actionable effects, like policies and programs that regulate the sex industry and those involved

based on incomplete, inaccurate, or otherwise flawed ideas about what sex work means and looks like in practice, as well as the exit from it. So how can we better acknowledge the diversity of sex work labour arrangements?

### ***Vectors: Acknowledging the Multiple Dimensions of Involvement***

First, we can attend to the diversity of their involvement. This diversity defies a simple present or absent binary (i.e. the current model), and instead exists along **multiple intersecting open-ended vectors** that produce an infinite number of relationships with the sex trade. Vectors speak to the multiple dimensions of involvement and may include, but are not limited to, the frequency and manner of participation, level of income dependency, and the various meanings affixed to participation. Identifying all possible vectors requires that ‘involvement’ itself be the focus of future research endeavours, and because many of these vectors are subjective, it also requires that researchers listen to the insights sex workers can provide about their work. An individual’s distinct relationship to their work can be understood as the point where these vectors intersect.

Figure 2 offers a provisional visual representation of what this may look like, based on my participants’ narratives. Possible vectors are expressed as doubled ended arrows, signifying both direction and magnitude. The precise number and nature of each vector – both what the vectors connote and how they measured - will emerge from more targeted interrogations of subjects’ involvement and their subjective interpretations of their involvement. An individual’s relationship with sex work is represented by the yellow circle highlighting the intersection point of these multiple vectors.

**Figure 2**

*The Multiple Vectors Shaping Relationships with Sex Work*

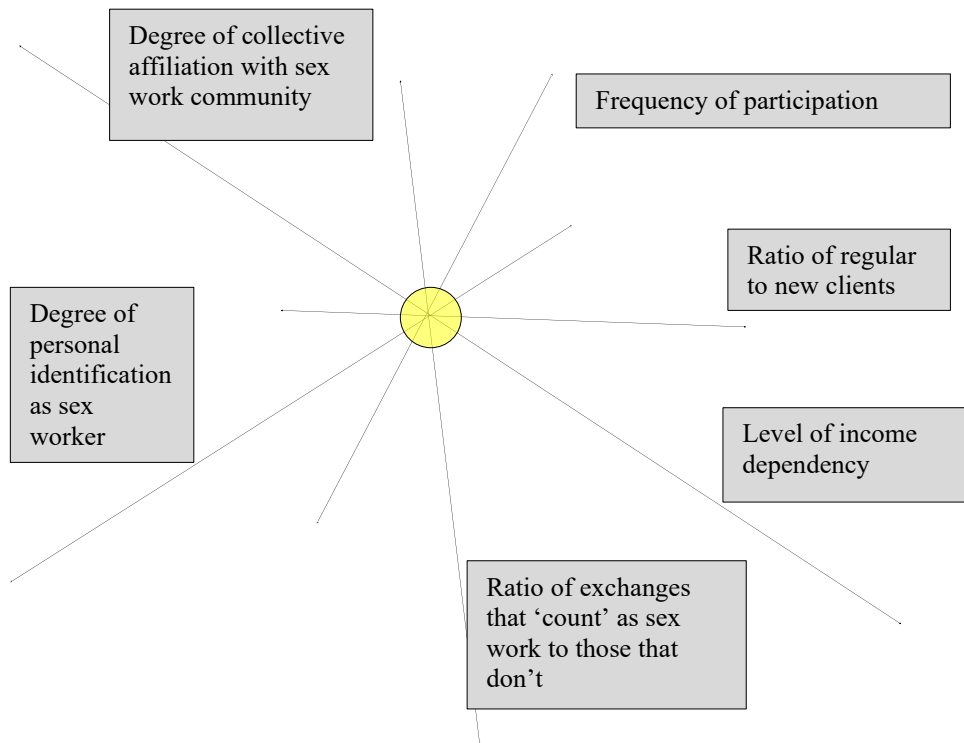


Figure 2 demonstrates that people’s relationships with sex work are more complex than categorical conceptualizations concede because they are the product of multiple concurrent and dynamic dimensions. My proposed model is heavily inspired by intersectionality, first coined and brought into mainstream discourse by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), and “meant to get us to think about *how* we think” about and subsequently analyze social inequality (Carasthathis, 2006, p.4). It directs us to reconceptualize disadvantage, not as occurring along a single categorical axis or operating in an additive way, but as the product of multiple manifestations of oppression that exist together to structure people’s experiences of the world (Crenshaw, 1999; Hill Collins, 2000). Similar to intersectionality, my model is best utilized as a conceptual tool to identify the “categorical exclusions” (Carasthathis, 2006, p.4) entrenched in sex work discourse rather than an applied tool to map out particular relationships. As such, I anticipate that its visual form may

change as involvement itself becomes the subject of investigation. It should, thus, be appreciated as a work-in-progress that actively invites further interrogation and elaboration of its elements, rather than a final product.

