

Navigating Risk and Safety:

An ethnographic analysis of body rub centres in Edmonton, Alberta

by

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Abstract

This Master's thesis focuses on the experiences of indoor sex workers working in body rub centres in Edmonton, Alberta. In Canada, the research on sex work tends to focus primarily on the experiences of outdoor sex workers although the majority of Canadian sex workers work indoors (Hanger, 2006). To address this gap in the literature, I ask two questions: 1. How do indoor sex workers view working in body rub centres in comparison to other sex work settings? 2. How do body rub centres mitigate some of the physical and psychological risks associated with sex work? Using an ethnographic approach to conduct 14 semi-structured interviews, 20 informal interviews, and over 700 hours of fieldwork, my findings outline the importance of body rub centres as sites of risk mitigation for sex workers. I find that body rub centres are associated with increased feelings of safety and a decrease in risks for sex workers in comparison to street-level sex work and indoor sex work in other settings (such as escorting). I also discuss how the unique social organization of body rub centres can mitigate some of the physical and psychological risks sex workers may experience. Finally, I discuss the benefits of the City of Edmonton's harm-reduction approach to body rub centres and argue that Edmonton's model should be considered by other Canadian municipalities.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Shaylyn Hunter. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board 1, “Experiences of Women Working in Body Rub Centres”, Pro00091666, on September 23, 2019. This project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in 2019/2020.

Dedication

To my participants, for graciously welcoming me into your lives.

And to Logan, my guardian angel.

Acknowledgments

First, thank you to my research participants for sharing your time, stories, and experiences with me. I hope the strength and resilience I witnessed is evident throughout this thesis. I look back on our time spent together fondly and look forward to seeing one another again in the future.

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Glossary

This glossary outlines terms used throughout this thesis. Some of these words are used by my participants but in other cases I also use this language in order to convey a situation in the way my participants would have described it. Please note, some of these terms may differ from their dictionary definition and other terms imply something that may be unclear to the reader and therefore I have defined them here.

Anti-sex work advocates – This is the general term I use to describe individuals from the community and non-profits that advocate for the closure of body rub centres in Edmonton. Based on information from media interviews, they believe that all sex work is exploitative and therefore body rub centres should be shut down. Therefore, they are not necessarily “sex-work advocates” as they do not advocate for the needs and desires of sex workers. My participants greatly disagreed with these individuals’ perspectives and approaches towards “advocacy”. Therefore, this term reflects my participants’ views of these individuals.

“Bad date” – This is a term used to describe any client that they did not enjoy having a session with, or would not have a session with again for a variety of reason. Reasons can range from them having bad breath, to a client who attempts “stealthling” (non-consensual condom removal) to a client assaulted them.

Body rub centre – This is the official term used by the City of Edmonton to describe adult massage parlours where sex workers operate out of: “A premises or any part thereof where members of the general public attend, are invited to attend, or through which they may arrange an appointment to receive the physical external manipulation of the soft tissues of the human body for a fee, including any manipulation of an adult or erotic nature, but not including Health Enhancement Centres” (City of Edmonton, n.d.). I will use this term throughout the thesis, although I will also use terms such as “spa” and “studio” to describe body rub centres.

Body rub practitioner – This is the official term used by the City of Edmonton to describe the employees of adult massage parlours/body rub centres: “a person who administers or offers to administer the physical external manipulation of the soft tissues of the human body for a fee, including any manipulation of an adult or erotic nature, but not including Health Enhancement Practitioners” (City of Edmonton, n.d.). I will occasionally use this term to describe my participants and other indoor sex workers who work in body rub centres, although I will also use terms such as “sex worker(s)” and “indoor sex worker(s)”.

Condom-checking – This is a term I use to refer to a strategy used by sex workers to ensure a condom has not broken or come off during intercourse with a client. This often involves checking that the condom is on the client’s genitalia by feeling for it or visually seeing it.

Client – A term used to refer to an individual (usually a man) that purchases sexual services.

“Dick” – A slang term for a penis.

Getting “ready” – A term used to describe the process a sex worker goes through before meeting a client. This usually involves putting on makeup, putting on lingerie/a nice outfit, sometimes putting on high heels, etc.

“Girl”/“Girls” – A term often used by sex workers to refer to other sex workers.

“In session” – When a sex worker and client are in a private room together and the sex worker is providing sexual services.

“Mock session” – Where someone will walk another person through what a typical session with a client looks like. This usually done for training purposes with a new employee.

“Out of session” – The opposite of “in session”.

Pimp – A term used to describe someone who assists in, and/or facilitates, the selling of sex between a sex worker and a client.

Sex worker – This refers to an individual who exchanges sexual services for material compensation (usually money). For my participants, being a sex worker was not the same as being trafficked or exploited. Being a sex worker was seen as something an individual engages in by choice. In comparison, sexual exploitation and sex trafficking were associated with individuals being coerced or forced to participate in the sex industry.

“Stay”/“To stay” – A slang term that means a client paid for and received sexual services from a sex worker in a body rub centre.

“Stealththing” – A colloquial term to refer to sexual assault as a result of non-consensual condom removal (or the acronym, NCCR).

Spa – A slang term used to describe a body rub centre.

Studio – Another slang term used to describe a body rub centre.

“Trick(s)” – A term sometimes used to describe a client. Usually used to discuss clients who buy sex from outdoor sex workers, but other sex workers will use it occasionally as well.

Participant Bios

While many ethnographers will often include short bios about their participants for their readers, I chose against outlining information on each one of my participants. Due to the fact that many sex workers in Edmonton's sex industry know one another, including any identifying information beyond what is stated in this thesis would jeopardize their anonymity.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As a new graduate student, I was excited about the idea of conducting research on a topic I had always been fascinated with – sex work. Before deciding if I wanted to focus on sex work for my thesis, I approached a police officer to learn more about sex work in Edmonton. It was during my discussion with this police officer that I learned about sex work inside adult massage parlours. Before this, I was not aware these types of businesses exist in Canada, let alone in the city I live in. They explained to me that not only do adult massage parlours exist in Edmonton but that they were actually licensed and regulated by the City of Edmonton. In a bit of disbelief, I remember asking, ‘do people know they are offering sex in these massage parlors?’ and in return, the officer smiled and then simply responded, ‘yes’.

The majority of sex work discussions centre around the experiences of street-level sex workers. We know much less about the experiences of indoor sex workers, who make up approximately 80% of the overall sex worker population in Canada (Hanger, 2006). Because discussions of sex work and the majority of research on sex work are focused on street-level sex workers, many policies and laws tend to target or aim to solely “help” street-level sex workers. All the while, a large number of individuals participating in sex work, those working indoors, are excluded from the literature and discussions that influence such policies. Nonetheless, Canada’s policies and laws affect indoor sex workers too and therefore, their experiences and perspectives must be heard. In Canada, indoor sex work takes place primarily in adult massage parlours (also referred to as “body rub centres”), in private residences, and in strip clubs.¹ To address these gaps in the literature, I conducted a 7-month ethnographic project, gathered 14 semi-structured

¹ Adult massage parlours in Canada are also referred to as body rub centres depending on the city. I will use the two terms interchangeably. The City of Edmonton uses the term ‘body rub centres’ and refers to the employees working in body rub centres as ‘body rub practitioners.’

interviews, 20 informal interviews, and over 700 hours of participant observation on indoor sex work in Edmonton body rub centres.

Sex work in general includes a variety of services such as escorting, adult entertainment (exotic dancers/strippers/pornography), dominatrix, street-level sex work, as well as the offering of sexual services in adult massage parlours. Traditionally and contemporarily, most individuals who engage in sex work are women (Hanger, 2006).² The existing literature on sex work generally focuses on factors such as poverty and addiction as motivations for engaging in street-level sex work (Maher, 1997), and the health and safety risks associated with street-level sex work (Lazarus et al., 2012; Dalla et al., 2003). These concerns are shared in a Canadian context with sex work discussions being primarily focused on the health risks and victimization of street-level sex workers (Shannon et al., 2008; Bungay et al., 2013) and more recently, how street-level sex work is a factor in the troubling number of Indigenous women and girls who have gone missing or have been murdered (NWAC, n.d.). While research is certainly warranted on the experiences of women working outdoors, indoor sex workers have their own unique set of experiences and circumstances that must be included in the sex work discourse.

Indoor sex work encompasses a wide range of activities from being a “cam girl” to escorting.³ While outdoor/street-level sex work tends to be the focus for scholars and policy makers, both internationally and in Canada, the majority of sex work in Canada is happening indoors (Bungay et al., 2013; O’Doherty, 2011). Body rub centres represent another important category where indoor sex work takes place. In 2014, federal legislation changes no longer made it illegal for sex workers to sell sexual services in a setting such as a body rub centre. While prior

² I will use the term ‘women’ to refer to all persons who identify as women and participate in sex work. I recognize that many folks who work in the industry do not identify as women; however, this project is predominantly concerned with women who provide sexual services to cis-male clients.

³ A type of sex work that involves talking to clients online and using a webcam for visual content.

to 2014, it was illegal for anyone to financially benefit off a sex worker's earnings, this part of the legislation was also amended. As the Globe and Mail explains:

Anyone who “receives a financial or other material benefit, knowing that it is obtained by or derived directly or indirectly” from the sale of a “sexual service,” faces up to 10 years in prison. This *excludes* those who have “a legitimate living arrangement” with a sex worker, those who receive the benefit “as a result of a legal or moral obligation” of the sex worker, those who sell the sex worker a “service or good” on the same terms to the general public, *and those who offer a private service to sex workers but do so for a fee “proportionate” to the service and so long as they do not “counsel or encourage” sex work* (Wingrove, 2014). [emphasis added]

Since rub centre owners and managers offer sex workers the “service” of renting a space to conduct their work, and as long as the manager/owner is not dictating the services a sex worker must provide to clients, body rub centre and their operations are not illegal. Therefore, in body rub centres, the only people who are committing a crime are the individuals who purchase the sexual services (Department of Justice Canada, 2014).

Both prior to and after these legal changes, Canadian cities have grappled with the licensing of adult massage parlours and the licensing of employees, primarily cis-women and transgender women, who provide services to mostly cis-men within these locations. Canadian cities use a variety of strategies to manage these types of business (Lewis & Maticka-Tyndale, 2000; Bungay et al., 2012). These strategies range from enforcement, to harm reduction, to no regulation at all.

Although indoor sex work encompasses a large portion of sex work in Canada, little attention has been paid to researching indoor sex workers and their experiences (Weitzer, 2009).

Further, there is even less scholarship on women working in adult massage parlours in Canada. In the media, it is often argued that women working indoors or in body rub centres experience safer working conditions than other sex workers due to increased presence and supervision of other employees (see Hall, 2012). It is also argued that clients accessing body rub centres will subject the women to less violence than those working on the street (Canadian Public Health Association, 2014). On the other hand, indoor sex workers have been found to experience violence in other ways such as attempted condom removal and “violent dates” (Bungay et al., 2012). Overall, much of the research on sex work focuses on the risks associated with the practice. While the literature outlines the many risks sex workers in all settings face, I wanted to explore how sex worker experiences in body rub centres compared to experiences in other areas of sex work.

Like most ethnographers, I entered the field with a broad research goal that would allow my research question to emerge naturally from the information I was collecting. Therefore, my initial research question was open-ended and asked, *what are the experiences of women working indoors in body rub centres in Edmonton?* As I began collecting data, it became clear that I needed to focus on what makes adult massage parlours unique in comparison to other types of indoor sex work. In addition, I began to notice how these spaces mitigate some of the physical and psychological risks that are often associated with sex work. As a result, my research lends itself to two important areas of inquiry. First, *how do indoor sex workers view working in body rub centres in comparison to other types of indoor sex work?* And second, *how do body rub centres mitigate some of the physical and psychological risks associated with sex work?*

Structure of Thesis

For the remainder of Chapter 1, I will provide an overview of the literature on indoor sex work, including body rub centres, and the physical and psychological risks associated with sex work. In Chapter 2, I will provide context on Edmonton body rub centres and discuss my methodology and sample. I will discuss my findings on sex worker perceptions of body rub centres in comparison to other types of sex work, and how body rub centres are associated with increased feelings of safety in comparison to street-level sex work and indoor sex work in other settings in Chapter 3. To follow, in Chapter 4 I will focus on how the unique social organization of body rub centres are unique in the way they manage and mitigate some of the psychological and physical risks that sex workers are subjected to. In conclusion, Chapter 5 will provide a discussion on the City of Edmonton's current body rub centre licensing practices and the benefits of using a harm reduction approach to licensing body rub centres in Canadian cities.

Literature Review

Sex work, including indoor sex work, takes place all over the world. For the purposes of keeping this literature review focused, I will provide a brief look into indoor sex work internationally (specifically in Thailand and Vietnam) and then focus on indoor sex work in western countries such as Canada and Britain.

In contrast to research based in western countries, which typically focuses on the buying and selling of sex between locals, indoor sex work research from Southeast Asia tends to focus on the sale of sex to the tourist and expatriate population. In Thailand for example, sex work is commonly associated with massage establishments which are exceptionally common across the country. Monk-Turner and Turner (2017) set out to understand if this assumption is warranted by

visiting 100 massage establishments in Thailand varying from high-end spas to street-front establishments. They found that for men, receiving a massage at a street-front establishment is often coupled with the solicitation of a “happy ending” for an extra cost.⁴ This was especially common if one requested an oil massage versus a traditional Thai or foot massage. The authors note the need for future research that explores the relationship between poverty and massage/sex work in Thailand as they found that many of the women working in Thai massage establishments come from Isaan – a disproportionately impoverished area of the country.

Kay Hoang’s (2011) findings from her ethnographic project in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam complicates the common narrative that poverty forces women into the sex trade for the benefit of tourists and expatriates. She argues, “sex workers are not all poor exploited women; rather, they come with an array of economic, cultural, and bodily resources that provide them with access to various types of local and global men” (p. 368). Drawing from Bourdieu’s theory of capital and Zelizer’s theory of intimate relationships, Kay Hoang (2011) outlines three different types of exchanges that occur between sex workers and clients - sex exchanges, relationship exchanges, and intimate exchanges. “Sex exchanges” are characterized as short or one-time interactions between poor local women and poor local men, where only sex and money are exchanged and the sex worker has limited access to body, economic, and cultural capital. “Relationship exchanges” include exchanges of sex, money and gifts, and often result in girlfriend/boyfriend or husband/wife relationships. Women that engage in relationship exchanges are often still poor but may have access to plastic surgery (body capital) and can speak some English (cultural capital). The third category, “intimate exchanges”, encompasses the “high-end sector” where short-term relationships emerge between both wealthy sex workers and wealthy

⁴ “Happy ending” is a term used to refer to manual stimulation of the penis (Monk-Turner & Turner, 2017).

clients. The sex workers involved in these exchanges are often educated, from wealthy families, and have access to high-end clothing and plastic surgery. With these categories, Kay Hoang (2011) argues that there are differences *among* sex workers and these differences shape their experience working in the sex trade.

As outlined, experiences of sex workers can vary for a variety of reasons – what type of establishment they offer their services in, their economic/cultural capital, and the type of clientele they interact with. Full attention must be given to these differences and research on sex work overall must acknowledge that sex worker experiences are not synonymous. In line with Kay Hoang's (2011) findings on sex worker experiences in Vietnam, Canadian sex workers' experiences also differ depending on a variety of factors.

Western Context

In Canada, approximately 80% of sex workers work indoors (Hanger, 2006) but the majority of research on sex work in Canada is focused on street-level sex work, sex work from a healthcare perspective, and based predominately in Vancouver and Ontario.⁵ Street-level sex work has rightfully been a major focus in research due to the high number of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada. The RCMP's 2014 report estimated that there are approximately 1,200 missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. This has been contested by advocates who say the number is over 4,000 (Brant, 2018). This high number, whether 1200 or 4000, is connected to Canada's colonial history as, "many Aboriginal women and girls are forced into situations or coping strategies that increase their vulnerability to violence", which can include survival sex work (NWAC, n.d.). Although many Indigenous

⁵ It is important to be reminded that the majority of research done on sex work occurred before the legislation changes in 2014.

women who are missing or murdered were not engaging in sex work (Brant, 2018), the correlation between missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, poverty, and sex work tends to be a focus for academics and activists.

It is widely agreed upon by scholars that street-level sex work is more dangerous than indoor sex work with rates of violence for outdoor sex workers being much higher. For example, with a sample of 240 sex workers, Church et al. (2001) found that outdoor sex workers experience much higher levels of violence at 81%, in comparison to their indoor counterparts, at 48%. The high levels of violence street-level sex work experience often are at the hands of clients, pimps, and other sex workers. For this reason, street-level sex work deserves to be an ongoing focus for academics, government, and communities. On the other hand, this focus on street-level sex work means that conceptions of “sex work” as a whole are often coloured by the characteristics of street-level sex work. This results in street-level sex work and indoor sex-work being lumped together under the umbrella term “sexual exploitation” in Canadian public discourse and policy discussions. With the majority of sex workers operating indoors, it is critical that conversations on policy and legislation on sex work include the voices and perspectives of indoor sex workers.

Sex Work and Risk

In comparison to street-level sex work, both Canadian and international studies have shown that between 60-80% of indoor sex workers have never experienced violence on the job (Benoit & Schumka, 2015). While there are a variety of reasons as to why the differing rates of victimization among indoor and outdoor sex workers exist, the numbers reveal that 20-40% of indoor sex workers could be experiencing violence at work. Canadian research has shown that

the experiences of indoor and street-level sex workers differ in many respects. Lewis et al. (2005) conducted a study comparing street-level and indoor sex worker experiences in a large Canadian city. Their sample included men, women, and transgender sex workers. The study found that because indoor sex workers are less visible to the public, they were less likely to report harassment and abuse in comparison to street-level sex workers (Lewis et al., 2005). The authors also state that because of the relative invisibility of indoor sex workers, they were often less likely to be targeted by law enforcement.

In comparison to the research on street-level sex work, the literature on occupational risks associated with indoor sex work to focus on three areas: health risks, emotional risks, and physical risks. Many scholars have tried to unpack how indoor sex workers perceive the risks associated with their job and how these risks are managed. For example, Whittaker and Hart (1996) found that in London, England, the presence of a “maid” helped mitigate the violence indoor sex workers were at risk of experiencing. “Maids” were often older women and were the first point of contact with potential clients (Whittaker & Hart, 1996). The authors describe that “maids” would screen the client through the peephole in the door and were also present outside the bedroom where the sex worker and client were. Their participants reported that having a “maid” present helped keep track of the time spent with the client as she would knock when their time was up. They were also present to assist the sex workers in handling dangerous or uncomfortable situations. Their participants viewed having a “maid” as the responsible thing to do and characterized women who work alone as “reckless” (Whittaker & Hart, 1996).

Similar findings were revealed in Sanders’ (2004) study using ethnographic methods to explore sex worker experiences in a variety of indoor sex work establishments in Britain. Sanders (2004) argues that sex workers view the risks associated with their jobs on a “risk

continuum”. While they are still concerned about the risks sex work poses to their health and physical well-being, Sanders’ (2004) participants expressed greater concern with the emotional risks their job poses including the fear of people in their personal lives finding out about their occupation. Health risks were viewed at the low end of the risk continuum due to the controllable nature of the risk through the use of condoms and the availability of STI (sexually transmitted infection) testing. In the middle of the risk continuum was physical violence. Similar to Whittaker and Hart’s (1996) findings, Sanders’ (2004) participants described mitigating the risk of violence by having other people present where they were hosting clients. Sanders’ (2004) participants also describe using tactics such as screening their clients prior to meeting them and assessing their clients during negotiation. Additional strategies included persuading the client not to harm them, having a weapon available if needed, and taking the money and locking it away to prevent being robbed.

Expanding on their discussion of emotional risks, Sanders (2005) describes that to combat some of the emotional risks associated with sex work, many of the sex workers she interviewed created separate identities for the workplace to protect their personal identities, and further, to be able to “perform their role of the ‘prostitute’” in order to satisfy their clients (p. 336). She argues that this performance and the creation of a workplace identity is an emotion management strategy that allows the workers to “protect their own mental well-being from the damage related to sex work” (p. 337). As Sanders’ (2005) findings reveal, emotional labour is often a defining part of sex work for many women.

Emotional risks, such as being “discovered”, were high on the risk continuum as emotional risks were less predictable than health risks, and unlike physical harms, could be damaging for sex worker outside of the work environment and persist long after they leave the

industry (Sanders, 2004). Sanders (2004) outlines 3 types of emotional risks, “the emotional implications for managing sex as work and sex as pleasure; second, the risks posed by the threat of ‘being discovered’ working as ‘a prostitute’; and third, the potential failure of emotional management strategies” (p. 566). Overall, Sanders (2004) argues that sex workers view risk on a continuum constructed by their perception of how much control they have in mitigating the risk and severity of the risk’s consequences.

Another study conducted in Europe surveyed 483 indoor sex workers and found their biggest concern, other than criminal/legal consequences, was the threat of people finding out about their involvement in the sex industry (Jenkins, 2009). This work also found that 15.7% had experienced violence as a result of their job (Jenkins, 2009).

Echoing Sanders (2005), Harris et al. (2011) found that the three most common occupational risks their participants described were psychological harm, physical harm, and health risks relating to condom use and substance abuse. Although Harris et al.’s (2011) study reiterates how the presence of other sex workers can be beneficial to the safety of sex workers, their findings revealed that the presence of other sex workers could simultaneously increase risks for sex workers. One of Harris et al.’s (2011) participants from a body rub centre described that while their coworkers could help manage and prevent violence, they could also do harm by giving bad advice and purposefully undercutting each other’s prices.

Weitzer (2009) also notes the emotional risks associated with indoor sex workers, as they are expected to engage in additional emotional labor with clients in comparison to street-level sex workers. They state that street-level sex workers usually spend less time with their customers, whereas interactions between indoor sex workers and their clients are longer and “more reciprocal” (p. 220). While these may be seen as reciprocal from the views of male

clients, this type of relationship requires intensive emotional labour on the part of the sex worker. They add that because the interactions between indoor sex workers and clients are longer, “indoor workers are much more likely to counsel and befriend clients, and their encounters often include a semblance of romance and dating” (Weitzer, 2009, p. 220). Thus, indoor sex workers are not only providing physical services, but emotional services too. Engaging in continuous emotional labour can have additional negative effects on sex workers that could result in burn-out and negative mental health outcomes. As O’Doherty’s (2011) research points to, there is a lack of community support to manage health and safety risks indoor sex workers may experience. From interviews with 10 Vancouver-based indoor sex workers in 2005, O’Doherty (2011) found that their participants were often hesitant to contact the police for protection and “their health is directly affected by the isolation and stress that accompany marginalized labour” (p. 217).⁶

Beyond the risks for individual sex workers, there are wider debates about the consequences indoor sex venues may pose to the communities where they are located. In comparison to street-level sex work, which is highly visible to community members, some scholars argue that, “indoor prostitution, by contrast, may have no appreciable impact on the surrounding neighborhood, and, if it is discreet, there is normally little public awareness of it” (Weitzer, 2009, p. 219). Other scholars have argued that indoor sex work does affect the surrounding community where such establishments are located. Cooper (2016) interviewed residents who live on Central Drive located in Blackpool, England on their experiences living in proximity to brothels/massage parlours. Through interviews with community residents, police

⁶ The author notes other negative consequences but these were directly related to many aspects of sex work being illegal prior to 2014. For example, living off the avails of sex work or regularly using a space for sex work (such as a sex worker’s home).

officers, sex workers and council members, Cooper (2016) found varying opinions on the effects of the brothels present in the community. For example, police officers and council members saw crime rates in Central Drive as similar to other areas in Blackpool, while the residents described their community as “unsafe” (Cooper, 2016, p. 560). The conflation of sex work with community disorder was often attributed to the visibility of the massage parlours and “druggies” hanging around them (Cooper, 2016, p. 560). The sex workers interviewed in this study believed that the residents were not particularly bothered by them, yet also described being ignored and excluded at a council meeting discussing community issues. As many of the women working at the massage parlour lived in the area, Cooper (2016) notes stigma played a role in how much the sex workers were allowed to participate as community members. Their work advocates that the inclusion of sex worker’s voices, who also may work or live in the area, would help establish better relationships between council members, residents and the massage parlour employees of Central Drive.

While the above literature points to the unique risks that indoor sex workers face overall, Bungay et al. (2012) describes the many hardships indoor sex workers working in body rub centres can encounter including physical and sexual violence. Bungay et al. (2012) conducted a project that included survey data from 129 body-rub practitioners and interviews with 21 practitioners in the Metro Vancouver area. Their sample included both Canadian-born and immigrant women’s experiences in the indoor sex industry. They found that “the majority experienced at least one form of structural, interpersonal, or both types of violence, with the attempted removal of a condom during sexual services being cited most frequently” (p. 262). The findings from the survey also revealed that most participants had experience with “violent ‘dates,’” and this violence included “financial exploitation, verbal and sexual assault,” including

the removal of a condom without the woman's consent (Bungay et al., 2012, p. 270). Bungay et al. (2012) notes that licensing may also hold business owners liable for the protection of the women that work there. They argue that self-defense courses, emergency call buttons, and the presence of bouncers could help keep the women safe (Bungay et al., 2012).

Body Rub Centres and Licensing

A unique aspect to indoor sex work, which can vary depending on location, is the existence of licensing and regulation practices indoor sex work establishments are subjected to. In the Canadian context, there is limited research conducted on sex worker experiences and licensing practices as not all Canadian municipalities employ this strategy. Some municipalities, including Edmonton, have been licensing people/venues within the adult entertainment business since the 1970s (Lewis & Maticka-Tyndale, 2000). A case study in Windsor, Ontario looked at licensing and escorting by interviewing escorts, escort agency personnel and city officials (Lewis & Maticka-Tyndale, 2000). They consulted city officials in Calgary, a municipality that also licenses escorts. Being an escort is different from working in an erotic massage parlor because with escorting the client does not necessarily attend a regulated location. Escorts often attend the client's home, an agreed upon hotel ("out-call" service), or the apartment/home of the escort ("in-call" service). Despite this difference, the study is helpful in understanding Edmonton's current situation, as municipal licensing for escorts and body rub practitioners in Edmonton are quite similar. Additionally, both types of sex work are inherently risky due to the fact they are negotiating prices and providing their services behind closed doors.

When speaking with Calgary and Windsor officials, the authors found that licensing practices in both cities were implemented to police the industry (Lewis & Maticka-Tyndale,

2000). They note that escorting (like most indoor sex work) is invisible to the public and thus makes it difficult for police to gather information on sex workers and their clients. Through interviews with women engaged in escorting, Lewis and Maticka-Tyndale (2000) found when the licensing practices were first implemented in Windsor, many escorts felt being licensed legitimized their occupation. This legitimization resulted in sex workers expressing that they were more comfortable calling the police like employees of any other type of business could.

As Windsor's licensing practices continued, Lewis and Maticka-Tyndale's (2000) participants explained many disadvantages of licensing that did not make their job safer or help build trust with the police. Windsor requires that licensed escorts must have no criminal record and requires other personal information when their license is issued. While requiring this information alone is not necessarily a problem, as described to the authors, having to provide personal information became problematic when the police started using their private information on file to inquire about the escort agencies they worked for. The participants describe police showing up at their, "private homes without warning, 'at all hours of the night, wanting to speak to escorts about the agency they worked for'" (Lewis & Maticka-Tyndale, 2000, p. 444).

Although indoor sex work is associated with fewer police interactions than outdoor sex work, in this case, the fact they worked for an agency subjected them to questioning from police. Another downfall of becoming a licensed escort in Windsor for their participants was that one's personal information could be accessed by the government, which could "be subpoenaed in legal proceedings, such as child custody and criminal cases" (Lewis & Maticka-Tyndale, 2000, p. 441). Sex workers' personal information could also be accessed by social services to restrict access to one's child(ren) or by the government for tax purposes (Lewis & Maticka-Tyndale, 2000).

Drawing on interviews with 46 migrant/immigrant sex workers and managers from licensed sex businesses, Anderson et al. (2015) also looked at the licensing practices of body rub centres in the Greater Vancouver Area (GVA). While their participants stated that working in a licensed establishment increased their overall safety, Anderson et al. (2015) found that “prohibitive licensing and policing practices prevent sex workers, managers and owners from adopting safer workplace measures and exacerbate health and safety risks for sex workers” working in such establishments (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 825).

In Canada, each municipality has the ability to develop and enforce their own licensing practices for sex establishments. Anderson et al. (2015) outlines a few key licensing practices used in the GVA and their negative effects on indoor sex workers. First, the body rub centre must have the front door unlocked at all times to allow the police access, which prevents employees from screening who enters the establishment. The body rub centre must be brightly lit and have uncovered windows into the massage room, which means there is lack of privacy for the sex worker and their client. In addition, the GVA licensing practices use police as licensing inspectors, there are high fees for obtaining a license, and they can deny someone a license due to a prior sex-work-related offence. Further, the authors argue that one of the benefits of working indoors – having others present – is not a requirement or something that is even encouraged. In addition to the above restrictions, Anderson et al.’s (2015) participants described their businesses being a point of continual inspection resulting in deterrence of clients and high fines for any licensing infractions. As a result, Anderson et al. (2015) argue that the over-policing and intense licensing regime aimed at body rub centres could deter sex workers from working in such establishments and that to combat the stress of frequent police interactions, they may turn to working in private residences and hotels.

Although indoor sex work has been shown to be safer overall than street-level sex work (see Hausbeck & Brents, 2000; Sanders & Campbell, 2007; O'Doherty, 2011), the above literature outlines that indoor sex work may face its own risks such as increased emotional labour and strict licensing practices. While indoor sex workers overall share some occupational risks, my findings will show that body rub centre experiences are unique in comparison to other indoor sex work experiences. Recent (post-2014 legislation changes) and focused research such as this thesis is needed to capture the unique experiences of women of working in body rub centres so that their narratives and perspectives can be considered alongside the existing narratives of women working outdoors. Further, it is important to discuss the perceptions of safety and occupation risk unique to different types of indoor sex work as the physical location and organizational features of where they work (such as in a massage parlor vs. private residences) influence sex worker experiences.

Just as it is common knowledge that tradeswomen who work on a construction site are subjected to different risks than women working in clothing store (i.e. tradeswomen are likely to experience gendered harassment in construction work (Kelly, 2020)), the same considerations should be given to sex workers working in different locations. Each type of sex work setting poses different levels and types of risk, and therefore should be examined as a distinct workplace with distinctive characteristics. Only by collecting information on the unique experiences of indoor sex workers, especially within the varying types of indoor sex work, can policy makers start to address sex work more holistically.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Context

In Edmonton, both the body rub centre (as a business) and the women offering sexual services in these businesses (body rub practitioners) require a licence. While there are licenses for a variety of adult businesses in Edmonton such as “adult theatres” (colloquially known as strip clubs), this project focuses primarily on two types of licenses: Business licenses for body rub centres and, body rub practitioner licenses.⁷ While often advertised as “erotic” or “adult” massage parlours, the City of Edmonton officially refers to these locations as “body rub centres” (City of Edmonton, n.d.). There are 32 licensed body rub centres that exist across Edmonton. While the women do not always explicitly advertise offering sexual acts, it is fairly clear through the photos and written descriptions in the women’s individual ads or on the business websites.

Body rub centres employ body rub practitioners as contract employees and are required to hold a municipal body rub practitioner license.⁸ Therefore, they do not get paid hourly and they are not protected by the same labour laws employees in other professions are. Although they are not paid hourly, they are still expected by body rub centre managers to show up for scheduled shifts. These shifts usually include a day shift and an evening shift as body rub centres are only allowed to be open from 7 am until 11 pm (City of Edmonton, Bylaw 13138:34-g). Body rub practitioners make their earnings directly from the clients who attend body rub centres, whereas body rub centres as a business make money from body rub practitioners’ “room fees”.

Essentially, before every appointment the body rub practitioner pays the business to rent a room

⁷ Many indoor sex workers in Edmonton hold both a body rub practitioner licenses and an escort license since the process is the same. This way, if the woman decides to escort or vice versa, she does not have to go through the process again.

⁸ Those working in body rub centres rarely call themselves ‘body rub practitioners,’ but this is the term used by the City of Edmonton.

to meet with the client in. If the studio has a receptionist, a portion of the room fee is given to them for their services which usually involves duties such as cleaning the rooms, answering the phone, and booking appointments.⁹ The private rooms that the body rub practitioners rent to see clients in contain both a shower and bed.¹⁰ Body rub centre owners also supply the furniture and décor for these rooms, bedsheets, and house-keeping items such as toilet paper and soap for the bathrooms and towels. However, body rub practitioners purchase their own sex supplies, such as condoms.

Licensing for body rub practitioners and the business licenses are obtained through the City of Edmonton. Edmonton takes a unique harm-reduction approach to licensing practitioners by making the license free, as well as providing information and support services to the workers in licensing information sessions they are required to attend. The Body Rub Centre Task Force is another way the City provides support. This team is comprised of one social worker and two municipal bylaw officers. The team is involved with the regulation of the centres and building supportive relationships with the women working at the centres. The task force uses a harm-reduction approach rather than an enforcement-based approach. In comparison to other enforcement-based municipalities, Edmonton will often give warnings to the body rub practitioners for administrative offenses (for example, forgetting to update their license) before issuing heavy fines. However, it is important to note Edmonton has not always been this way. Many of my participants who have been in the industry for a number of years stated that

⁹ Receptionists in body rub centres are typically women who previously worked as a sex worker but has since retired from the industry. In some cases, reception duties are carried out by the centre's manager or owner.

¹⁰ Although I did not visit all the body rub centres in Edmonton, having a bed and shower in each room was considered the norm and was discussed as features all body rub centres provide.

Edmonton used to be more focused on enforcement, where bylaw officers would give tickets at a much higher rate than they do now.

To obtain a license as a body rub practitioner, you must provide: 1) your full name, date of birth and a recent police information check, 2) two pieces of government-issued ID that confirm you are at least 18 years old, 3) proof you attended a licensing information session, 4) a list of any aliases you use on websites to promote your services, 5) the address of the Body Rub Centre you'll be working at, and 6) a photo of you that will be taken by the city when you apply for your license (City of Edmonton, n.d.). It is unclear how the City of Edmonton stores this information, and to what extent the information is confidential. Even though the license is free, the police information check that is required costs the applicant \$70.¹¹

The licensing information session that all body rub practitioners must attend focuses on providing the participants with information about the sex industry such as health information on sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and outlines the risks associated with sex work. While some of my participants explained they did not like some of the “scare tactics” presenters from non-profit organizations would use, they found the information session beneficial overall as they got to learn about the regulations and rules they are required to abide by as an employee of a body rub centre. The information sessions are also a space where the registrants can engage with the members of the Body Rub Centre Task Force, ask questions about the industry and receive information on community-based supports.¹²

¹¹ As per the Edmonton Police Service website.

¹² This information based off discussions with my participants and my experience when I attended one of the information sessions prior to starting my research.

Methods

For my project, I conducted a short-term ethnography to examine the experiences of body rub practitioners in Edmonton. I completed 14 semi-structured interviews, 20 informal interviews, and participant observation at two separate Body Rub Centres over the span of seven months. In total, I spent over 700 hours conducting fieldwork.