I also draw on Sullivan and Baruch's (2009) kaleidoscope career model, to stress that changes in any of these vectors affects the intersection points of other vectors, creating new work arrangements and different relationships with the work. As a result, intersection points are continually shifting according to changes in contexts, choices, interpretations, and motivations. Figure 2, thus, demonstrates how relationships with sex work are both subjective and situational, shaped by the intersection of multiple dimensions. The result of this is both the existence of distinct relationships for different individuals, as well as consistently amended relationships for each worker because the particular points of intersection remain unfixed, continuously affected by changes in involvement motivation, practice, perception (e.g. attitudes about clients, affiliation, etc.), and context. Involvement itself becomes the focus of inquiry.

Recognizing involvement as comprising a range of different possibilities and realities based on the particular intersection of vectors places researchers and policy makers in a better position to produce knowledge and develop strategies that acknowledges this diversity. To illustrate the value of this shift in perception for providing more nuanced understandings of sex work involvement, I will briefly demonstrate using participation frequency. As my participants' narratives reveal, sex work participation<sup>38</sup> more often occurs at a frequency between, rather than at, the extremities of full-time immersive involvement and complete abstinence, and the frequency regularly changes while still not reaching the extremities. Yet, involvement is regularly assumed to always and only denote full-time consistent participation. Policies and programs grounded in

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<sup>38</sup> I refer to all sex work participation here, regardless of sector, gender, or other variables.

the assumption that all sex workers participate in a full-time daily manner not only overlook those who participate differently, they may also impose support or regulation that is inappropriate for their relationship with the sex trade. This is made worse when one assumption about involvement fosters others, for example when that full-time participation is theorized as the result of financial dependency or adoption of sex work identity as a master status. Conversely, if researchers are required to ask research participants about the nature of their participation, like the frequency of their participation, whether that frequency is more, less, or consistent with previous years, and the explanatory variables shaping that frequency, a more accurate depiction of sex work practice is enabled that would subsequently demand multiple rather than one-size-fits-all responses.

Recognition of the complexity of involvement, however, will always be limited by one-dimensional conceptualizations of exit and since much of the discourse about sex work relies on a particular image of what it means and looks like to be involved in sex work, we are restricted in how we envision what it means to no longer be involved. Failure to acknowledge that involvement exists in manners other than full-time consistent participation, and denotes more than the physical behaviour of an exchange, narrows how we make sense of potential alternatives. Assuming that everyone who participates in a sexual exchange sees themselves as involved overemphasizes the relevance of exit to their lives. In the preceding chapters, I revealed the existence of varying and fluid modes of participation occurring throughout a sex worker's entire sex trade career, as well as the manner with which a range of variables influence whether a particular exchange is seen to 'count' as sex work or something distinct from sex work. If sex work discourse concedes that involvement is both more complex and more diverse than currently acknowledged, researchers have an obligation to consider more complex and diverse conceptualizations of what it means for people to not be involved. To put it another way, in order to appreciate the multiple relationships

people have with the sex trade, researchers need to purposefully reject the binary and the homogenous status categories it creates by rejecting both of its pillars.

***Dis-involvement: Replacing Categorical Approaches with Process-Based Ones***

So how might the conversation about sex work differ if involvement and exit are no longer thought of as oppositional, and exit is untethered from complete and enduring abstinence? Within the existing literature, a few authors appear to approach exit in a less absolute manner than the dominant framing. Providing a glossary of sex work-related terminology, itself a rarity in the sex work literature, Ouspenski (2014) defines exiting as “[t]he process of transition that people undergo as they move away from, or find alternatives to, working in the sex industry” (p.64). Similarly, Huluso (2013) uses the language ‘breaking away’ in her discussion of sex work experiences, and Sanders (2007, p.450) defines exiting as “making transitions out of prostitution”. Their use of less definite language – ‘move away from’, ‘breaking away’, ‘making transitions’ – can create space for non-binary involvement, permitting workers to theoretically reduce their participation as well as ceasing it altogether. However, none of the authors directly speak to this potential, nor explicitly reject the binary status framework. Accordingly, it remains unclear whether a reduction in participation is accepted as valid on its own accord (i.e. as exited) or only as a transitional phrase which eventually ends in complete disengagement (at which point they are exited). Consequently, their examples of less definite language are insufficient to actually disrupt the dominant framework and, thus, better recognize people’s many relationships with sex work.