Ethnographic research, in both anthropology and sociology, is centred on studying the culture of a specific group. As described by Delamont (2004), ethnographic research, “does not proceed in a straight line, but in a series of loops, because each step leads the researcher to reflect upon, and even revisit, earlier steps” (p. 11). As outlined by Hammersly and Atkinson (2007, p. 3), ethnographic projects usually contain the following: First, the data are gathered in the participant’s “everyday contexts” instead of in a controlled research setting. Data are also gathered from varying sources such as informal conversations, observation, documents and more. Ethnographic data collection is often unstructured in the sense that categories of interpretation are not built into the methodology but rather emerge from the data. Next, Hammersly and Atkinson (2007) suggest focusing on a relatively small-scale group or setting for an in-depth project. Finally, they stress the importance of analyzing the data and how it is related to local and wider contexts. Importantly, it is also noted that there is an exploratory nature to ethnographic projects when the project is in its initial stages (Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007, p. 4).

Throughout data collection, I drew upon two ethnographic approaches – protagonist-driven ethnography and feminist ethnography. Protagonist-driven ethnography situates research participants as the focus in both the research and writing processes (Cobb & Hoang, 2015). Cobb and Hoang (2015) argue that reflexivity has led to “scholar-centered” ethnographies - where the

scholar focuses on how they are different from their population -- the researcher's "journey" dominates the experiences of the subjects. While reflexivity is an essential skill for any qualitative researcher to possess, the authors argue that self-reflection is a methodological tool and should not be the central focus of an ethnography (Cobb & Hoang, 2015). While this methodological approach is not always referred to as protagonist-driven ethnography, other ethnographic scholars echo the importance of focusing on participants (Duneier, et al., 2014). This type of ethnographic approach in the research methods and writing can be found in urban ethnographic books such as *Unwanted* (Bucerius, 2014), *Sidewalk* (Duneier, 1999), and *Dealing in Desire* (Hoang, 2015).

I also applied the tenets of feminist ethnography which emphasizes focus on the power dynamics that result from gendered experiences. Davis and Craven (2016) argue that a feminist ethnography focuses on how people's gender and its relation to status and power operates in your fieldsite. Paying attention to gender and how it relates to power differentiation was an essential aspect of my project as I studied primarily cis-heterosexual interactions between men and female sex workers. Feminist ethnographic projects not only pay attention to gender, but marginalization as it is shaped by intersections of poverty, race, sexuality, and so forth (Davis & Craven, 2016). Focusing on how these factors, alongside expressions of gender, affect body rub practitioners was essential to understanding the dynamics of power inside body rub centres and then how these power dynamics shape their daily experiences.

Access

During the investigative stage of this project, I reached out to the Body Rub Centre Task Force to discuss a potential project on body rub centres in Edmonton. After discussing my

project with the task force's social worker, in April of 2019, I was able to visit a few different body rub centres with the social worker. Through these visits, I got a sense of what body rub centres look like on the inside, had the chance to chat with a few body rub practitioners about my project, and receive feedback on what they thought would be useful to examine in a research project. It also gave me an opportunity to start building rapport with women in the sex industry. Visiting the body rub centres with the social worker was beneficial because she was able to provide me with an overview of some of the routines and norms within body rub centres.¹³ It was also a good way to start building trust. As outlined by Sanders (2006), forming relationships with participants through someone they are already familiar with can help with access.

In September 2019, I started my data collection by reaching out to the few body rub practitioners I had met during my visits with the social worker in April of 2019. While I assumed that I would begin my project by conducting interviews first and then gain access to conduct participant observation, the opposite occurred. Based on my discussion with my first participant during our first interview, I reached out to two different body rub centres in the City of Edmonton regarding my project. After reaching out to the body rub centres, I visited each location to discuss my project in more depth with the managers and women working there. In one case I discussed my project with the manager on the phone beforehand and was invited to come in person on a later date to discuss my project further. With the second centre, I was invited to visit by my participant after she discussed the project with her manager. During these initial in-person visits, I was able to explain my project to each of the managers and gain their consent to conduct fieldwork at their locations. In both cases, the managers consented, but this was contingent on each body rub practitioner consenting to my presence for each shift I was

¹³ For example, she told me not to refer to clients as “johns” – a common term used by law enforcement to describe men who buy sex.

present as well. Fortunately, during these visits the women I met expressed immediate interest in participating in the project. On subsequent visits to the body rub centres, each time I would explain my project to potentially new participants and in almost all cases they consented to my presence and were willing to be interviewed. There were some rare situations where a body rub practitioner consented to my presence but did not want my audio recorder on during their shift and did not want any information about them included in the study.

Interviews

In total, I formally interviewed 14 participants and informally interviewed 20 participants.¹⁴ The 14 participants I formally interviewed were interviewed multiple times throughout the seven months I conducted this ethnography. For example, each of them completed a formal interview with me but were informally interviewed at other times throughout the time I spent with them at work and in their personal lives. These 14 participants were also often a part of the group discussions that occurred during my fieldwork on various topics. The other six individuals were not formally interviewed for one of two reasons: First, some were not interested in having a one-on-one private discussion with me and preferred to discuss their experience throughout group conversations or informally with me throughout their shift. Second, there were a few participants who agreed on a formal interview with me, but I did not have the opportunity to complete this interview due my research abruptly ending due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the participants who completed a formal interview with me, I offered a gift card reimbursement to a coffee shop of their choosing in the amount of \$15. The majority of my

¹⁴ Originally, I had 15 formal interviews, but one participant withdrew shortly after their interview was completed due to reasons unrelated to my research.

formal interviews (11) took place at the individual's workplace during work hours. The other three interviews took place at a local coffee shop, in my car, and at a bar. Formal interviews ranged from 1 hour to 4 hours. All formal interviews took place one-on-one in private. I gave all of my participants the choice of doing their interview at the spa, or outside of work. The majority chose to do them at work. The interviews that took place at the participant's body rub centre all took place in one of rooms they would see clients in. At the body rub centre, these rooms were the only place where we could close the door and have a private conversation. Further, after the participant stated they would like to do their interview at the body rub centre, the participant often indicated which room they would want to sit in.

Interviews were conducted at my participants' place of work for a few reasons: First, many of my participants had obligations such as childcare and other jobs outside of their shifts at the body rub centre and therefore their time at the body rub centre was the only time they could meet with me. Second, on most shifts my participants had "breaks"/free time between clients and, thus, interviewing them during that time period was an opportunity for them to pass the time. To ensure the interviews did not interfere with their work, we would pause the interview whenever a client would come in. If the client wanted to stay with the woman I was interviewing, we would resume the interview after the client had left, or resume the interview the next time I saw them at work. If the client did not choose to stay with the woman I was interviewing or if they knew the client was either staying with someone else or leaving altogether, we would resume the interview. This practice ensured that my research did not interfere in significant ways with my participants' ability to earn money as they were still able to potentially secure a client despite my presence.

Fieldwork

In addition to my formal interviews, I conducted fieldwork at two different body rub centres over the span of seven months. Both locations are licensed body rub centres through the City of Edmonton and are managed by women. From September 2019 until March 2020, I spent approximately 30 hours a week conducting fieldwork that could be characterized as “deep hanging out” (Geertz, 1998). I would go to the body rub centres while my participants were working, but my fieldwork also included spending time with my participants at their homes, at their other workplaces, at restaurants and bars (usually after their shift ended), and more.

Throughout my project, all of the women I met consented to me being present at each location. If everyone working at a given time consented, I would turn my recorder on during the time I was present. This allowed me to remember with more accuracy what happened throughout the time I was in the field since I was often there for periods of 7-8 hours. It also allowed me to collect my participants’ perspectives and words exactly as they were said when casual conversations in the staff room would become impromptu informal interviews and group discussions. I used my fieldnotes to supplement the information I was gathering in my interviews in order to triangulate my findings.

An average “shift” for a sex worker at a body rub centre ranges from 7-8 hours. At the locations I conducted field work, most of the time women only worked the morning shift or the evening shift. For some of my participants, they would work “doubles” and therefore work both shifts. While this may seem like a long time to be at work, my participants never spent their entire shift with clients. There are often slow periods throughout the day and if/when clients come in ends up being a game of chance. While there were some evenings that a particular woman could be fairly busy, during the course of my study it was not the norm. During a shift, it

was normal for body rub practitioners to range from no clients (often referred to as “blanking”) to four or five clients on a busy day.¹⁵

Typically, I wrote fieldnotes the day after being in the field as I often got home late after attending evening shifts. Having audio recordings of most of my time in the field was helpful when writing fieldnotes as it helped me remember what occurred throughout my time at the spa. When I was at a body rub centre conducting fieldwork, I spent the majority of my time hanging out with my participants in the staff room. The staff room was reserved for staff only and was where most of my participants would spend their time if they were not with a client. If someone needed to have a nap, needed a break from being around people, or had other things to get done (i.e. work relating to their other job(s), homework, etc.), they would often go into one of the client rooms that were not being used. Sometimes I would help out with reception duties if needed, such as answering the phone and doing laundry. Once in a while I would encounter a client in passing or while putting them in a room if my participants were busy, but I never took fieldnotes regarding clients directly. I only made note of what my participants said about clients and the situations that arose while I was present. Being able to observe and interact with body rub practitioners in their work environment was essential to my ethnographic approach and allowed me to understand the nuanced culture of this specific group. Further, it allowed me to go “beyond the informants’ impression management” (Delamont, 2004, p. 12) that could be employed when engaging with me during a formal interview.

In the middle of March of 2020, the body rub centres had to close due to the COVID-19 pandemic but have since reopened.

¹⁵ Some studios have “customer appreciation days” where prices are lowered for a day, and therefore often more clients come. I never observed one of these days and therefore cannot comment on the dynamics of such days.

Sample

While there are individuals of all gender identities working in the sex industry, my sample was comprised of cis-women. Some of them saw both female and male clients (female clients did come in but were uncommon), while others would only see men. All of my participants were actively working at a body rub centre at the time of their interview, either seeing clients and/or completing duties as a receptionist. My sample is comprised of participants who were approximately 20 to 45 years old and include women from diverse cultural/ethnic backgrounds.

As previously stated, some women may work in multiple sex work settings. To keep the study focused, my sample is comprised of sex workers who were currently working at a body rub centre as a licensed body rub practitioner. Nineteen of my participants had worked at a variety of other spas in the city so their interviews provided insight into the spas they were currently employed at, as well as the spas they had worked at in the past. All 20 of my participants had experience working as an escort outside of their experience working in a body rub centre. Therefore, they could all speak to the difference between body rub centres and escorting. Two of my participants had experience working on the street. 10 of my participants identified as Caucasian and the other 10 identified as Black, Indigenous or a Person of Colour. Seven of my participants changed work locations during the time of this study, both temporarily and permanently, but I have maintained contact with most of them throughout their transition. While some of the employees in Edmonton body rub centres speak minimal English, due to access and to my own language skills, I only interviewed English-speaking body rub practitioners for my project.¹⁶

¹⁶ It is important that the perspectives of non-English speaking women are included in the broader discussions around body rub centres and the regulation of such establishments. Thus, a future study

Data Analysis

I audio-recorded all 14 formal interviews with my participants' consent. Immediately after each interview, I wrote up a summary about the contents of the interview and made note of potentially important themes. As my fieldwork was quite intensive for seven months, each interview was transcribed after all my data was collected. I exited the field in March 2020 due to COVID-19 and I completed the transcriptions of the interviews in the following month. First, I transcribed the interviews verbatim using Microsoft Word and NCH's Software's ExpressScribe program. My first step in data analysis was reading each interview transcript thoroughly. Next, I coded the interviews using the qualitative research program, NVivo12.

I conducted two coding passes of the interviews. The first coding pass I coded for "organizational categories" as a strategy to organize my data and identify the broader topics I was interested in (Maxwell, 2012, p. 107). These codes included topics such as "safety", "family", and "health." Next, I completed a second coding pass of my interviews looking for "descriptive categories" which involves coding for participants "concepts and beliefs" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 108). The descriptive categories I identified included codes such as "opinions on deregulation", "problems with the industry", and "setting boundaries with clients".

My third step included consulting my fieldnotes and looking for themes that both my fieldnotes and interviews presented. This included themes of "risk mitigation" and "feelings of safety". Throughout this process, I wrote up short memos regarding the most prominent themes that I identified and started to connect them with the "organizational categories" and "descriptive categories" from my interviews. By revisiting the codes from my initial two coding passes, I was

focusing on the specific experiences of immigrant and non-English speaking body rub practitioners would be an opportunity to expand on the findings from this project.

able to connect codes such as “friendship” and “cameras” to my thematic concepts of “risk mitigation” and “feelings of safety” which developed into the findings of this project.

I chose not to transcribe all of my informal interviews and fieldwork recordings due to the sheer number of hours of audio I collected. Instead, to keep track of notable points during my fieldwork, my field notes outlined times for that day’s audio when important conversations or incidents occurred. For example, I would indicate in my field notes: ‘*(something notable)* happened at *(time-stamp)* on *(date)* at *(which body rub centre I was at)*’. Therefore, if needed I could refer to the time-stamped portions of the corresponding fieldwork recordings for clarification or additional details. I then only transcribed those relevant parts.

Confidentiality

I wrote all of my fieldnotes using pseudonyms for both my participants and their workplace. Throughout my project, I did not use their legal name or the name they used at work in any of my fieldnotes. Instead, I put their contact information in my phone or wrote about them in my fieldnotes using a unique third name different than their legal name and working name. As some of my participants picked their pseudonyms or told each other their pseudonyms, I have assigned each participant an additional pseudonym when writing about their experiences within this thesis.

Insider/Outsider Status

As an ethnographer, it is important to discuss my positionality and how my insider and outsider status potentially influenced the data I was able to gather. One of the most pervasive topics related to ethnographic methods is whether or not the researcher was an insider or an

outsider to the group they were studying. For some ethnographers, it is important to gain rapport with their participants through similarities they may have with their participants or group they wish to study (Contreras, 2012). For others, they have noted there are benefits to being seen as an outsider to the group they engage with (Bucerius, 2013; Bucerius, 2014). Many ethnographers argue that we should not think of the insider/outsider status as dichotomous terms but as a continuum (Bucerius, 2013). Thinking about my positionality and status as a continuum resonated with me as I believe I coexisted as *both* an insider and an outsider.

Although I did not participate in sex work, I had many other attributes in common with my participants. I am a cis-gender woman, around the same age as most of my participants, and outside of our differing occupations we share many of the same concerns, aspirations and hopes for our futures.¹⁷ Soon after starting my project, several of my participants began calling on me for general life advice, wanting to build a genuine friendship with me, even outside of my official research time at the body rub centre.

While my participants were certainly aware that I came to the body rub centre for research purposes, over time, I started co-existing as both researcher and friend. Developing these types of close bonds with one's participants is quite typical for ethnographers (see Bourgois, 2003; Kay Hoang, 2011; Contreras, 2012; Bucerius, 2014). This friendship I built with my participants took many forms. A few examples include when I was admitted into the PhD program, my participants planned a celebration for me over dinner and drinks. I also received Christmas presents from two participants. These close relationships with my participants also

¹⁷ It is difficult to know whether my career aspirations are equally as attainable as my participants'. As I will discuss later, many of my participants were post-secondary educated and were of similar socioeconomic status as me. While we shared other life aspirations such as having kids (or being a good mother), having a healthy relationship with a partner, etc., I am privileged as I do not have to consider the stigma sex workers often face. Managing this stigma in my personal life is something that I do not have to grapple with.

meant being there for my participants during difficult times. For example, one evening a participant texted me that they were in the hospital and needed something to eat. While she did not feel comfortable reaching out to her other friends in Edmonton, she felt comfortable enough to reach out to me. When I arrived at the hospital, it was clear she not only needed a snack but also did not want to be alone. In other instances, I would help my participants with practical matters such as proof-reading their resume or helping translate for my participants whose second language was English.

As an ethnographer that wanted to study sex work, the most pervasive similarity that influenced my access and ability to conduct this research seemed to be my shared gender with my participants. As mentioned, all of my participants identified as cis-women and as a cis-woman myself, our shared gender identity allowed me to gain the insider status a male researcher would not have been afforded. First, my gender allowed me access to spaces and conversations that I would not be privy to if I was a man. For example, the women in my study openly talked about their bodies and sexuality with me. They talked about the effects their job had on them physically and sexually. As a woman who shared similar bodily functions, these conversations were not uncomfortable for me and were even conversations I could participate in. For example, one day I asked my participants if they could still see clients while they were menstruating. Without hesitating, Leah quickly explained in detail the common practices sex workers use to ensure they can still work while menstruating. A male ethnographer may never have thought about asking such a question and if they did ask, the conversation would potentially have been much less nuanced and descriptive. There were many other conversations that took place similar to this one that I argue would not have occurred without our shared gender identity.

Gender is something that is often a part of every ethnographer's journey in building rapport with their participants. In some cases, ethnographers who differ in gender from their participants are still able to build meaningful relationship and collect valuable data from their participants. For example, Bucerius and Urbanik (2018) outline that as female ethnographers studying groups of criminalized men, gender was a factor in building rapport with their participants but ultimately did not hinder their ability to conduct rich ethnographic research of these groups.

In comparison, my gender aligned with the group I was interested in study which I believe allowed me access different spaces a male ethnographer would have likely not have been able to. While I was not interested in engaging with clients for this project, spending so much time in the body rub centres sometimes meant that I was expected to help out if needed. As a woman, I could answer the door and answer the phones if needed without sticking out or deterring clients. In many cases, I blended in as the body rub centre's receptionist or another employee and therefore could walk around more freely inside the body rub centres. Along with answering the door or phones, this allowed me to help out with laundry or cleaning if needed without concern a client may see me. My shared gender identity also allowed me more freedom in terms of spending time with my participants in their personal lives. My participants were comfortable going out in public with me since I easily blended in as a friend. If my participants were spending ample time with a man, many of my participants' family, friends and especially their boyfriends may have been skeptical of my intentions.

In addition to my shared gender identity allowing me a level of access a male ethnographer would not have been afforded, our shared gender identity also allowed me to ask my participants questions regarding their work with some ease. For example, I could ask about

fetishes or “strange” services clients asked for, or to show me how they posed in their advertising pictures in order to still look “sexy” and hide their face from the camera at the same time. The same questions coming from a male researcher could have been interpreted as sexual or seen as invasive.¹⁸ Further, while not all of my participants were heterosexual in their personal lives, they all predominately saw male clients. Since I was open with my participants about having a male partner, this allowed for discussions regarding having sex with men. I could participate in many of the conversations regarding sex and sex acts that they engaged in with clients, and thus it was easier for me to be both present and engaged in conversations regarding sex.