Alternatively, Bowen’s (2013, 2015) concept of sexiting and Law’s (2011) premise of dual trajectories blur the discursive boundary between involvement and exit by revealing the overlap that defines many sex workers’ transition experiences, as they participate in both sex trade and mainstream employment in a concurrent rather than successive manner. Yet, as previously



critiqued, their framing of post-exit participation as ‘returning to’ or ‘re-entering’ sex work retains involvement and exit as distinct statuses, with the inference that participation cannot continue after the transition process without constituting (re)involvement. Ham and Gilmour’s (2017) discussion of the symbiotic relationship between ‘exit plans’ and ‘work practices’ also recognizes that participation may persist during the exit process; unfortunately, they also maintain involvement and exit as oppositional states, falling short of actually rejecting the binary’s relevance for sex worker lives. While Bowen’s (2013) discussion of duality comes the closest to actually rejecting the binary, upon closer reading it is evident that the “resistance to the limited binary categorizations related to sex work involvement” (74) to which she speaks concerns the differential conceptualization of ‘sex work’ and ‘square work’, rather than the binarization of involved and exited more generally.

Thus, even when accepted as having a less definite or exclusive meaning, exit is still defined by its presumed otherness to involvement. This categorical approach to exit is hegemonic. Its repeated implicit and explicit reproduction has resulted in it being taken for granted as truth, rendering it both more ‘tellable’ and ‘hearable’ than potential alternatives, whose legitimacy is assessed through comparison with the hegemonic form (LaFrance & McKenzie-Mohr, 2014). Thus, I argue that it is more fruitful to theorize exit, not as a distinct category from involvement, but rather as a particular expression of involvement. Whereas categorical constructions of exit evoke a singular and oppositional denotation, the process-based approach of **dis-involvement** locates it as part of the larger practice of involvement. Dis-involvement draws our attention to the ways in which the significance and practice of involvement changes. It acknowledges the multiple ways in which sex workers reduce and modify their involvement, regardless of whether complete cessation of participation, is ever a goal or outcome. It also attends to alterations in the subjective

interpretations and motivations of involvement, permitting exploration about how the meaning and rewards affixed to participation may change throughout a sex worker's sex work career and in response to the context in which it occurs.

By providing participants the space to reflect on and discuss their involvement in the absence of a binary framework, I realized that conversation was typically not moving from 'involved' to 'exited' as distinct and stable categories, but rather altering the specifics of their involvement so either it occupied a lesser proportion of their time, effort, and identities, or so it better resembled their desired relationship with sex work (i.e. agentically rather than dependently determined). For example, rather than lamenting their inability to fully exit, many participants spoke positively about their dis-involvement, taking the form of reduced frequency of participation, restriction to most liked regular clients, or ad-hoc engagement:<sup>39</sup>

I used to like live practically out there. Now I rest. Rest my mind. Live good, you know? Eat good, you know? (Cindy)

Before, I just kept going. Like every day I'd do it. But now, I'm not out there as much anymore. I'm usually just waiting for my clients, my regulars. (Tara)

I don't do it as much as I used to do anymore [...] Now it's just people I've kept for years on end now. [...] I got friends that I'll see whenever I see them. (Jane)

Like probably I have two regulars now, you know, as opposed to god knows how many, that I see. [...] But I mean that's double my income, you know? (Cat)

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<sup>39</sup> Select quotes are repeated here because they take on additional significance with different framing. Whereas they were previously used to show what their current involvement looks like, they are now used to demonstrate their desired involvement and how it differs from their prior involvement.

Um I have a couple of regulars that I see. They have my number now, so I don't go out as much as I used to. So they just phone me, hopefully on days that I need the money. (June)

By not adhering to all or nothing conceptualizations of involvement, these participants were able to interpret the alterations of involvement as successful accomplishments in-and-of themselves, rather than simply provisional steps towards a future goal. Whereas prevailing exit narratives are likely to brand them 'failures' for not meeting the abstinence requirement expected of them, because the dis-involvement framework has no singular objective or form, it can recognize personally-informed goals and victories like those identified above.