While shared gender and sexuality allowed me some insider status, my outsider status as a non-sex worker was important as well. It allowed me the distance to be critical and the ability to ask questions a fellow sex worker may not be able to. For example, I could ask questions about prices, services, and the informal and formal rules in body rub centres. If I was also a sex worker, my participants might have been hesitant to share this information with me in fear I might use that information to my own advantage. As an outsider, I believe my participants also felt comfortable sharing information with me without the fear I would share that information with someone else in the industry. Therefore, my outsider status also ensured I was not seen as competition. If my participants and I were competing for business and clientele, I believe the trust and rapport I have with my participants would have been much different.

Another area of difference and similarity that is important to discuss between myself and my participants is our varying socioeconomic statuses. The socioeconomic status of my

¹⁸ Here I am referring to a heterosexual cis-male researcher. A gay cis-male researcher may have been able to ask similar questions I was able to regarding such topics without making my participants uncomfortable. Although, I would argue that a researcher who did not present as a cis-woman would have had a more difficult time blending in as a staff member or receptionist which would have prevented them to participate in reception duties, walk around more freely in the centre, and so on.

participants was quite varied and therefore categorizing myself as an insider or an outsider in respect to socioeconomic status is quite difficult. Some of my participants were involved in the sex industry as way to supplement their government-assisted income. These participants were searching for work and having a difficult time finding a job outside of the sex industry, so they were using their income from working in the body rub centre to pay their bills until they secured other employment. Although these women make up the portion of my participants who would be regarded as low socioeconomic status, all of the women in this group were still able to meet their basic needs and limited luxuries such as owning a personal vehicle.¹⁹ I also had participants who would be considered upper/middle-class by the general public. Some of my participants use their income as a sex worker to supplement their income they make from their “day” job and a couple own their own homes. Many of my participants have experience travelling internationally and are able to afford going on vacation to places such as Mexico or Vegas. Many of my participants also have attended postsecondary in the past and possess degrees, diplomas, certificates, in various areas. In other cases, my participants are students enrolled in post-secondary and are in the process of completing their program.

Overall, throughout this project my insider and outsider statuses co-existed. I was seen as both an insider and an outsider at the same time. My insider status afforded me access to my participants’ personal lives and the ability to help out in the studios where needed. Most importantly though, my outsider status ensured I was perceived as a researcher with a genuine

¹⁹ It should be noted that many of my participants were not able to meet their basic needs from their government-assisted income alone and working in a body rub centre operated as a way to supplement this income “off the books”. They explained to me that even if they were to work at a fast-food restaurant, the income would be taxable and therefore the government would lower the amount of income support they receive each month based off what their income was from their job. Thus, finding employment outside of the sex industry did not make logical sense as the income support they already received was not sufficient and finding a job with taxable income did not help them increase their overall monthly income.

interest in their experiences as a sex worker rather than a fellow sex worker who may be collecting information for their own personal gain.

Research Questions

As outlined in my introduction, I purposefully started this project with the broad question, *what are the experiences of women working body rub centres in Edmonton?* Keeping my initial question wide at the beginning of my project allowed my initial findings to guide me towards more nuanced and interesting questions throughout my study. This strategy also allowed my participants to guide the direction of this study. As an outsider, I wanted this project to provide sex workers an opportunity to share with me what they perceived to be the most important topics to be explored and discussed regarding their jobs.

Due to their concerns regarding the City of Edmonton potentially moving toward deregulating body rub centres, many of my initial conversations with my participants were focused on their frustration with what the media, city council and some community advocates were putting forward regarding safety in body rub centres. These initial conversations also involved hearing their stories about why they believed body rub centres to be safer and why deregulating body rub centres was a bad idea. Therefore, I began to restructure my focus onto two questions:

1. How do indoor sex workers view working in a body rub centre in comparison to other types of sex work?

Based on my participants answers regarding question one, I then proceeded to focus on my next question:

2. If body rub practitioners view working in body rub centres as safer, then how do body rub centres mitigate some of the physical and psychological risks associated with sex work?²⁰

As the following chapters on my findings will demonstrate, my participants feel safer in body rub centres for a variety of reasons. In the next chapter, Chapter 3, I will discuss my participants' perception of body rub centres as safer and outline some of the reasons body rub centres are associated with increased feelings of safety in comparison to sex work in other settings. In Chapter 4, I will discuss how the unique social organization of body rub centres, including collegial relationships between sex workers, and how these factors help to mitigate some of the risks sex workers often face.

²⁰ Although this thesis will discuss that there are still risks to sex work in body rub centres, I wanted to know how and why body rub centres were associated with increased feelings of safety.

Chapter 3: Location Matters

This chapter will discuss my participants' perceptions of *where* they conduct sex work and how location relates to their overall perceptions of safety. While Sanders (2005) argues that sex workers view the risks associated with sex work – physical, emotional and health risks – on a “risk continuum”, I argue that sex workers also view their workplace location on a “risk continuum”. Working outdoors is seen as the riskiest location for sex workers, especially to those who had prior experience working on streets. While my participants view working indoors as safer overall, my participants distinguished between indoor locations such as escorting in hotels/private residences and working in a body rub centre. Escorting was viewed as safer than working on the street, but less safe than working in a body rub centre. As such, this chapter will discuss how my participants viewed working in a body rub centre as the safest option and the location with the least risks. To follow, Chapter 4 will discuss how beyond simply their location, body rub centres are sites of risk mitigation for sex workers due to the unique social structures that exist within them.

Anticipating and managing risk is not unique to sex workers, but rather practices all women engage in. Stanko (1997) argues that women learn from an early age how to engage in a form of “safety talk” that involves “identifying, classifying, and managing” the dangers of men (p 487). The measures women take to identify and manage gendered violence have been embedded into our “routine consciousness” and has become an expected feature of a feminine identity (Stanko, 1997, p. 488). She argues “safety talk” is a form of risk assessment used by women which is “a display of situated, locally-produced knowledge of our risk and conceptualization of danger” (Stanko, 1997, p. 488). She proceeds to add that “safety talk” includes both discussions of risk but also strategies women actively engage in to manage an

overarching fear of potential male violence (Stanko, 1997). As Stanko (1997) outlines, this potential for violence is felt as both “diffuse and specific”, as it situated around men as the dangerous “other” (p. 489). As the quotes from my participants will reveal, my participants engage in discussions and practices of “safety talk”. I argue that their engagement in “safety talk” reveals that sex workers are consistently aware of the potential for violence against them as both women in their day to day life, as well as during work. Further, the “safety talk” they engaged in with me and their peers on strategies to managing risks is an integral feature of how indoor sex workers perform and “do gender” (Stanko, 1997).

Due to the fact my research occurred during the same time the City of Edmonton was discussing safety within body rub centres and considering closing them down, many of my participants were stressed with this possibility and frustrated with the narrative that anti-sex work advocates and city council members were putting forward. Overall, the City of Edmonton and anti-sex work advocates were concerned about the potential victimization that could be occurring in body rub centres, and argued that by licensing such business, the City is being complicit in sexual exploitation (Omstead, 2020). Broadly, the argument that is being put forward to city council is that all sex work is exploitative and body rub centres condone the purchasing of sex.

While it has never been completely clear what the City of Edmonton is considering in regards to deregulating or closing down body rub centres, the narrative put forward in the media was that the City of Edmonton was looking at a 5-year exit strategy toward ending the licensing of body rub centres (Labine, 2019; Zabjek, 2019; Omstead, 2020). Regardless, the perception among my participants was that the City wanted to close body rub centres, and as a result of this perception and the reporting of local media (Labine 2019; Zabjek, 2019; Omstead, 2020), many

conversations with my participants became focused on what they would want an outsider to know about their actual experiences working in a body rub centre.

Perceptions of street-level sex work

In regard to perceptions of street-level sex work, my findings support previous research that argues indoor sex work in general is much safer than street-level sex work (see Hausbeck & Brents, 2000; Sanders & Campbell, 2007; O'Doherty, 2011). My participants who had worked outdoors were able to clearly articulate why indoors was safer than outdoor sex work. However, for my other participants who had never worked outdoors, this opinion was not necessarily shaped by personal experience.

From my sample, two of my participants had first-hand experience working outdoors. My other participants' perceptions of working outdoors were largely based upon the stories they had heard from sex workers with street experience or portrayals of street work in the media. These vicarious experiences influenced their thinking and prompted them to conceptualize street-level sex work as dangerous. For example, when I asked Nora about the potential closure of body rub centres, she responded, "What?! So, we all go out into the streets and get killed, like?!". Her visceral response clearly emphasized her perspective about the safety of working outdoors.

Maddie and Ava had many years of working in the sex industry and they were vocal with me and the other women about what working on the street was like. Both of them told me that working indoors was vastly safer than working outdoors. When asked about the differences between street-level sex work and indoor sex work, Maddie was quick to tell me about the violence she experienced working on the street. Maddie explained that working on the street

involved violence from her pimps, other working girls, and clients (she often referred to clients as “tricks”):

Maddie: [...] I’ve been robbed by tricks, I’ve been beat up by tricks, I have 5 stitches in my lip because some girl didn’t wanna suck some trick’s dick, for the \$150 she got. Like he punched her, she broke her nose and busted my lip.

After listening to a few stories, I proceeded to ask her if she thought indoor or outdoor sex work was safer. Maddie explained that outdoor was riskier due to the fact you would have to go to a hotel room or do “car dates” with clients. She proceeded to tell me that in comparison, she could not think of a time she had a “bad date” working indoors.

Maddie: I don’t think I’ve really had a bad date inside, like I never got robbed or anything like that inside.

During my interview with Maddie, we also had a lengthy discussion regarding the City of Edmonton’s plans to potentially stop regulating body rub centres. While all of my participants discussed how this would push girls to just start working in hotels or private residences as an escort, Maddie articulated that this would also increase the number of girls having to work on the street:

Maddie: See but do half these advocates talk to girls? Cause really if that’s what the city wants to do, if closing them down all together... it’s just gonna push girls to 118th street

[...] it's probably safer for them to be inside than 118th street. There's serial killers in Edmonton, there always, like for 25 years there has been and the police don't give a fuck here, otherwise they would have caught him by now.

Maddie also expressed frustration with the narrative that advocates were portraying to the media since she interpreted the closure of body rub centres to mean increased risk for sex workers. During many discussions with my participants we talked about the information in various local news articles outlining the narrative being put forward to the city that body rub centres are not safe and that continuing to license them means the city is being complicit in exploiting women (Labine, 2019; Zabjek, 2019; Omstead, 2020). This frustration was also echoed by participants who had no experience working on the streets. As Tiffany told me, working in a body rub centre was nothing like working on the streets – which is often the only story that is portrayed in the media or by the public:

Interviewer: Is there anything else people should know about the industry or know about working in a massage studio?

Tiffany: It's not as scary and dangerous as people make it out to be. I think when you....when my mom found out, she...like my mom's image of it and what I used to think too is that you're a prostitute on the street, you're hopping into people's cars, like you're having unprotected sex, like you're probably getting pimped out or something, it's like.. it's really not like that.

While Tiffany and Maddie talk about the physical risks outdoor sex work poses for sex workers, Ava also added that outdoor sex work can pose emotional risks. As outlined by Sanders (2004), one of the emotional risks sex workers are most concerned about is the potential of people finding out about what they are doing. This was true in Ava's case. She described to me that working in a body rub centre helped mitigate the risk of being "seen" working on the street by friends and family. For Ava, being able to work in a discrete location lessened her fear that people in her personal life would find out. As I will discuss later, being "outed" as a sex worker was a fear for many of my participants due to the stigma associated with being a sex worker. While reiterating to me that working indoors was much safer than working outside, she explained the importance of working in a discrete location.

Ava: it's [body rub centres] safer...way safer...way more clean, like way more you know discreet. Cause I remember when I was working on the street I had one of my fucking friends fucking drive by and be like, "oh my god what are you doing, get in the car!!!" [...]

So yeah, you don't... you're out there and I didn't wanna be out there, like you know?

Interviewer: It was more public?

Ava: Yeah so [body rub centres] are definitely more discreet.

While Ava and Maddie's experiences validate the existing research (Lowman, 2000; Church, et al., 2001) that outlines the dangers of street-level sex work, my findings add a new dimension. As I will outline below, my participants did not only distinguish between indoor and outdoor sex work but also made clear distinction *within* indoor sex work settings based on safety.

Feelings of Safety

Throughout this project, it became clear that working in a body rub centre was associated with an increased sense of safety, especially in comparison to working as an escort. All but one of my participants told me they preferred to work in a body rub centre in comparison to escorting because they felt safer in a body rub centre. The only person who did not state a preference was Jenna. She explained she likes escorting since she enjoys travelling and working alone to avoid the drama that can come with working alongside other girls. Jenna explained that she usually works as an escort and only works in studios once in a while. Even for Jenna though, working as an escort was associated with decreased levels of safety.

When I asked Jenna about how safe she felt while escorting, she first told me that she has not had any negative experiences with clients as an escort. Immediately after that statement though, she corrected herself and explained that she actually has had experiences with clients that scared her and has also heard horror stories about escorting from other sex workers.

Jenna: [...] I guess I have had like a few like, instances where it was a little scary, but... yeah I don't know like... I hear horror stories from other girls, like cab drivers driving girls out to the middle of nowhere and raping them umm... being drugged, and shit like that. But, I don't know I've never experienced that and I was out in Fort Mac working independently there for like a year and a half... never experienced any of that, but ahh I don't know maybe I was just lucky. I have had like a couple scary experiences [...]

She then proceeded to tell me about two instances when she was escorting where she had been scared because of the clients' behaviour.²¹

As mentioned, safety was always a general topic of conversation because my participants were aware that the City of Edmonton was exploring potentially closing body rub centres down and that one of the reasons they were considering doing so was because of concerns regarding their safety. For all of my participants, excluding Jenna, the possibility of having to work outside a regulated business as an escort was equated with feelings of stress and decreased safety. Kimberly clearly articulated this during our interview when I asked her what she thought would happen if the City stopped regulating body rub centres:

Kimberly: We'd have these illegal brothels (laughs) and just have like, you'd have like girls or guys renting houses and then just like...

Interviewer: Do you think it would be more dangerous?

Kimberly: I think it would definitely be!

To follow, I asked Kimberly about people being victimized in body rub centres, she immediately explained that victimization is much more likely when escorting.

Interviewer: Do you find that that's [victimization in body rub centres] something that is happening frequently?

²¹ I do not go into detail about these stories as the information could identify my participant to anyone who may have also been told these stories.

Kimberly: Weirdly enough, I think the victimization comes... if you wanna talk about victimization in this industry, I think it more so comes from independence. Like the girls that are working independently.

Interviewer: Like escorting?

Kimberly: Like at hotels and escorting, and stuff like that. They get, they get robbed, they get jumped. They... you know, they get taken advantage of. They like... really horrific things happen.

As my research progressed, my participants also continually rejected the narrative that working in a body rub centre was unsafe. They would even joke about it and make comments like, ‘look Shaylyn, see how much we’re being forced to work here?’²² They were aware that some women are in the sex industry against their free will, but would also reiterate that they were not those women. My participants even explained that if they suspected someone was being trafficked or exploited, they would report it to the City’s Body Rub Centre Task Force. As I will discuss in-depth later, my participants did not want to be working with women who were being trafficked and therefore they engaged in self-regulation of their workplaces.

When I first met Lily, during the first hour I spent with her, she was also adamant that working in a body rub centre was safer than escorting. She further explained to me that as an escort, she had been raped in her own home. She had been seeing clients out of her home, and therefore this client knew where she had lived and they showed up unannounced. During my interview with Lily a few months after her initially disclosing this information to me, she reiterated her feelings of safety in a body rub centre:

²² From my fieldnotes.

Interviewer: Are there any things you think people should know about the industry, or job?

Lily: Only that it's like, [fumbles on words] these places are way better, like they're not as sleazy as people give them credit for, right? Like, I think that it's a safe place for girls to do this, right? Because...

Interviewer: Like for you, do you feel safer here?

Lily: Yeah I feel super... I feel totally safe here. I don't ever, ever, ever worry about my safety here.

For Lily, she was thankful that she could work in a body rub centre because after that incident she continued to work and having the option of a body rub centre at least provided her a space where she could feel safe while doing so. I continued to hear narratives like Kimberly and Lily's that escorting was more dangerous than working in a body rub centre. This led me to wonder what made body rub centres unique and what my participants were referring to when they talked about body rub centres being safer. Therefore, I began to narrow in on my first research question: what promotes feelings of safety within a body rub centre in comparison to escorting? Their perceptions of body rub centres as safer was based on experiences while escorting and their overall feelings of safety while working in a body rub centre in comparison to working as an escort. My participants described that escorting is characterized by uncertainty and an increased risk of violence. In my interviews, my participants' engaged in "safety talk" that highlighted that they feel safer in body rub centres for 3 reasons: 1. The presence and use of cameras, 2. That others were always present (such as coworkers or a receptionist), and 3. Their perception that

being assaulted within a body rub centre was less likely and if it did happen, they argued it was less severe than in other settings.

Cameras and Presence of Others

Two of the biggest factors I found that contributed to an overall sense of safety was the existence of cameras in body rub centres and the knowledge that others were present. In Edmonton, body rub centres typically have operating cameras at various points throughout the business.²³ It is also required by bylaw that there is a minimum of two employees working at a time and that there must always been one person “out of session” in case something were to happen (City of Edmonton, Bylaw 13138:34-f). While these are two separate features of body rub centres, my participants almost always talked about them concurrently and perceived these features as social control mechanisms that deterred potentially abusive clients. Since my participants believed that the cameras and presence of other people were effective social control mechanisms, these features contributed to their feelings of safety within body rub centres.