Additional victories reported by participants involved more subjective changes in motivations for working. Multiple participants expressed content with their current relationship with sex work because their involvement was motivated by what they interpreted as 'positive' needs and wants, like little luxuries for themselves or items for their children, instead of those considered more often harmful in nature, such as illegal substances. With street-level sex work participation often inextricably linked with addiction in sex work discourse, participants expressed pride at their inability to be pigeon-holed and their own personal betterment:

It depends on if I *need* something for that day - then I'll go for a walk [to get a date] and come back, [and] I'll have whatever I want. But I quit the drugs and drinking now for a while, so that's good. (Stacey)

Like if I really needed money then I would [accept a date opportunistically], but I don't like blow it on pure drugs all the time or alcohol. Like I would go get a cheeseburger and eat [*laughs*] or I'd get my cat food or my cat litter. Like it would go to sources that are really needed. (Lydia)

So I am stuck in that position where sometimes I do have to go out and get a few extra dollars, and I know it's not the healthiest, but it's better than me out there every day, twenty-four hours, and working for the pipe. I'm working to get by, not for the drugs anymore. So, I'm pretty happy with that. [...] Don't get me wrong, when I'm out there I'm like "Holy fuck, I could just turn a trick right now, go get some dope, and [my partner] wouldn't even know". It's crossed my mind many times. But I know we've needed the money, so I'm not selfish like that anymore. So I do the responsible thing. (Skylar)

Perceived as the 'responsible' thing, strategic sex work participation is seen as a triumph over prior negative motivations and methods of involvement. A person's relationship with their work can be very different if their participation is motivated by an addiction, or to otherwise provide the money necessary to live an 'enjoyable' life, for example being able to buy junk food or pet items. In the latter instance an individual has much greater control over the nature of their involvement and is likely to, subsequently, view their involvement in a more positive light. Lydia's discussion of pet supplies and Skylar's household approach to decision making ("we've needed the money") also point to the consideration of personal vs. familial needs, suggesting a more positive perception of participation done to secure the needs of others than that done for personal benefit. Dismissing these victories as incomplete or failed exits actively discounts sex workers' own subjective truths, as well as the ways in which they express and interpret agency, even if constrained, in a manner that is fundamentally irreconcilable with this project's methodology and my critical feminist standpoint.

The changes that occur in workers' involvement (both material and embodied) located between the extremes of full immersion and complete exit are necessarily areas of examination if researchers desire a nuanced understanding of sex work and the experiences of those involved.

Acknowledging involvement only as either ‘present’ or ‘absent’, and subsequently prioritizing exit over admitting the resourcefulness of individuals to meet their needs, “narrow[s] the discursive and material fields of agency” (Showden, 2011, p.158; also Bungay et al., 2011) and sustains the stigmatization of already marginalized groups by dismissing their status as legitimate ‘knowers’ in conversations about their lives and work. It also contributes to the dichotomization of sex workers as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’: restricting the labels of ‘successful’ and ‘responsible’ to those who uphold a narrow definition of success (i.e. an abstinent exit), generalizing and essentializing particular values as the only acceptable way to engage with world, and enabling the oppressive and coercive regulation of those who differ (Sanders et al., 2009; Scoular et al., 2009; Showden, 2011). This is eloquently summarized in the following quote from Cat:

Yeah, I went on a... uh retreat once, for women, [...] and there was a ‘recovered’ [*air quotes*] hooker and drug addict who pulled the holier than thou, “If I can do it, you can do it” shit. And she uh she was saying you know, well she was belittling the women, saying ‘*well I did it, I quit.*’ So then I thought ‘you know, these people are not going to leave here with a positive feeling that they should continue to support the girls, right? Because she came across as so/ she minimalized what was going on with the girls. [...] It bothers me when people say ‘Well I got out.’ [...] Out? You are never out of it. You are never out of it. [...] Ok, if I’m out of prostitution and I’m out of drugs, why can’t I share it? ‘Cause nobody wants to listen. They really don’t want to listen.

Cat’s experience incorporates all of the faults with the privileging of exit: promotion of complete disengagement as the only acceptable status, stigmatization and responsabilization of those who differ, reliance on a dichotomized understanding of involvement, and devaluing sex workers as experts in conversations about their lives. It is a highly-decontextualized approach that

does not consider the other resources both available and accessible to sex workers (e.g. other forms of work, adequate income, etc.), nor the multiple demands they carry (e.g. responsibility for children and other family members, etc.), focusing more on the actions they take than the reasons for those actions.

An emphasis on dis-involvement instead of, or at least in addition to, exit offers sex workers greater space to talk about their involvement, what it means to them, what is informing it, and what they want it to look like – while revealing the various supports beneficial for these diverse work arrangements. It also decreases normative assumptions, redirecting researchers' attention away from where they think sex workers *should* end up, to an exploration of where they currently are, how and why their involvement has changed, and what they want that involvement to look like in the future. This knowledge has immense value for nuanced understandings of the practice of sex work and sex workers' lived experiences. It tells us more about what sex workers' involvement 'looks like' and 'means' than binary conceptualizations of involvement and exit ever can.

## **Chapter Summary**

Sex trade involvement is far too diverse and fluid for dichotomous frameworks built on exhaustive and mutually exclusive binaries. Just as the concept of 'involvement' remains inadequate for capturing the diverse and fluid ways my participants participate in the sex trade, so too does the concept 'exit' for describing participation changes and desired outcomes. The binary construction of participation as 'any' and 'none' not only ignores the vast manners of participation that sex workers engage in, but also does a disservice to exiting conversations because it overlooks all of the personal accomplishments sex workers experience that look different from dominant conceptions of exit.

With the binary comprised of mutually exclusive statuses, a sex worker is only eligible for one category if ineligible for the other. As a result, post-exit participation is taken to result in automatic disqualification from exited status. While a singular act, thus, becomes the catalyst for a person who, prior to this act was classified as exited, to be deemed (re)involved, post-exit participation is always assumed to occur in a re-immersive manner. The fundamental incompatibility of exit and involvement informing dominant definitions of exit makes exit an extremely difficult status for individuals to achieve and maintain. This is especially worrisome when exit status is ascribed value and extended rights and resources unattainable to its ‘unsuccessful peers’. As Scoular and O’Neill (2007) note, the prioritization of ‘exit’ by government or other authorities “sustain[s] the binaries between good and bad, deserving and undeserving women, so that only those who responsibly exit, who fit dominant norms of citizenship and resume normal lifestyles and relationships are socially included, leaving those outside increasingly marginalized” (Scoular & O’Neill, 2007, p.774). Conceding exit only in cases of complete and enduring abstinence excludes a large segment of the population for whom sex work is an infrequent, occasional, or sporadic activity, but still sometimes a desired and/or necessary occurrence.

It is important that conversations about sex work not discount the reality that sex work offers all individuals – regardless of whether they have previously participated in a sexual exchange – a sort of safety net or always existing possibility to secure money, belonging, and other currently unrecognized needs that is incredibly difficult to give up. Moreover, I would argue that it is completely unnecessary to ask them to do so. To demand that people, many of whom experience multiple and intersecting oppressions, forever avoid one of the potentially few resources they have access to or risk being labeled failures, “promotes a form of governance that

individualizes problems and detracts from the state, which is absolved from tackling the underlying conditions that give rise to prostitution in the first place” (Scoular et al., 2009, p.45). Refusal to recognize the possibility of participation and exit co-existing, as well as ebbing and flowing, rather than as negating one another, limits the appropriateness and efficiency of policies and programs put in place to support those concerned. It also discredits the interpretations and insights of those being talked about, who are forced into categories that may not accurately describe their lives. As a participant in Bowen’s study (2013, p.74) points out: “if somebody identifies as a sex worker and they’re not working does that mean they have to be an exited sex worker?” Furthermore, as Ava questioned when discussing the shame externally affixed to involvement, “Like if you’re doing it safe and the person choses to do that with her life, but she can maintain other things like a home and her kids, then what’s the problem?”



## Conclusion

I want someone to remember something I've said and have it change their lives. (Sophia)

In this dissertation, I aimed to make sex workers' lived experiences and insight, particularly when it differs from or is inconsistent with established knowledge, 'hearable' by inserting their voices into conversations about them, that typically exclude them. Sex workers have valuable insight to provide about their lives and the wider context in which it occurs, provided that researchers are willing to hear what they are trying to tell them rather than simply fitting their responses into preestablished categories and concepts. When researchers fail to ask critical questions about the subjects under investigation, they risk drawing on and reproducing inaccurate assumptions that limit both the specific knowledge they produce about that subject, as well as the overall knowledge that can exist about that subject. It is through realizing the discrepancies and disconnections between sex workers' narrations of their experiences and the meanings they affix to those experiences, and the concepts and theories of the established literature, that the value of conceptual disruption – making the taken-for-granted itself the object of investigation – becomes most clear. At a more personal level, this dissertation also endeavors to respect my participants, as well as women in street-level sex work in Edmonton more generally, seriously as legitimate knowers and speakers about their work and lives. By listening to what my participants were saying and preserving their voices by means of quotations, I believe that I have achieved these goals and, in doing so, offer a significant contribution to sex work discourse and critical feminist research more generally.