Nora started out in the industry as an escort, so during our interview I was especially curious as to why she now works in a body rub centre instead of escorting like she had for so many years.

Interviewer: One of things I’m interested in is what moved you from escorting to the spa?

²³ Both body rub centres I conducted fieldwork at had operating cameras. While it is not outlined in Bylaw 13138, both my participants and I were under the impression that having cameras in a licensed body rub centre was mandatory. In addition, based on conversations with my participants, most of the body rub centres in Edmonton have operational cameras on the premises.

Nora: Umm... I got tired of having to answer phone, like my phone all the time and like talking to tricks and it's safer. Definitely a lot safer, umm... and then I don't have to bring them to my house or like go like to their place.

Interviewer: So, in what ways is it safer for you?

Nora: Because there's more... there's people here and most people aren't going to try shit in a fucking studio, there's cameras everywhere!

As Nora states, the presence of the cameras and having others around not only provides a sense of security for her, but she also believes that these factors prevent clients from acting inappropriately while they are in the body rub centre.

During my interview with Kelsey, she also explained to me that because of these two features of a body rub centre, she felt much safer in working in a body rub centre than having to see a client in a hotel:

Kelsey: I like the safety of it [...] I like the fact that they're on camera... they know that they can't fuck around, you know? It's like, you know how to act, they know what to expect and like, it's... it's easier, I feel safe.

By stating that they know what to expect, Kelsey is referring to the fact that the clients know there are other people around that can intervene if needed.

Alongside their mention of cameras, my participants described to me that contributing to feelings of safety in a body rub centre was the fact that they were never alone. When I asked Amelia about whether body rub centres were safer in comparison to working as a sex worker in

other settings, she responded, “There’s no comparison, absolutely no comparison when you’re talking about being in a location with people and cameras versus being alone with these people.” The fact they were never alone in the body rub centre contributed to a sense of safety that working alone in a private residence did not afford them.

Isla also explained the importance of having others around when I asked her why she chose working in a body rub centre rather than working independently. She explained:

Isla: Because it’s just like, there’s always people here, so it’s not as scary, then like doing it from... like alone.

The presence of a receptionist was also often talked about in regard to the importance of having other people present in body rub centres. It is a City of Edmonton regulation that body rub centres must have someone present in the studio who is not in session at all times (City of Edmonton, Bylaw 13138:34-f). This practice was accepted as it made body rub practitioners feel safer. While body rub centres have separate rooms for privacy when a client stays, these rooms are not soundproof. If something were to happen, and the body rub practitioner yelled, it would be easily heard by the other staff members. The doors to the rooms are never locked, so in a matter of seconds, someone would be able to enter the room. My participants described that the clients who visit body rub centres are very aware there are other girls, and other clients, present so just knowing that others can hear what is going on inside the room may deter clients from pushing their boundaries. Further, if the girl wanted to kick them out, or stop the session short, there would always be someone there to back the girl up or call for help if they refused to leave.

Although it was rare for anyone to call the police or for help due to a lack of trust with the police, the fact they could or might do so was believed to be enough.

Further, the body rub practitioners always let the other girls or receptionists know how long their session is going to be. Although the body rub practitioners always keep track of the time themselves, the other girls/receptionist will keep track as well. If the session was over, and no one was leaving or you couldn't hear the shower being turned on (for the client to shower after the session) someone would knock on the door to make sure everything was alright. In most cases where the session was lasting a bit longer than expected, the client was often slow at showering or taking their time getting dressed.

During my interview with Kimberly, it became clear that just working with someone was not always sufficient in mitigating the potential safety risks associated with. For Kimberly, the way body rub centres are set up with cameras and the close proximity of other body rub practitioners was important. Kimberly explained to me as someone who has done both independent work as an escort and worked in body rub centres, that working with another person in a hotel did not provide the same feelings of safety for her.

Kimberly: You're in a locked hotel room, I'll usually switch keys [with her] and stuff too, but like still she's been busy and I'm in trouble, then what? Like that's that, steal some of my money like whatever, beats me up, or whatever. She's gonna find out when her session is done, and my guy is long gone by then.

In comparison, in a body rub centre the rooms are close together and the doors to each room are unlocked. If something were to happen, the other employees are in close proximity to where you are and can access the room without a key.

At the body rub centres where I conducted fieldwork, cameras are situated at the front entrance where people came in from outside, at the indoor locked entrance where clients removed their shoes and rang the doorbell, and throughout the common areas such as the staff room and hallway. My participants explained that having cameras ensured that if something were to happen, they would have evidence to give to the police. This also gave them the ability to give a photo to Body Rub Centre Task Force's social worker so that they could notify other body rub centres of a potential "bad date". My participants also believed that the cameras and the presence of others deterred clients from being violent or acting inappropriately with them.²⁴

The cameras were also an integral part of the day-to-day operations of the body rub centres and provided my participants with a bit of foresight into who was coming into the body rub centre. It was the first level of "screening" that the clients went through before being greeted by an employee of the body rub centre. During my fieldwork, my participants explained to me that there are many clients who will come to a body rub centre just to "look". There were also regular clients who would always try and persuade the body rub practitioners to take much less money for their services and would leave if the body rub practitioner did not agree to the low price. This was frustrating for them since these clients never ended up staying and felt like these men were wasting their time. In these cases, they would still have to get ready and go meet the client, and inevitably, they often left without having a session with one of the women working.

²⁴ While I am unsure if all of the clients knew about the cameras, my participants believed they were well aware of them. The cameras were also not hidden and are visible to anyone who looked around the space. The clients knew there were other girls and potentially other clients there because they often met the other girls or the receptionist.

While the cameras did not deter these types of clients from coming, they did help the sex worker mentally prepare for the fact that this particular client's visit probably meant they were not going to make money. I observed many instances where just based off the camera footage of a client coming inside the studio, the women who were working were able to guess who it was. Having this information helped deal with the frustration they anticipated from these clients in two ways. First, on slow days, they knew before even opening the door that they should not get excited since the visit would probably not result in anyone making any money. Second, they would save time and energy on meeting him because they were less likely to get fully "ready" and spent less time discussing prices and services with the client because they knew what the conversation was likely to entail.

Likelihood of Assault

Sex worker relationships with their clients are not always black and white. Like many other people who think about sex worker experiences, I began this project wondering if sex worker's experienced assault (both sexual and physical) and if they did, was it a common occurrence?

During my interviews with my participants, I often asked them about negative experiences they may have had with clients. To my surprise, being overtly assaulted by a client in a body rub centre was not common. Since all of my participants had prior experience working in the sex industry in other capacities, they discussed their experience with "bad dates" was often while they were working as an escort or on the street. While many aspects of what my participants told me constitutes a form of "safety talk", my participants discussions of "bad dates" with me and each other and how to prevent or mitigate situations with a "bad date" is

specific form of “safety talk” that is unique to sex workers (Stanko, 1997). When I probed if there were instances of assault within a body rub centre, they responded that being assaulted in a body rub centre was much less likely to happen and if it did happen, it was much less severe than escort experiences of assault. For them, they conceptualized the level of risk they face based on location and the strategies used to mitigate those risks were also location specific. For some, they believed the severity and likelihood of the assault was partly mitigated due to cameras and presence of others at a body rub centre (as the quotes in the above section outline). They attributed this to clients knowing that their identity would be caught on camera, that others would hear if the body rub practitioner yelled for help, and that if needed another sex worker or potentially another client in the studio would intervene.

My participants felt that being assaulted by a client was less likely and less severe by clients in body rub centres. Based on their own experiences and stories they heard from other women, this anecdotal evidence told them that experiences with clients while escorting were much worse than their experiences in body rub centres. Further, the type of sexual assault that most commonly occurs in body rub centres, non-consensual condom removal (NCCR), was seen as a situation each individual sex worker could potentially prevent or mitigate individually through vigilant “condom-checking”.

NCCR is when a sexual partner removes the condom before or during sex without the consent of the other partner (Czechowski et al., 2019). In a sex work context, my participants described that this type of assault often includes the client attempting to or successfully remove the condom without the sex worker knowing, or where a client would start/continue having sex with the sex worker knowing the condom was no longer on or had broken. Informally, this practice has been referred to as “stealth,” but I will refer to this practice as non-consensual

condom removal (NCCR).²⁵ NCCR has also garnered the attention of legal scholars such as Browdsy (2016) and Clough (2018) who have cited the legal ambiguity around NCCR as it relates to the criminal justice system and consent. As Czechowski et al., (2019) outlines, based on the case *R v Hutchinson* (2014) that went before the Supreme Court in Canada, “NCCR may be considered criminal only if it leads to significant risk of serious bodily harm related to STI transmission or pregnancy” (Czechowski et al., 2019, para 14). It was unclear to me throughout my interviews if my participants characterized NCCR as sexual assault. As Browdsy (2016) found, many of their participants did not see NCCR as necessarily “equivalent” to sexual assault and instead argues that NCCR is a form of gendered violence that is “rape-adjacent” (p.210).

During informal discussions during my fieldwork, it became clear to me that when my participants talk about “bad dates” in a body rub centre, it means something different than “bad dates” in other sex work settings. During conversations, a “bad date” in a body rub centre was often characterized by clients who asked for ‘odd’ fetishes that made the sex worker uncomfortable, a client who was high or drunk, a client who wanted bareback services, or clients that took too long to ejaculate. In these cases, they were more so describing “annoying clients”. For example, when I asked Trina what makes a “good date” versus a “bad date”, she responded:

Trina: Umm, they [good dates] pay without humming and hawing about what the price is. They don’t want to do the weird stuff... not weird [...] Umm, they’re not like super grabby, or trying to drool all over me (laughs) and they’re quick.

²⁵ Czechowski et al. (2019) argue that referring to this practice as non-consensual condom removal (NCCR) “is a more descriptive, accurate, and correct label for the phenomenon and that it has the same utility of giving people a vocabulary to describe and discuss NCCR experiences” in comparison to the term “stealththing” (p. 17). They also argue that the term “stealththing” leaves room for interpretation and that “stealththing” is a trendy term that may downplay the severity of an individual’s experience. Since my participants did not use the term “stealththing”, I use “non-consensual condom removal” or NCCR based off Czechowski et al.’s (2019) recommendation.

In addition to these annoyances, “bad dates” in body rub centres were also those who engaged in NCCR. In comparison, stories about “bad dates” in an escort setting were characterized by stories of rape, physical violence such as punching/slapping, and knowing someone who had been murdered. This distinction indicated to me that although their experience with annoying and “bad dates” in a body rub centre setting were certainly not positive and in some cases considered sexual assault, that overall my participants saw “bad dates” in a body rub centre as less dangerous in comparison to what clients can and have done to sex workers in an escort setting.

Lily’s story helps to explain the distinction between “bad dates” in a body rub centre in comparison to when she was escorting. As mentioned, Lily had been raped in her own home by a client she saw while escorting but she always made it clear to me that clients in body rub centres were much nicer. She told me many stories about working as an escort before working in a body rub centre and the types of clients she encountered. Throughout the time I spent with Lily, she would complain to me about clients who were cheap or would talk about a session being awkward with someone, but she never discussed any clients she saw in a body rub centre as being assaultive.

Similar to Lily, Amelia told me about situations where she had negative experiences with clients while escorting. Although she did not elaborate on the details, she did tell me that there were situations where she has had to call the police. In comparison, while spending time with Amelia at the body rub centre, I never witnessed or heard of a situation where a client assaulted her.

“Condom-checking”

Since NCCR was seen as the primary type of sexual assault that a sex worker could experience in a body rub centre, it was perceived by my participants as a situation that body rub practitioners could partially prevent through vigilant “condom-checking”. Similar to Sanders’ (2004) findings, ensuring condoms were used and always on the man’s genitalia was seen as a risk that each sex worker was individually responsible for. Therefore, using “condom-checking as a risk management strategy was talked about as an accepted part of the job. During many of our conversations, my participants would tell me about their various strategies for ensuring the condom was always on before and during sex.

Although my participants told me about other instances, I was only present once when a potential NCCR situation occurred. This event illustrated to me that not only did my participants just talk about how ensuring the condom was on was something they could control, but that if the condom did come off, they would blame themselves. This particular evening, I was sitting on the couch in the staff room watching TV when Tiffany ran in looking visibly upset. I knew something may have happened since she was completely naked and typically the girls were wearing a towel or a robe when they came back to the staff room after seeing a client. I asked her what happened and she explained that the condom had come off inside her and that she hadn’t noticed right away. She was extremely worried that because she did not notice right away, that they had unprotected sex for a short period of time and that the client had possibly ejaculated inside of her. She ran to the bathroom to clean herself the best she could and was crying at this point. In this case, it did not matter if it was accidental or if the client had continued having sex with her while knowing the condom was no longer on, the damage had been done and she would have been exposed to potential STIs. In this case, it is unclear whether the condom removal was

intentional as Tiffany never indicated to me whether she believed the client did it on purpose or whether it was an accident. What became clear though, is that Tiffany felt she was partially responsible since she believed she could have been checking that the condom was on more frequently.

In other situations, my participants told me stories about other working girls who had experience with the condom coming off or breaking, and often talked about how the body rub practitioner was potentially not experienced enough or it was a result of them not paying attention. While what happened with Tiffany outlined for me the personal responsibility body rub practitioners feel, the informal conversations my participants had with one another reinforced that overall vigilant “condom-checking” was each woman’s own personal responsibility. Therefore, “condom-checking” and is a gendered strategy women use and share with other women in the form of “safety talk” (Stanko, 1997). As Stanko (1997) argues though, women not only have to combat the risks of male violence but the risk of judgement and blame from others if they are able to effectively prevent and combat violence they end up experiencing. These conversations outlined to me that “condom-checking” was something each person could individually control or manage which contributed to their belief that being sexually assaulted in a body rub centre (which was almost always talked about as NCCR) was less likely as you could avoid it or stop the session if you were vigilant enough with “condom-checking”.

Overall, my participants were well aware of the risks associated with sex work, especially when it came to the possibility of being sexually assaulted. Some of my participants did tell me about “bad dates” while both escorting and in body rub centres, but what varied was their perception of the severity and frequency of sexual assault in a body rub centre in comparison to their experience escorting. The risk of experiencing NCCR is a risk that all individuals face who

have penetrative intercourse with men, and NCCR is not a phenomenon that only exists in sex work but is a type of assault that has recently garnered the attention of academics and the general public. For example, based on interviews with 344 undergraduate who had engaged in penetrative intercourse with men, Czechowski et al. (2019) found that 18.7 % of their participants had experienced NCCR. Another study conducted by Latimer et al. (2018) found that 32% of the women in their sample had also experienced NCCR.

Overall, women are at risk of sexual assault whether they are engaged in sex work or not. While being a sex worker may increase a woman's risk of being sexually assaulted, my participants believed that they were equipped to mitigate and prevent NCCR situations through strategies such as "condom-checking" and that sexual assault in general less likely to occur in body rub centres due to the cameras and presence of others.

Chapter Conclusion

While this chapter is a discussion regarding perceptions of sex work locations, this chapter also points to how sex workers are often left to their own devices regarding their safety. While the City of Edmonton does require the use of cameras and presence of others, sex workers must still find ways to continuously protect themselves against assault from clients. While my participants outline that simply working in a body rub centre helps limit the likelihood of being assaulted, they still need to employ individual strategies such as "condom-checking". While condom-checking is a personal risk management strategy, the next chapter will discuss how the social structure of body rub centres enables indoor sex workers to collectively mitigate additional safety and psychological risks sex work poses. Therefore, location on its own does not

sufficiently mitigate risks for indoor sex workers but rather, the social structure within a location contributes to sex workers' feelings of safety in body rub centres as well.

Chapter 4: Social Organization and Risk Mitigation Strategies

As described in Chapter 3, many of my participants explained that they felt safer while working in body rub centres than outdoors or escorting. They cited reasons such as the presence of cameras, the presence of others, and the perception of decreased likelihood and severity of sexual assault. In addition to these factors, I began noticing additional ways body rub centres mitigate some of the emotional and physical risks sex workers face.

These observations led me to ask my second research question: how do body rub centres mitigate some of the physical and psychological risks associated with sex work? My findings reveal that the social organization of body rub centres help mitigate risks associated with sex work in three ways. First, through friendship and mentorship, which helps with the emotional risks of sex work such as loneliness and stigma. Second, the social routine of meeting a client enables body rub practitioners to screen clients prior to having a session with them. Third, the organizational structure of body rub centres removes the “need” for pimps which can prevent the psychological and physical victimization that sex workers with pimps often face.

Friendship and Mentorship

When I had discussions with my participants about the differences between escorting and working in a body rub centre, one of the most common responses was the fact that escorting can be extremely lonely and isolating. Body rub centres help mitigate a variety of psychological and emotional risks through the friendship and mentorship that developed among body rub practitioners.

As Sanders (2004) outlines, the risks sex workers are most concerned with are the psychological and emotional risks involved with sex work. Sex work is not the only profession

that carries emotional risks for women. While the emotional risks sex workers face may be *different* than women in other professions, studies have highlighted emotional risks may be felt similarly between women in sex work and other professions. For example, Vanwesenbeeck (2005) found that in their study, in comparison to female health care workers, indoor sex workers exhibited similar levels of work-related emotional exhaustion and work-related personal competence to female health care workers such as nurses (p.635). Therefore, this discussion on emotional risks sex workers face is intended to highlight how indoor sex workers experience emotional risks, rather than argue the emotional risks they face are more severe than women in other professions.

In Edmonton, many women who escort travel to various cities throughout the province or country (sometimes internationally as well) to work. While travelling, my participants explained to me that one of the emotional risks to escorting was loneliness and burnout. As Mackenzie told me, even if you're travelling and working with another person, those emotional risks are still present.

Mackenzie: Escorting like... you can get, you can burn yourself out real quick... because like you can be really busy, you know? Like you can be as busy as you want for as long as you want, so you can burn yourself out real quick and you can make like a lot of money but it can be like super lonely, cause you're just by yourself. Or even if you're with somebody else, like you're not in the same hotel room and like who says you're not busy at the same time... like you don't see each other very often right? So, it's like kind of isolating. So like pros [to escorting], you make a lot of money but you're by yourself a lot like... and yeah you just fucking burn out.

Although Jenna predominately worked as an escort, she also described to me the loneliness that she has felt while escorting:

Jenna: I don't know you just get really lonely too being in a hotel, you start going crazy, cause the only contact you get is just with clients and up north, everybody's like...on coke... all the clients at least like... it's just... I'll never see a sober person.

In comparison, body rub centres are only allowed to be open from 7 am until 11 pm (City of Edmonton, Bylaw 13138:34-g). These hour restrictions help to prevent burnout, as they restrict women from working around the clock. Further, in most studios, “doubles” are rarely worked, meaning the typical shift would represent a traditional workday of 7-8 hours. This was different than what my participants described about escorting. In order to make money escorting, Jenna explained to me that it was best to always be available and to work late into the night. While Mackenzie explained to me that you don't have to be available 24/7 as an escort, it is hard not to because the money makes it tempting to do so.

Body rub centres are also unique because those who are on shift are spending an ample amount of time together throughout their shift. Both the day and evening shifts are approximately seven hours long and the number of clients a body rub practitioner will have sessions with will fluctuate based on the day. Even on a busy day, my participants were not with clients for the full seven hours of their shift.²⁶ Because of this, there ends up being a lot of free time that body rub practitioners spend with one another. This time is spent hanging out in the

²⁶ Appointments with clients were typically 30 minutes or an hour in length.

staff room, watching tv, going for a smoke in someone's car or walking to the store to grab food. As Jade explained to me, sometimes it can be smart to avoid friendships at work due to the drama that can unfold as a result, but she also added that it is nearly impossible not to get "close" to the people you work with due to the structure of your workday. While my findings support what Jade told me, I argue that the benefits of co-worker relationships within body rub centres outweigh potential negative implications.

While friendship was not a primary focus of this research, the benefits of co-worker relationships among body rub practitioners became a clear form of risk mitigation and therefore is included. The definition of friendship for each person can be highly variable, which makes using this term difficult to use in research (Caroline, 1993). Friendship is also conceptualized differently depending on the context (Caroline, 1993). For the purposes of my research, "friendship" entails a mutually supportive relationship that is rooted in mutual lived experiences. For almost all of my participants, the basis of their friendships with one another is rooted in their shared experience as a sex worker. These friendships existed on a continuum. For some of my participants, they spent time together outside of work and were enveloped in each other's personal lives. On the other end of the continuum, they were strictly friends at work and their friendship was based on passing the time during their shift. However, not all my participants were friends with all of their coworkers, but friendship and mentorship were more common than dislike or conflict within the body rub centres I was located at.

Beyond mitigating the loneliness and isolation that can come from sex work in other settings, such as escorting in hotels, co-worker relationships also provided my participants with people they could talk to openly about their experiences as a sex worker. This helped them manage their internalized stigma and the stigma sex workers face from family, friends and

society. All of my participants belonged to one of three groups. The first group did not disclose to their family or friends that they were working in a body rub centre and kept their identity as a sex worker a secret. Or second, if family or friends did know about their work, they either were not able to empathize with or fully understand my participants' experiences. Third, their family or friends, and sometimes boyfriends and partners, knew about them working in the sex industry but it was not discussed beyond that. As Kimberly outlined to me, for her, the stigma associated with sex work prevents her from disclosing her occupation to her family.

Kimberly: I think that girls that do it for reasons for just financially getting ahead, they like keeping it private. Just 'cause there is a lot of stigma across it. I think if I told my family, uhm, my siblings wouldn't talk to me. And my mom, her and I are pretty close, so I think she would be accepting. But she would not like it. Uhm, I would feel judgment from her, which would be terrible. And then my dad would probably just murder me, in my sleep.

Trina expressed similar discomfort during our discussion on stigma and she explained to me that managing sex work as a secret was one of the difficult parts of being a sex worker:

Interviewer: How does the stigma of sex work affect you, in terms of your life?

Trina: Yeah, so it's like you've always got this secret and skeleton in the closet that you're always like [fumbles on words]...

She then explains to me how she would scramble to answer boyfriends or family when they would bring up work with her. Trina further told me that she does not wish to be more open with people, because she does not want to deal with the judgement and opinions from other people.

Their relationships with one another filled the gap that their family and friends were not able to. They could relate to one another and share stories about work openly. My participants often expressed to me the need to “vent” about clients and that they could only do so with their co-workers. In cases where something negative happened with a client, there was also fear that if they shared this story with their family or friends, they would just push them to leave the industry rather than just listen.

Another positive outcome from the social structure of body rub centres is mentorship. During the duration of my fieldwork, there were many new body rub practitioners who started working at my fieldsites. Usually they had experience working as an escort or in another body rub centre, but there were also girls who were brand new to the sex industry. Although this was not a topic I focused on during my formal interviews, it was something that became apparent to me while conducting fieldwork.

During my first month at the body rub centre, my participants walked me through a “mock session” to show me the routine of what session can look like. I learned after this experience that this is a strategy used to help orientate employees who are brand new to working in a body rub centre setting. By doing a mock session, the new employee learns important tips such as what to say to the client when you first meet them, the price range other girls charge for different services, that you receive payment from the client prior to the session, and more.

At one of my fieldsites, a woman completely new to the sex industry started. It was interesting to watch how my participants mentored this person. During the new employee’s first

couple of shifts the manager and other employees would perform a “mock session” with them. They also described ways in which clients may attempt to push boundaries, and provided strategies for handling those situations. My participants described that clients could “sniff out” new girls and push for services and lower prices they would not ask for from an experienced sex worker. For example, if a client said he already showered before they got there, the current employees would explain to the new employee how to navigate that conversation in a non-confrontational way to make sure he showered at the body rub centre before the session. Another example was tips on how to push back against clients who asked for condom-less services and strategies to use during the session to ensure the condom was worn properly.

A prominent way my participants helped out the new employees was by ensuring they were aware of the types of services clients would ask for and the acronyms they may use to reference those services. This form of mentorship is an example of Aker’s (1973) social learning theory since sex workers often learn “how” to conduct themselves as sex workers from other sex workers.²⁷ Besides doing “mock sessions”, one of the ways they do this is through sharing knowledge with one another.

This was important as most of the terms used by clients and sex workers did not clearly articulate what the client was referring to. Only through gaining knowledge from other sex workers would someone new to the industry be able to understand what a client was asking for. As someone who was unfamiliar with the sex industry prior to beginning this project, I could empathize with the new employees regarding all of the new terminology. For new sex workers, not being aware of these terms or other practices put them in a vulnerable situation with clients.

²⁷ Aker’s (1973) social learning theory has been used by sociologists to describe changes in behavior and attitudes among various subcultures including groups such as the police (Chappell & Piquero, 2003), stalking perpetrators (Fox et al., 2011), intimate partner violence (Powers, et al., 2020). When discussing deviant behavior, Sutherland’s theory of differential association is also used to describe this phenomenon.

One example that outlines this is the acronym, “GFE” which stands for the term “girlfriend experience.” This term includes a wide range of services, and in many cases my participants define the requirements of the term for themselves. Based on conversations with my participants, “GFE” often refers to services that involve the exchanging of bodily fluids (usually saliva) between the sex worker and the client. This can include kissing, open-mouth kissing, allowing the client to perform cunnilingus on them and more. Since this was one of the most common services clients would ask for, it was important for new employees to understand that they could offer “GFE” but chose what acts fell under this term for themselves. Many of my participants explained that they would offer “GFE” but that only included kissing the client. This example highlights the importance of mentorship for women new to the sex industry. Without the knowledge of specific terms and practices, the new employees may be vulnerable to exploitation. My participants described that it was best if the client was unaware of the inexperience of new employees so the sex worker could remain in control of the session.

Mentorship among my participants was not limited to discussions about how to manage clients, but extended to advice in areas outside of the realm of sex work. For example, Mackenzie also has a successful nail business at the body rub centre and helped train and mentor one of her coworkers who was interested in that industry. My participants would also help each other with their resumes and job applications for careers outside of the sex industry. In many cases, they would seek each other’s advice on relationships and dating, family matters, and more. They would ask each other advice on how to emotionally manage keeping their sex work a secret from their family. Or how to date as a sex worker – for example, when did you tell them what you did for work? They also spoke to each other about finances, and how to combat debt. Mentorship regarding life outside of the spa was often facilitated by the vast range of age and

experience among the women. Those that were younger and had less life experience would usually seek advice and support from my participants that were older and had more life experience. For some of my participants, they did not have female role models in their personal life they could turn to for advice. Therefore, being able to seek advice from someone they trusted, who had both general life experience and experience in the industry, was invaluable.

Overall, friendship and mentorship among sex workers in body rub centres can have various positive outcomes. Co-worker relationships that develop within body rub centres help mitigate some of the emotional risks associated with sex work including loneliness and isolation. Mentorship that occurs within body rub centres ensures that women new to the sex industry are aware of industry practices that improve safety and allow the women to control their environments. The extension of this mentorship to general life advice allowed for the sharing of strategies to deal with the emotional risks that exist for sex workers outside of the body rub centre – including the stigma sex workers face, dating as a sex worker, paying off debt, and more.

Meeting and Screening the Client

Beyond the interpersonal characteristics of body rub centres, risk is also mitigated through the social organization of body rub centres. For example, body rub centres are workplaces with routines and rules (both informal and formal), and these characteristics are instrumental in the overall well-being and safety of everyone involved. Each body rub centre had a system so that when a client entered the business, there was a loud doorbell that notified the staff of their presence. While the main entrance from the outside was not locked, there was a second locked door inside where the client would be required to ring the doorbell after removing

their shoes. Cameras allowed the women see who was entering from the outside, and who had rung the doorbell to be let in.

Once the client rang the doorbell, they were either greeted by the receptionist, or one of the body rub practitioners. This person would take the client to either a meeting room, or one of the bedrooms. Regardless, this is where the client would meet all of the attendants available. Most of the time there was more than one girl available to meet the client. My participants described that this initial meeting was used to “feel out” the client. While I was never present during these initial conversations, my participants described to me that they would go in the room, say “hi” and say their name, maybe shake the client’s hand and then leave. While these initial greetings were short, my participants did describe the benefit of such interactions. For example, you could sense right away the “vibe” of the client. Did they seem creepy? Did they make eye contact? Were they intoxicated? Were they attractive? In those first few seconds, the body rub practitioners could gain a brief sense of what that client may be like and assess the client’s demeanor.

One fairly slow evening, we were all sitting in the staff room and a client arrived. One by one, the girls went to say hi and introduce themselves. Maddie went first, and she came back and immediately said, ‘Ugh he gives me serial killer vibes’.²⁸ Shortly after, Jade came back and said something similar. In this case, the client did not have a session with anyone, after he met everyone he decided to leave. Although it is unclear whether or not one of the attendants would have stayed with him had he decided to pick someone, this situation clearly outlines the importance of these initial meetings. Maddie would likely have decided not to stay with him, just based off of this initial meeting. Many of my participants would not tell the client outright that

²⁸ Not a direct audio-recorded quote. From my fieldnotes.

they were not interested in staying with them. Instead, they would use other tactics to turn away unsavory clients. This would include refusing to negotiate on prices or telling the client that they had another appointment soon and were unavailable. During my interview with Leah, she explained this strategy clearly:

Interviewer: Do you feel supported in not staying with someone if you don't want to?

Leah: Yeah. Yeah, you don't have to. If I don't feel like, there's some days where I come into work and I'll see like a couple clients and then I just don't wanna stay with any more [clients], so I just won't meet them, yeah

Interviewer: Yeah, but you'll still stay for your shift kind of thing?

Leah: Yeah, sometimes yeah 'cause I have to because there has to be a certain number of girls here. But like sometimes if I meet with someone and I'm not getting a good vibe from them, I'll tell them that I have an appointment with someone and I'm not available.

This initial meeting also allowed body rub practitioners to see if it was someone they had stayed with before, and if they had, it jogged their memory on what type of client they were. This knowledge allowed them to be more prepared for how to approach the session. In cases where one of the practitioners was familiar with the client, they could give the other women a heads up on what the client was like. This information included comments on their cleanliness, whether or not they were cheap, what kind of services they might be looking for or want, and importantly, whether the client would push boundaries or engage in NCCR.

The sharing of this information allowed the other women to make an informed decision on staying with the client and prepare them for dealing with the client if they did choose to stay with them. Kimberly described this to me in an interview:

Interviewer: Do they usually tell you, like if you were to see a client that tried something with them, would that girl usually tell you beforehand?

Kimberly: Yes! Yeah, we're all very communicative (laughs).

Interviewer: Oh okay.

Kimberly: The staff room is where there's like story sharing or a guy will come in and you'll see him on the camera and be like, oh yeah that guy really likes this, or he doesn't like that, or he tried this. And then it gives you a bit of an edge, like when you go into the room to be like, what to look for.

Interviewer: Right.

Kimberly: So, if a guy has tried something inappropriate with her, the condom off, or something like that. Then you become extra like, vigilant, and you're watching for those things.

Similar to Kimberly, Tiffany also described to me that when going to "meet", she assesses what type of client the individual might be to help her prepare for her session. For example, when discussing prices and services, she may ask certain questions to some clients and not others. In some cases, she explained she will not see a client based off her impression after meeting them. In other cases, she explained that based on her initial impression of the client, she will sometimes still agree to a session with them but will be extra vigilant.

Tiffany: Umm...it's usually just meeting someone I'd say, it's that gut feeling. You'll just like, you get a little thing like 'ooohhh this guy seems weird' and I'll say he looks like the kind of guy that would try something, right? [...]

Interviewer: So when you do get those bad vibes...?

Tiffany: I'll stay with them, but I'm a lot more cautious and like I said, I'm a bitch with clients and I always tell them if you're good to me I'll be good to you.

Like Tiffany, Kelsey also explained she uses her "gut" instinct to decide whether or not to stay with a client. When I asked Kelsey if she ever turns clients away simply based her initial impression of the client, she responded, "Oh, tons!" She then explained to me how she makes this decision.

Kelsey: If within talking to somebody, within that minute or 2 minutes, you can usually tell if they're in the right mindset, like you can usually tell by looking at somebody like, if you're a good judge of character, what they're all about. You observe their skin, kind of look at them, smell them like see what their like, you know... judge.

Thus, the routine of "meeting" a client was an essential step in screening the client and deciding if you felt comfortable having a session with them. Based on stories from my participants, "meeting" your clients before having a session with them was absent in escorting. When escorting, initial communication with the client took place online or over text message. Agreements on services, prices and meeting locations were also often arranged this way. While

these virtual conversations allowed for some small forms of initial screening, it was not as effective as a face to face interaction. Over the internet, it is much more difficult to gain a sense of the person you're talking to. Screening clients online also does not allow for the sharing of information about clients among co-workers as efficiently.

As Kimberly explained in regards to meeting a client in a body rub centre, body rub practitioners often discuss clients with one another so that even if the client is going to have a session with a new body rub practitioner, that practitioner may have the information they need to manage that session, or decide not to stay with that client based on the information given to them from their coworkers. In comparison, sex workers in other settings are often not able to meet their client before booking an appointment with them. For example, the routine of physical "meeting" a client prior to agreeing to an appointment does not take place in an escort setting, escorts do not have the same immediate source of information on a client from their co-workers as body practitioners do.

Absence of Pimps

Finally, the social organization of body rub centres also helps prevent sex workers from being "pimped." The term "pimp" is controversial and is highly dependent on the context it is being used in. Many hear the word "pimp" and immediately think of an elusive person who forces or coerces women into the sex trade by getting them addicted to drugs, using physical violence, and more. While this is often the case, what is missing from this narrative is that there are some women in the sex industry who choose to work with a "pimp"/"partner" to help with their bookings, driving them to appointments, and providing security for them against potentially abusive clients. These partners are often considered typical pimps by law enforcement but the

relationships partners and sex workers can look slightly different than typical pimping relationships.

In conversations with my participants regarding “pimps,” they acknowledged these common misconceptions with the term “pimp.” They explained that in some cases, women will seek out a male partner to work with and, in some cases, having this partner made working in the sex industry overall safer for the woman who hired them. The differences between “partners” and “pimps” has been outlined by scholars who have argued they can differ in both their behaviors and tactics and how the sex workers they manage view the relationships. After conducting interviews with street-level sex workers and the men involved in managing their work, May et al. (2000) found that sex workers who had a “pimp” described experiencing physical violence at a higher rate than those who worked with a “partner”. “Pimps” were also more likely to be sexually abusive and use drugs as a coercive measure. While the relationships sex workers and “partners” were not free of violence, the authors found that those with “partners” viewed their relationship in a much more positive light than those who had “pimps”.

While none of my participants described ever having a beneficial or positive relationship with a pimp or a partner themselves, they did indicate that some women will enter into pimping relationships freely under the assumption this individual will help with their safety. This perception was examined by Norton-Hawk (2004) who interviewed 50 incarcerated sex workers – 40% of their sample had pimps and the other 60% did not. They found that contrary to popular belief, the sex workers with pimps actually experienced more violence from customers than those who did not have pimps. While there may be women who are in mutually beneficial relationships with a male partner or pimp that are not abusive, the literature points to the fact the

vast majority of these relationships result in abuse (see Raphael et al., 2010; Williamson & Cluse-Tolar, 2002; Faugier & Sargeant, 1997; Maher, 1997).

What became clear throughout my fieldwork and interviews is that body rub centres removed the “need” to work with a pimp or a partner and therefore limits sex workers’ exposure to potentially abusive pimping/partnership relationships. Instead of a pimp, the receptionist or other girls who work together to book appointments. There was also no need for a pimp to act as security as the main features of a body rub centre, such as cameras and the presence of other people, filled that gap. The City of Edmonton also had set rules and regulations for managers and owners to ensure they did not start using tactics such as coercion or force and provided education on this regulatory scheme to women at the information sessions they are required to attend before receiving their practitioner’s licence. These rules and regulations were both formally policed by the Body Rub Centre Task Force, as well as informally policed by the woman working in body rub centres.