In this concluding chapter, I summarize the main findings enabled by a shift from a categorical approach to theorizing sex work to a process-based one that subsequently acknowledges plurality, contradiction, and variability. As part of this, I emphasize the scholarly

and practical implications of this shift. I then offer some recommendations for research and practice, including areas for future research. Finally, I reflect on the research process and offer some concluding thoughts.

## **Main Findings and Implications**

This dissertation is the result of my attempts to make sense of participants' simultaneous declaration of "I'm no longer involved" followed by descriptions of participating in the sexual exchange currently understood as the determining factor of sex work status. As I wrestled with this apparent contradiction, I realized that I needed to critically interrogate how I, and the dominant discourse, currently theorize sex work, involvement, and exit. This led me to appreciate involvement as a diverse and multi-dimensional practice, rather than a stable homogeneous state.

I began with first asking *what sex work means* to my participants. This revealed the multiple additional criteria that influence whether or not a sexual exchange is perceived to 'count' as sex work. These criteria included the presence of street-walking behaviour, nature of the clientele, existence of prior intent and purposeful action, and level of financial dependency, all of which inform participants' perceptions of what sex work is and how their involvement matches up to that standard. Consequently, not every sexual exchange meets the definition of sex work. *Involvement in sex work*, thus, comprises more than simply participation in a sexual exchange; it also involves the context of that exchange. When researchers, service providers, and politicians overlook the significance of that context to sex work definitions, they overemphasize the significance of individual acts in assessments of sex work involvement and lack thereof. The focus, subsequently, remains on the acts of individuals, rather than the motivations and circumstances of those acts.

This questioning of *what involvement in sex work means* lead me to realize that involvement is not just physically enacted, but emotionally embodied as well. Involvement speaks

to non-tangible elements like a sense of identity and social relationships, in addition to – and often primary to – financial reward. Because of this, involvement cannot be externally determined. It may exist even when the physical acts of it cease, leading to the inability to be assessed through a binary categorical approach. If research fails to attend to the latent functions of sex work, valuable motivational and contextual information remains unaccounted, and the narrative associating sex work involvement solely with money, and often in a survival-based manner, continues to inform theory and practice. Whilst money may form the primary motivational factor for some sex workers, including in a dependent manner, as has been shown it does not reflect the reality of all.

Recognition of the multi-dimensional meaning of involvement then stimulated me to probe *what involvement looks like* in practice. This provided further critique of categorical assessments, by revealing the diversity of sex workers' involvement. This diversity exists as two levels: between different sex workers and within the same sex worker across time and circumstance. Whereas sex work is typically assumed to denote full-time continuous participation, thereby implying a uniformity of practice among sex workers that remains stable until exit, my participants showed that involvement is a dynamic practice, shaped by motivations and context and thus looking very different for each sex worker from other workers and at various stages in their sex work careers. This is really important for sex work conversations and policies, in order to acknowledge all of the relationships with sex work that exist but defy stereotypical forms, and subsequently, develop appropriate knowledge and supports for individuals and their particular involvement. Programs and policies that assume sex work is always a full-time job overestimate individuals' dependency on sex work income, as well as the frequency of their participation.

With involvement itself now established as a dynamic practice, taking multiple forms and even existing in the absence of participation, I finally challenge the relevancy of current

conceptions of exit for sex workers' diverse relationships with sex work. Theorized as the opposite of involvement, exit narratives responsabilize individuals for the success or inability to achieve and maintain the level of abstinence required by externally imposed eligibility criteria, while simultaneously dismissing sex workers agency in the face of multiple intersecting barriers. Noting the variety of participant attitudes and intentions about form of exit, as well as the various contextual and dimensional factors informing them, I argue that dominant conceptualizations of exit – as complete abstinence – has less relevance and attraction for sex workers than assumed. Exiting it, thus, both an undesirable and difficult to achieve goal for many sex workers; however, the significance of this is overlooked in differential scholarly and public valuation of those who do and do not meet the specific criteria for exited, and corresponding disparate distribution of support and attention. By focusing only on the one form of exit, researchers and service providers ignore all of those whose post-exit participation – regardless of frequency and motivation – disqualify them from exit status.