When I asked Leah, who had experience with a pimp in the past, about if there were pimps in body rub centres, she responded:

Leah: No... no... not uhhh... not here. Like, I’m sure on the streets maybe, but girls on the streets don’t do massages, you know what I mean? But, in the spa setting... absolutely not, no... there’s the owner umm... and like they just kind of have to be like... these are the spa rules, these are the regulations you always have to have a certain amount of girls on, and you have to always have your license on you, other than that like... the owners are not allowed to tell you what to charge, they’re not allowed to tell you what to do.

Leah also noted that owners and managers of body rub centres are not pimps because they do not have influence over what services you offer or what you charge. There are price ranges that some owners like the women to stay within in order to make sure girls are not undercharging, but the women are still able to choose what to charge.

Although a couple of my participants explained to me that they had a pimp in the past when escorting or working outdoors, I did not encounter anyone who currently had a pimp during this study. Four of my participants had experiences with a pimp and explained that their experience having a pimp was often negative and involved some sort of abuse. For example, Isla was pimped by men who disguised himself as a suitor and eventually her “boyfriend”. She met a man through online dating, they started hanging out and eventually he presented the idea of making easy money by her seeing clients. It is important to note that Isla was very clear that although he presented the idea, she was free in her choice to become involved in sex work. She reported it was something she was curious about before the proposition. At the time, Isla agreed because she did not have a job and was quite “naïve.” She explained that prior to meeting this man, she did not know how sex work worked. While there were many negative aspects to having a pimp for Isla, including the emotional and physical abuse he subjected her to, she also explained that the presence of a pimp allowed her to be initially successful as a sex worker. She did not drive, so he provided transportation for her to appointments. He also had experience in the industry with other girls, so he was able to “show her the ropes.”

Isla’s experience with a pimp reveals the importance of body rub centres for two reasons. As someone who was new to the sex industry, having a pimp was seen as an important resource as she did not drive and lacked experience. Second, only through starting to work at a body rub centre did Isla realize that she was being pimped and that she could leave the situation she was

in. Isla eventually stopped escorting and started working in body rub centres. Even though her boyfriend was no longer booking appointments or driving her to appointments, Isla was still having to give him a large cut of her earnings. The relationship between Isla and her pimp/"boyfriend" became increasingly toxic and she started to share some of this with her coworkers. Through the friendship and mentorship her coworkers provided her, she was able to realize that her situation was toxic and allowed her to question why she was still giving her boyfriend a large cut of her income.

The beginning of this chapter outlines the importance of friendship, mentorship, and the social organization of body rub centres. These factors all played a part in helping Isla leave her pimp and gain her independence. Not only do body rub centres prevent girls from being pimped, but they also can serve as a mechanism that aids women to leave a pimping situation. In addition, the presence of a receptionist or support from coworkers to answer the phone and book appointments removes the "need" for a pimp. Due to the fixed location of the body rub centres, there is also no need for pimps/partners to provide transportation to each client. Finally, as has been discussed, the security provided by cameras and the presence of others also means a pimp is not needed to provide a sense of safety and security. These three "needs" or roles pimps fill can all be alleviated by body centres, and reduce the potential abuse and manipulation a pimping/partner situation may entail.

Ensuring that managers were not using coercive pimp-like tactics was also informally policed by women in the industry. Body rub practitioners often work at multiple studios and have friends and acquaintances also working in the industry, so any controlling or abusive behaviour by managers would quickly tarnish their reputation within the community. Based on my observations, I argue that this deterred managers from treating their staff negatively. From my

experience, this deterrence was a result of the difficulty that all managers had in retaining staff, as body rub practitioners often moved studios or traveled for work. Therefore, any gossip or negative reputations about their business would be detrimental to their ability to recruit and retain an adequate number of employees.

Further, it was well known by body practitioners that negative practices by managers could be reported directly to the Body Rub Centre Task Force. Reporting to the task force acted as an informal social control mechanism against abusive managers. It is not uncommon for groups, especially those considered to be deviant, to informally police one another and promote rule following among their peers. For example, Pattillo's (1998) findings revealed that a local gang she studied informally controlled the neighbourhood they resided in to reduce visible criminal behavior such as vandalism and street-corner drug dealing. Similarly, Bucerius (2014) findings outline how the drug dealers in her sample employed informal social control in their neighborhood by trying to deter their younger relatives from becoming drug dealers.

Since the social worker from the task force visited the centres frequently, many of my participants explained to me that they trust her and feel comfortable reporting any concerns they have to her. For example, Kimberly explained to me that she had previously reported a manager to the Body Rub Centre Task Force because of the way the manager was treating some of the staff. She explained she felt comfortable to do so because she trusted the social worker, believed they would keep her identity anonymous, and trusted they would take action to investigate her concerns. My participants were most concerned with working with unlicensed women, women they perceived were being coerced to work, and those that used drugs or alcohol excessively at work. They believed that the presence of these issues took away from the legitimacy of working in a body rub centre and presented a negative image of their workplace which could lead to

clients thinking they could “get away” with certain things. Some of my participants explained to me that their perception is that if they presented a “trashy” image to their clients, the clients their studio would attract would be less respectful. Besides Kimberly, it was not uncommon to hear from my participants that they had called the Body Rub Centre Task if they had concerns or questions involving body rub centre matters. This use of informal social control revealed to me that my participants valued working in a licensed and regulated environment, and in general, anything that threatened the legitimacy of their work environment was not welcome. Their comfortability reporting any misconduct also further reiterated to me the importance of the harm reduction approach the Body Rub Centre Task Force social worker employs as the body rub practitioners felt comfortable reporting situations of misconduct or abuse happening in their workplace.

This perspective has been echoed in the media by body rub practitioners. In articles with CBC and the Edmonton Journal, body rub practitioners have stated that the Body Rub Centre Task Force is a great way to ensure women are working in the sex industry safely (Labine, 2019; Omstead, 2020). In a CBC article regarding body rub centres in Edmonton, a body rub practitioner explained this to the reporter:

It's not perfect [...] There are still some owners who exploit their power. But oversight has made them an exception to the rule, while at the same time empowering workers to report issues to authorities without repercussion (Omstead, 2020).

While no form of social control, informal or not, is 100% perfect, the majority of the women working in body rub centres want to work in a safe, licensed establishment that follows the bylaws the City of Edmonton has enacted. Therefore, they are as invested in ensuring women are not being forced or coerced to work in the industry as anyone.

Chapter Conclusion

In conclusion, the social structure of body rub centres mitigates risks for indoor sex workers in three important ways. First, through friendship and mentorship, my participants were able to both mitigate and provide support for the emotional risks associated with sex work such as loneliness and stigma. Being able to physically “meet” a client allowed my participants to mitigate safety risks by screening their clients before deciding to have a session with them. This screening also allowed for my participants to share information regarding potential clients, and make safe, informed decisions about accepting or refusing to stay with a client. In addition, body rub centres remove the various “needs” that pimps can fulfill. Body rub centres provide safety, remove the need for transportation, and allow the girls to manage their own appointments with the assistance of receptionist. Finally, the Body Rub Centre Task Force and social structure of the body rub practitioner community help to ensure that the potential physical and emotional harm caused by pimps cannot be perpetrated by managers of the body rub centres.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis has explored indoor sex workers' perceptions of safety within body rub centres in comparison to other sex work settings. Their perceptions of increased safety in body rub centres are based upon their personal experience working in other settings and the stories they hear and share with one another. In addition, I have highlighted in which ways body rub centres act as sites of risk mitigation against many of the risks sex workers are subjected to.

Chapter 3 explored that body rub practitioners feel the safest in body rub centres due to the presence of cameras and other people in body rub centres as these mechanisms can deter clients from acting inappropriately. They argue that because of these features, the likelihood of a client assaulting them in a body rub centre is reduced and if they were to be assaulted, it is much less severe. In Chapter 4, I outlined how the unique elements of body rub centres act to mitigate some of the emotional and safety risks sex workers often face. I discussed strategies such as friendship and mentorship, and the importance of “meeting” and screening a client. Further, body rub centres replace the “need” for a pimp, and eliminate physical, emotional and financial exploitation that negative pimping relationships can entail. Throughout this thesis, I mentioned the City of Edmonton's Body Rub Centre Task Force and their role in ensuring body rub centres are safe places for women to work. To close, I will outline areas for future research on indoor sex work and highlight the benefits and successes of the City of Edmonton's current harm reduction approach. I also argue that Edmonton's model should be considered by other municipalities looking at effective regulation practices for indoor sex work venues.

Future Areas of Research

While this thesis includes findings based on seven months of extensive ethnographic data, it is not without limitations. Unfortunately, I was unable to interview non-English speaking sex workers due to my own language skills. Thus, it would be beneficial to include their perspectives in future projects involving body rub centres in Edmonton. This would also ensure that non-English speaking immigrant and refugee voices are included.

This project was also limited in its ability to gather and include perspectives from trans, non-binary, and cis-male sex workers. Throughout my project, my participants explained that in some body rub centres, trans-women and cis-men work occasionally. They also explained that it is more common for them to work outside of body rub centres and conduct sex work as an escort instead. Future research on body rub centres and sex work in all settings should prioritize and seek out non-binary, transwomen, and male participants to ensure that their voices are included in sex work policy discussions.

In addition, I was also not able to visit or interview women from all 32 of the body rub centres in Edmonton, although my participants talked to me about their experiences working in many of the other studios. Future research should focus on expanding the number of body rub centres included in research on the topic. While ethnographic research makes this difficult to do, incorporating surveys or other methods of data collection could help gather a larger cross section of perspectives within body rub centres.

This research also only focuses on the experiences of indoor sex workers in one Canadian city, therefore future research is needed to determine whether these findings hold true for other Canadian cities. It would be beneficial to also examine how the experiences of indoor sex

workers working in body rub centres may vary in cities with varying licensing and regulation practices.

Benefits of Harm-Reduction Approaches to Licensing Body Rub Centres

Although my findings and other studies have shown that there are still risks associated with working in a body rub centre (Sanders, 2004; Bungay et al., 2012; Anderson et al., 2015), my findings reveal that if managed and regulated properly, body rub centres can be a space that mitigates many of the risks associated with sex work. While I cannot argue that body rub centres are exempt from sex trafficking and sexual exploitation, I did not encounter or hear stories of any exploitation or trafficking happening in body rub centres during my project. My sample includes women who spoke of actively choosing to engage in sex work. They are working to provide for their families, supplement their insufficient government income, saving to go to post-secondary school, and more. Further, my findings reveal that working in body rub centre rather than in other sex work settings provides an ability to mitigate some of the risks present in sex work.

As many of my participants told me, the demand for purchasing sexual services will never go away. As long as there are (primarily) men willing to buy sex, there will always be someone who will offer it. Therefore, if the City closes body rub centres, this would not result in a decrease of women selling sex but would instead result in sex workers being displaced from licensed indoor settings and forced to work in escorting and outdoor settings which they describe to be more dangerous. As Professor Jairan Gahan from the University of Alberta put succinctly in an interview with CBC (Zabjeck, 2019):

When you criminalize or try to abolish sex work, what happens is that sex workers are going to go to another city. This is their means of survival. They're just going to move around and their clients are going to move around with them.

Additionally, my participants highlighted that if body rub centres were to close it would not push them to leave the industry, they would just continue to do sex work elsewhere. Therefore, rather than debating the morality of sex work, municipal governments (including the City of Edmonton) should be invested in harm reduction rather than elimination.

To highlight the benefits of a harm reduction approach to licensing body rub centres, I will outline some of the positive strategies used by Edmonton's Body Rub Centre Task Force. Despite Edmonton's model and its many successes, I will also provide recommendations for the City of Edmonton to build upon the success of the Body Rub Centre Task Force and continue to improve their approach to body rub centres.

Benefits of Edmonton's Model

Sanders (2007), a leading scholar on indoor sex work, has made the argument that while indoor sex work is the safest option for sex workers, unregulated body rub centre or adult massage parlour settings can be dangerous if they are unregulated. She states that without regulation, there will be a "lack of accountability" and that "those who manage parlours have no incentive to run a safe and respectful working environment that values its workers" (Sanders, 2007, p. 792). Fortunately, as my thesis has outlined, Edmonton has successfully regulated body rub centres in a way that scholars such as Sanders (2007) have hoped for – a system that enforces accountability among body rub centre owners, managers, and practitioners.

The benefits of Edmonton's model stem from its use of the harm reduction approach. Harm reduction is characterized by a focus on reducing the risks associated with certain behaviours rather than attempting to criminalize or restrict the behaviour itself. The general public is most familiar with this approach in the context of drug use, with users being provided clean needles and safe spaces rather than stigmatization and punishment. In the case of sex work, harm reduction is characterized in a variety of ways. This includes ensuring sex workers have access to safe-sex supplies like condoms, safe spaces, STI testing and treatment and free or low-cost counselling.

Using Edmonton as my case study, my findings advocate and support the use of a harm-reduction licensing model. Based on my observations, Edmonton's Body Rub Centre Task Force facilitates harm reduction by ensuring all practitioners are properly licensed. By taking this step, the Task Force ensures that each practitioner attends an information session that outlines the potential risks associated with working in a body rub centre. During this information session, the facilitators also outline body rub practitioners' rights as contracted employees and ensure that the women know where they can report instances of maltreatment.

In addition, the bylaw officers and social worker visit the 32 body rub centres across Edmonton to build rapport with the practitioners,²⁹ provide safe-sex supplies, and would sometimes organize STI testing.³⁰ While bylaw officers have the ability to issue fines to body rub practitioners, based on my observations and discussions with my participants, Edmonton bylaw officers use their role as a way to educate the women on the rules and regulations rather than focus on enforcement. For example, if a body rub practitioner's license expired the individual

²⁹ I am unable to comment on the frequency of these visits as I was only present once when bylaw visited.

³⁰ My participants explained to me in the past, an STI nurse would visit the body rub centres and provide testing for them while they were on shift. They said this practice had since stopped but wished it would happen start again in the future.

would be given the opportunity to renew the licence before returning to work, instead of immediately receiving a fine.

While many cities across Canada currently license and regulate sex establishments, not all employ a harm-reduction model. In Edmonton, the use of a harm reduction licensing approach is both effective and welcomed by women in Edmonton's body rub centres. Many of my participants spoke highly of the Body Rub Centre Task Force and their approach to regulating body rub centres. For my participants who had worked in other municipalities, they made it clear that Edmonton's approach is superior because it focuses on their safety rather than punishment. Instead of fearing the bylaw officers, they were seen as necessary in keeping body rub centres safe places to work. By not taking an enforcement-based approach, managers and practitioners are more likely to feel comfortable contacting the Body Rub Centre Task Force with questions or complaints. This was expressed to me in conversations with my participants who told me that they were comfortable calling the social worker to report a "bad date", or if they had questions regarding rules and regulations of body rub centres.

Although Edmonton's approach is not perfect, Edmonton's harm-reduction model should be considered in other municipalities who are looking into the regulation of body rub centres or who already regulate body rub centres in some capacity.

Recommendations

With any program, there is room for improvement. While the City of Edmonton's use of the Body Rub Centre Task Force is commendable, there remain opportunities for the program to further support sex workers working in body rub centres.

First, it is important to point out that while cameras are perceived by many as a requirement for body rub centres, based on my review of Edmonton Bylaw 13138, it is not required by bylaw to have cameras in a body rub centre.³¹ As it is right now, this camera footage is private and owned by the body rub centre unless there is footage or information on the cameras that needs to be given to police regarding criminal investigations. Cameras are important for body rubs for three reasons: 1. They provide the employees with a sense of safety and security as they can visually screen who is entering the centre before coming into physical contact with them. 2. They can aid law enforcement in any potential criminal investigations. And 3. They can also serve as an informal safety measure within each centre. For example, if a client comes in that is not welcome back, but the body rub practitioner does not feel comfortable reporting the incident to the police, having a visual image of the client that can be provided to all of the staff can help provide body rub practitioners with information on clients they may not want to see. Therefore, I argue that the City of Edmonton should consider legislating working cameras as a requirement in all licensed body rub centres.³²

Another major gap that became evident throughout my project was the lack of relationship between the Edmonton Police Service and body rub practitioners. When I asked my participants about the police, they explained that the relationship is basically non-existent. While my conversations with my participants generally suggested they felt comfortable calling the social worker with the Body Rub Centre Task Force to report any “bad dates”, there was not that same level of trust with the police. My participants also expressed their frustration with this relationship, noting that when police do visit, they often proceed without invitation to the private

³¹ This may have been a requirement for body rub centres at one point.

³² I state “working cameras” to ensure that the cameras are actually serving the intended purpose and that inoperable cameras are not used.

staff rooms at the back of the body rub centres where girls are often naked or changing. Their hesitancy was often in relation to not knowing how the police would respond or handle the situation. In most cases, the Body Rub Centre Task Force would bridge the contact between the body rub practitioner and the Human Trafficking and Exploitation officers, but this is unfortunately no longer possible. While conducting this research, the Edmonton Police Service had a unit referred to as the “Human Trafficking and Exploitation Unit”, this unit was comprised of 3 male officers and was responsible for human trafficking and sexual exploitation cases, but was also the unit that was mandated to work with sex workers such as escorts and body rub practitioners.³³ Recently, I have been informed that the Edmonton Police Service’s Human Trafficking and Exploitation Unit is no longer based in Edmonton and is now managed by ALERT – a provincial organization that focuses on collaboration between various police organization on criminal investigations. It is my understanding that this unit is now responsible for all Northern Alberta human trafficking cases.