Consequently, I recommend that the current binary approach for sex work status be replaced by a model informed by intersectionality and conceptual disruption. Sex work involvement is neither categorical nor standardized, meaning that we should not attempt to understand it through the overlay of preestablished categories or as taking a typical form. Instead, there are an infinite number of relationships people can have with sex work, and each individual's relationship is the product of multiple intersecting vectors comprised of contextual and dimensional factors. Involvement in sex work, thus, is an umbrella concept that encompasses these diverse and dynamic relationships and should be analyzed as such, meaning in an inductive rather than generalizing way. Accordingly, I propose that discussions of involvement de-emphasize exit – which maintains inflexible status categories – in favour of dis-involvement. Dis-involvement

locates complete non-participation and dis-engagement, not as oppositional to involvement, but as a particular expression of the involvement practice. Involvement itself thus becomes the object of focus in a way that's untethered from the normative rhetoric that saturates exit discourse. This is the primary lesson I took from my participants.

## **Recommendations**

Acknowledging the multiple, diverse, and fluid ways involvement is enacted by those involved in sex work draws attention to the variability of circumstances and corresponding needs shaping their participation in the sex trade and, subsequently, resulting from it. Recognition of this diversity can lead to more appropriate services and support that better respond to the multiple different relationships sex workers have with their work. In recognition of this I make the following recommendations.

First, and most importantly, researchers must demand language accountability of themselves and others. This includes conceptual and construct clarity, ensuring that concepts and populations are operationalized, so that there is clarity about whom and what is and is not included in the conversation. As demonstrated throughout this dissertation, multiple meanings exist for some of the most foundational concepts of sex work discourse: sex work, sex worker, involvement, exit, etc. Assumptions about shared meaning – amongst commentators as well as research subjects – have contributed to the proliferation of one-dimensional generalizations about sex work and sex workers that cannot account for the range of experiences and beliefs that exist. This is particularly the case when the claims being made are otherwise consistent with the prevailing narrative about sex work and, thus, escape questions about accuracy or specificity. Sex work is subjectively interpreted and enacted; subsequently, work that evokes generalized claims about undefined populations or themes should be cautiously received and, ideally, be returned for clarification.

Subsequently, language accountability also fundamentally demands reflexivity. The language we use to talk about sex work, sex workers, and sex work involvement is inherently political, imbued with already existing rhetoric about “what sex for sale *is* (ontology), how sex for sale can be known and represented (epistemology), and [...] what should be done about sex for sale (politics)” (Spanger & Skilbrei, 2017, p.2). It also, as Haak (2019, p.109) argues, “has significant implications for assessing whose experiences are and are not reflected in argument and in evidence, and for evaluating what is known or not known about those experiences.” Critical thought must be given to the terms and frameworks we chose to reproduce in our research, as they shape the knowledge produced and, thus, have real discursive and material consequences for those being discussed.

This also holds true for policy makers and service providers. To be effective, the knowledge produced – and products that result from it – must have clear parameters and targets. If, for example, the federal government allocates funding to support ‘exits’ from sex work, there should be clarity about how they define, and thus concede exit, and who is subsequently eligible for support. The requirement to clarify definitions and boundaries will also produce a larger conversation on the appropriateness of particular definitions and boundaries, which creates space for more philosophical and practical debates about the complexity of subject(s) under consideration. Continuing with the above example, should the federal government or service agencies define exited as complete abstinence for a period of time, rebuttal can emphasize many of the limitations I outlined in Chapter 4 to show the vast number of workers such definitions exclude.

Conversely, if policy makers and agencies shift their focus towards dis-involvement rather than exit, there can be a corresponding shift away from one-size-fits-all approaches that encourage “individualistic and responsabilizing social interventions” (Scoular & O’Neill, 2007, p.767) and

subsequently provide conditional support and social inclusion, in favour of multiple and dynamic need-based, but more importantly sex worker-directed, policies and programs that engage with sex workers as agentic subjects and contextualize involvement in the wider structural and material conditions in which it occurs. In doing so, ‘success’ is no longer defined solely as the cessation of participation and dis-identification with the sex worker identity or sex work community, but rather the ability to adapt one’s involvement to what is necessary or desired.

Second, and still of great significance, research should take the practice of involvement as the centre of investigation. There is still so much to learn about how sex workers participate in sex work, and the variables shaping the form and significance of that participation. Making that the explicit focus of research projects can dramatically enhance the conversation about what involvement means and looks like, as well as better attend to the significance of race and ethnic identity, gender identity, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, mental health, addiction, and other social identities and statuses – and their intersection with other dimensions. By asking more targeted questions about the nature of participants’ involvement and the meaning they affix to it, we can gain increasingly nuanced understandings of the various relationships with sex work that can exist. Essentially, sex work discourse needs to take seriously Bowen’s (2015, p.444) assertion that “there are many ways *to be* a sex worker”. Recognition of this diversity, and resulting divergence from the singular stereotypical form, contributes to a dialogue that is more respectful of the personhood of those involved (through the reduction to which we can speak about sex workers as a homogenous population) and can, thus, contribute to de- or reduced stigmatization of the sex worker label.

Third, by making involvement itself the subject of examination, dis-involvement becomes a legitimate area of inquiry. Moving from a categorical to a process-based approach opens space

for the acknowledgement of modifications and alterations in involvement even when they exist independent of exit intentions or attempts. This knowledge is itself valuable because it highlights the contextual nature of involvement, as well as the physical and non-physical dimensions that comprise it. Dis-involvement locates sex worker action and thought in the wider social, political, and economic milieu in which it occurs – educating us on incidences occurring in those spheres as much as on how individuals respond to them.

### **Reflection**

My findings are the direct result of my Critical Feminist positioning and corresponding methodological choices made throughout the research process. My decision to approach the topic inductively and with a loose structure provided participants with the space to talk about their experiences and their interpretations of those experiences in the absence of predetermined categories, frameworks, or intervals. The resulting knowledge is both incredibly valuable to scholarly and practical discussions about sex work, while validating the expertise of a traditionally silenced population. This notwithstanding, because the main themes of this dissertation emerged out of the data analysis process, topics were often not addressed in a direct manner by participants. Subsequently, the resulting knowledge is my attempt to make sense of their mediated interpretations of their experiences within the structure of the interview process. It is, therefore, possible that I have mistakenly inferred or, alternatively, failed to appreciate something they said to me. However, because this dissertation is structured as an appeal to think more critically about involvement based on my participants' narratives, rather than a claim to represent my participants' involvement, any mistaken or overlooked point – while unfortunate to the participant – does not change the end result.



Ideally, I would like to follow-up with participants to engage in more directed probing of the themes identified, as well as to learn about their current relationships with sex work. At the same time, though, I acknowledge that the knowledge produced is a snapshot of the particular interview moment and can be appreciated as such. So, alternatively, I believe a new research project that represents a more proactive disruption of sex work concepts, theorization, and rhetoric would enable greater contributions to the scholarly and practical literature on sex work. In particular, I want to examine the practice of street-level sex work in Edmonton – what involvement looks like and the meanings affixed to it - particularly in response to the legislative changes introduced since these interviews occurred (e.g. *PCEPA*).

### **Final thoughts**

It is far too easy to promote one-size-fits-all theory and practice when everyone is presumed to have the exact same relationship with sex work and involvement is acknowledged in a categorical manner. Definite statements can be made about what sex work *is* and who sex workers *are* that escape evaluation provided they are otherwise consistent with what we think we know or worse - what we personally believe, based on abstract arguments about the meaning and morality of exchanging sexual services for financial compensation. We should know that not everyone participates exactly the same, but acknowledging this undermines the ability to speak in generalizing statements and allows cracks in which diversity and contradiction can emerge. As a critical feminist researcher, I believe that we are accountable not only to ethical parameters of ‘good research’, but also to those of ‘good allies’. Being a good ally means respecting the expertise of my participants, and particularly when it challenges the current scholarly, political, or lay narratives about sex work. This may complicate the analysis process, but it will produce richer and more nuanced knowledges as a result.

I would like to close this dissertation by once again naming and offering my sincere gratitude to my research participants: Abigail, Ava, Betty Page, Cat, Cece, Chantelle, Chloe, Cindy, Ellie, Emma, Freddie, Jamie, Jane, June, Kristina, Leigh, Lydia, Monique, Olivia, Samantha Cookie, Samara, Skylar, Sophia, Stacey, and Tara.

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