In the past, the body rub practitioner who may have wanted to make a complaint would have typically called the social worker with the Body Rub Centre Task Force and the social worker would have bridged the contact between the complainant and the officers of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Unit. From there, the social worker would set up a time or place for the body rub practitioner to talk to an officer in private. Since these changes with Edmonton’s Human Trafficking and Exploitation Unit, that in cases where they may want to talk to an officer or make a complaint against a client, body rub practitioners have now been instructed to call the public complaint line and a uniformed officer will come to take their statement. I initially intended to outline recommendations specifically for the Human Trafficking and Exploitation

³³ The unit used to be referred to as the “VICE Unit”.

Unit, but since learning of these changes, I will instead provide two general recommendations law enforcement should consider in regard to body rub centres.³⁴

In general, the lack of trust between police and body rub practitioners, and arguably all sex workers, should be improved. First and foremost, law enforcement must recognize that employing women to engage with women in the sex industry is necessary. As mentioned, the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Unit that was in place during this research was comprised of only male officers. Since sex workers are predominately women, having women on units of these types would ensure that practitioners feel comfortable reporting sexual assault or potentially exploitive situations when and if they may arise. Many of my participants described how uncomfortable it can be to talk to a male officer about their bodies, sex, and victimization and that for some, this deters them from reporting their experience to the police. Having a woman in a unit could also potentially increase body rub practitioners' comfortability in reporting prior experiences with pimps or traffickers to the police which could then assist the police in their current on-going investigations of those same pimps and traffickers. I would argue that hiring an additional officer is not necessary, but instead, the police services should consider hiring civilian members who are women and have experiencing working with vulnerable populations whose primary focus is on building trust-based relationships with sex workers and individuals who are suspected of being exploited and trafficked.

Lastly, police agencies should consider relabelling units that use names such as "Human Trafficking and Exploitation Unit". This name immediately implies that *all* individuals in the sex industry are being trafficked or exploited and this is simply not the case. For women who are not trafficked or exploited, the name of the unit could deter them from reporting to the police as the

³⁴ I intend on providing direct recommendations to the Edmonton Police Service on this matter as well.

name indicates their focus is on trafficked and exploited individuals. As I noted early, my participants, for example, were not being trafficked or exploited. Overall, the name of the unit directly imposes and assumes a trafficking and exploitative narrative upon individuals involved in the sex industry which should not be assumed but rather something that is investigated by the police once a complaint is made. I argue that even for individuals or groups who may be victims of human trafficking or sexual exploitation, the name alone could deter them from engaging with the police since those terms can be highly stigmatizing and emotionally charged.

In addition to recommendations for the police, the Body Rub Centre Task Force could improve their service delivery by providing body rub centres with a clear outline of what the rules and regulations are for body rub centres and body rub practitioners. While this information has been distributed in the past, many of my participants felt the need for updated information on a regular basis. My participants described that in the past, bylaws have been altered without notification. It was also reported that new information was often given informally when the members of the Body Rub Centre Task Force were visiting a body rub centre. While these face-to-face interactions are important and should continue, the lack of formal notification leaves individuals who were with clients or not present in the dark. A potential solution could be giving body rub practitioners the option to “opt in” to email or text updates from the Body Rub Centre Task Force when new information was available. A formal notification system could also allow the Body Rub Centre Task Force and police to warn body rub practitioners of individuals the police suspect to be involved in trafficking. While they are often informally notified of such individuals, a formal notification would ensure that more body rub practitioners are given the information directly and that it is received in a timely manner.

Given the many positives of the current harm reduction model the City of Edmonton has created with the Body Rub Centre Task Force that I have outlined, I strongly recommend that the City of Edmonton refrains from engaging in a 5-year exit strategy towards deregulating and closing down body rub centres. We must treat sex workers as the experts of their own profession and of their own lives. Any political discussions regarding sex work – municipal or otherwise – should move away from outsider opinions regarding the morality/lack of agency of sex work and instead focus on how to best support those who do engage in sex work. While risks will always be present in sex work, the harm reduction approach that the City has taken remains the most effective way to ensure the overall safety of sex workers in our city. Closing or deregulating body rub centres will only serve to increase the potential risks associated with sex work. Sex work cannot and will not be eliminated by the City. Attempts by the City to distance themselves from body rub centres are self-serving and do nothing to solve the issues related to sex work or protect sex workers from the risks they face. Harm reduction remains the best solution to the issues present in sex work, and it is the solution the City should continue to choose.

As outlined in my methods, I took both a feminist and protagonist-driven ethnographic approach to this topic (see Cobb & Hoang, 2015; Davis & Craven, 2016). As such, the information and suggestions I have outlined throughout this thesis do not focus on my own personal experience as an ethnographer, but rather aim to centre the perspectives and experiences of the women I interacted with. As a feminist ethnographer I paid special attention to the gendered power dynamics in both my participants' professional and personal lives. Using both a protagonist-driven and feminist ethnographic approach, I chose quotes and stories that highlight the intersection of gender, poverty, and power as it relates to body rub centres. As highlighted by Cobb and Hoang (2015), it is important to centre the experiences and voices of one's participants

not only through data collection but also in the writing portion of the research. I hope my methodology and how I have written this thesis can serve as an example to future ethnographers who wish to conduct protagonist-driven and feminist ethnographic projects.

Concluding Remarks

To reiterate, all 20 of my participants told me that if body rub centres were to close sex workers would be forced underground, increasing both the number of risks they will face and their severity. They argued that by removing body rub centres, the City would be actively preventing sex workers from keeping themselves as safe as possible while working in the industry. I have chosen two important quotes from my participants to highlight my participant's perspectives on this matter.

Amelia and I had many long discussions throughout my research about the City shutting down body rub centres and she explained that body rub centres are the safest option sex workers have. As someone who had worked at many different body rub centres around Edmonton, and had experience working as an escort, I also asked Amelia about victimization in studios. She acknowledged that it did happen, but in those cases, the men who harmed them were not the typical client. Amelia explained that getting rid of studios would not get rid of the small amount of men who like to hurt women, they would just hurt them elsewhere.

Interviewer: Are people being victimized in studios?

Amelia: Rarely. Um... you can't... why would you [the City of Edmonton] take away the only safety that a victim potentially has, right? These are issues of the men who are causing it, not the victims so... if those men are coming into a studio and causing this, if there were

no studios... they would do it somewhere else, they're not just gonna be like, "oh I can't go anywhere", they're gonna go to a different incall with a girl, or they're just gonna attack a girl on the street.³⁵ These are people with severe mental issues, that need to be looked after, that are being failed by the system and that's nothing on us [women working in body rub centres], like the odds of them coming in and doing something to us are just as likely as them doing something to anyone else. I mean look at the guy attacking girls on Whyte Ave, right?³⁶ He's not going into studios, are they going to stop women from walking the streets now, like just wandering around? Are they going to stop that, because [fumbles on words] it's not safe? It might be dangerous, they might be victimized...

For Amelia, it did not make logical sense to close body rub centres as a response to women being victimized. Leah shared Amelia's perspective. When I brought up the possibility of the City of Edmonton moving towards closing body rub centres, she passionately responded.

Leah: I think it's a really bad idea, um, coming from like, obviously my point of view I don't want it to end. But I also um, I think that it would increase the danger in this industry, because girls are going to do it either way, like just because they're trying to ban it and make it illegal or whatever, doesn't mean that it's gonna stop, like it's never going to stop, ever. So, at least in this situation, like at least it's... this is a safe controlled environment, you take that away... what are you left with? Girls doing it on the street, girls

³⁵ "Incall" is a way to describe a situation where an escort has their own location and the client goes to their location (usually a hotel room or a rented apartment that they use for work). Whereas "outcall" would be where the escort goes to the location of the client (i.e. their house)

³⁶ While I am not sure about the exact situation Amelia was referring to. I believe she was referring to a series of attacks against women in 2012 on Whyte Avenue in Edmonton. See (Griwkowsky, 2012).

doing it in unsafe ways, you know what I mean? It's just gonna be a shit show, it's gonna be terrible.

As Leah has explained, sex work will continue to happen. Therefore, the City of Edmonton must ask itself, will they continue to work towards keeping sex workers safe? Or, will they adopt the misguided belief that closing down body rub centres will deter women from offering sexual services?

To close, before making such a wide-reaching decision, that can potentially harm the very people the city is supposedly trying to protect, those who hold decisionary power need to consider the perspectives of sex workers. Especially those who have experience in different types of sex work and particularly, in body rub centres, and listen to their lived experience. As with all decisions, we need to make sure those who are experts in the field, in this case, indoor sex workers, are provided agency in decisions that will greatly affect their ability to carry out their work in a safe manner. It is questionable what purpose would be served if the opinions of those who are most affected by decisions are disregarded and dismissed, potentially because of solely moral reasons. Discussing sex work at a policy-level should not be based on arguments of morality but instead focus on the issue pragmatically, foregrounding the safety of workers, instead of personal feelings about the political sensitivities around the topic. As individuals, people do not have to agree with or condone sex work in order to support a harm reduction approach to sex work. At the end of the day, selling sex in Canada is legal and therefore the City of Edmonton has a duty to ensure sex workers have the ability to offer their services in spaces they deem to be their safest option. This in itself, is also a moral and ethical obligation the City

must consider. As this thesis has highlighted, removing sex workers' ability to work in a safe location will ultimately cause more harm for the sex work community.

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Appendix I: Interview Information Letter and Consent Form

Study title: Experiences of Women Working in Body Rub Centres

Researcher Name and Affiliation:

Shaylyn Hunter, MA Student
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Research Supervisor:

Dr. Sandra Bucerius, Associate Professor
Department of Sociology,
University of Alberta
Phone: 780-492-3561
Email: bucerius@ualberta

Background and Purpose of Study

First of all, thank you for allowing me to speak with you today. I am conducting research on the experiences of women working at body rub centres in Edmonton. I am interested in hearing about your history and experiences working at a body rub centre. This research is being conducted for my Master's thesis project. This knowledge is key to determining policies and services designed to meet the needs of women working in body rub centres.

Study Procedures

The interview may last about one hour and will give you a chance to share about your experience working as a body rub practitioner. Please do not feel rushed or pressured to talk about a topic that is on your mind within a specific time frame. I have lots of time and I will listen to what you have to say for as long as you are willing to talk to me.

Benefits

- You may find it enjoyable to discuss your experiences and share your knowledge.
- Although I do not work for the City of Edmonton, I hope that the City will benefit from the results of this research to develop 'best practices' in regards to body rub centres and supporting body rub practitioners.

Risks

- By participating in my study you may be exposed to psychological or emotional stress when discussing past personal experiences.
- There may be no direct benefit to you as a result of participating in the study.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study today is completely voluntary. You don't have to be here and you can stop the interview at any time. You also don't have to talk about topics that you don't want to talk about. You can stop the interview at any time to ask me questions about the study, or for any other reason. If after we finish you decide that you want to withdraw from the study you

can contact me if you would like your interview to be removed. You can do that up to 14 days from today.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

The information that you give me will be kept completely confidential. No one but the researcher will have access to this information.

- This research will be used for my Master’s thesis project, research publications, conference presentations, and teaching. The information may become part of future research projects.
- Your name will not be put on any of the data or research reports as a result of this project. Instead, I will use a code name so that I can link you to your data without ever using your real name. This way, nobody from outside of the study will ever be able to tell who you are.
- The information that you provide is completely confidential. It will not be given to other people—like your family members, employer, coworkers, or anyone else.
- I will be asking you if I can tape-record your interview. If you agree, the information that is collected on tape will be written down after the interview is over. To protect your privacy, I will ask you not to say your name while you are being taped. Even if you don’t want to be tape-recorded, I still want to interview you.
- All study documents will be kept in locked filing cabinets in a research office. The transcriptions and audio-files of the interviews will be encrypted and kept on my computer.

Further Information

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact myself or my supervisor, Dr. Sandra Bucerius. The plan for this study has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta to make sure it meets ethical guidelines (Pro00091666). For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780)-492-2615.

Consent Statement

Now I’d like to keep a record that we talked about the research process and that you agree to participate in it. I will circle ‘yes’ or ‘no’ for the following two questions and then sign my own name on this document. I won’t write down your name or ask you to sign anything.

- | | | |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study? | Yes | No |
| 2. Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study? | Yes | No |

3. Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study with the researcher? Yes No

4. Do you understand that you are free to refuse to participate, or to withdraw from the study at any time, without consequence, and that your information will be withdrawn at your request? Yes No

5. Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you? Do you understand who will have access to your information? Yes No

6. Do you agree to have this interview audio-recorded? Yes No

I, Shaylyn Hunter, have read the participant this form, offered them the opportunity to ask questions, and have answered any questions they have asked.

Date: _____ Signed: _____

Appendix II: Key Informant Information Letter and Consent Form

Study title: Experiences of Women Working in Body Rub Centres

Researcher Name and Affiliation:

Shaylyn Hunter, MA Student
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Research Supervisor:

Dr. Sandra Bucerius, Associate Professor
Department of Sociology,
University of Alberta
Phone: 780-492-3561
Email: bucerius@ualberta.ca

Background and Purpose of Study

First of all, thank you for allowing me to speak with you today. I am conducting research on the experiences of women working at body rub centres in Edmonton. I am interested in hearing about your history and experiences working at a body rub centre. This research is being conducted for my Master's thesis project. I hope the information gathered from this study will help influence policies and services designed to meet the needs of women working in body rub centres.

Study Procedures

I'd like to ask if you'd be willing to serve as a key informant for my study. In order for me to understand how body rub centres operate and women's experiences working there, I would like to be able to spend time with you, simply 'hanging out' with you while you are at work. This would not be while you are in session with a client, but rather when you are hanging out in the staff room. How often and when you would like me to 'hang out' with you at the body rub centre is completely up to you. You do not have to participate in both aspects of the research. If you would prefer to only complete only an interview, or would rather only participate through informal conversations as we 'hang out', I would still like you to be a part of the study.

Whether we are doing an interview, or just casually talking, you will be able to tell me as much or as little as you like about any topics we talk about and you will also have the chance to bring up topics that are important to you and that you would like me to know about. Please do not feel rushed or pressured to talk about a topic that is on your mind within a specific time frame. I have lots of time and I will listen to what you have to say for as long as you are willing to talk to me. We will only discuss topics you are comfortable with. If there are any questions or topics you prefer not to discuss during the interview, please let me know and we will move on. These conversations combined with the things we observe while 'hanging out' with you during your work day will help me to get a complete picture of how women experience working in Edmonton body rub centres.

I would be collecting information in 2 ways: 1) through formal interviews and informal conversations, and; 2) through participant-observation, where I participate in and observe some of your activities at work (whatever you choose to show me) and take field-notes once I get home. This would exclude anything while you are in session with a client but could include tasks such as helping with clerical work, answering the phone, etc.

Depending on the topic and your comfort level, I will ask for your consent to audio-record some or all of our interviews and conversations. We can do this on a day-to-day basis or you can consent to tape-recording for all future meetings. Even if you don't want to be tape-recorded, we still invite you to be part of the study. If you would like to see the oral consent form that I have read to you asking for your consent in the study, for any reason, and at any time, I will show it to you. I will also provide you a copy.

Benefits

- You may find it enjoyable to discuss your experiences and share your knowledge.
- Although I do not work for the City of Edmonton, I hope that the City will benefit from the results of this research to develop 'best practices' in regards to body rub centres and supporting body rub practitioners.

Risks

- By participating in our study you may be exposed to psychological or emotional stress, particularly when discussing past personal experiences.
- While it is highly unlikely I will associate with clients, or that clients will ask me why I am there, I would have to let them know about my study. As I am not collecting any information on the clients, if they ask me who I am and why I am present at your place of work, I would simply answer that I am a university student doing research for a project.
- There may be no direct benefit to you as a result of participating in the study.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study today is completely voluntary. You don't have to be here and you can stop the interview at any time. You also don't have to talk about topics that you don't want to talk about. You can stop the interview at any time to ask me questions about the study, or for any other reason. If after we finish you decide that you want to withdraw from the study you can contact me if you would like your interview to be removed. You can do that up to 14 days from today.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

The information that you give me will be kept completely confidential. No one but the researcher will have access to this information.

- This research will be used for my Master’s thesis project, research publications, conference presentations, and teaching. The information may become part of future research projects.
- Your name will not be put on any of the data or research reports as a result of this project. Instead, I will use a code name so that I can link you to your data without ever using your real name. This way, nobody from outside of the study will ever be able to tell who you are.
- The information that you provide is completely confidential. It will not be given to other people—like your family members, employer, coworkers, or anyone else.
- I will be asking you if I can tape-record your interview. If you agree, the information that is collected on tape will be written down after the interview is over. To protect your privacy, I will ask you not to say your name while you are being taped. Even if you don’t want to be tape-recorded, I still want to interview you.
- While *voice recordings are not anonymous*, they will be de-identified as much as possible and no one will ever listen to them except for the researchers.
- The information will be protected by encryption software and stored in a safe location for a minimum of 5 years.

Further Information

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact myself or my supervisor, Dr. Sandra Bucerius. The plan for this study has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta to make sure it meets ethical guidelines (Pro00091666). For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Consent Statement

Now I’d like to keep a record that we talked about the research process and that you agree to participate in it. I will circle ‘yes’ or ‘no’ for the following questions and then sign my own name on this document. I won’t write down your name or ask you to sign anything.

1. Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study? Yes No
2. Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study? Yes No
3. Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study with the researcher? Yes No

4. Do you understand that you are free to refuse to participate, or to withdraw from the study at any time, without consequence, and that your information will be withdrawn at your request? Yes No

5. Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you? Yes No
Do you understand who will have access to your information?

6. Do you agree to participate in the study as a key informant? Yes No

7. Do you agree to have our formal or informal conversations audio-recorded? Yes No

I, Shaylyn Hunter, have read the participant this form, offered them the opportunity to ask questions, and have answered any questions they have asked.

Date: _____ Signed: _____

Appendix III: Interview Prompts

- 1) First of all, I'd like to understand what it is like working in a body rub centre.
 - How long have you been working as a body rub practitioner?
 - How long have you been working at this particular parlour?
 - What does a typical day at your job look like?

- 2) How/when did you get involved in this type of work?

- 3) What are the benefits of working in a body rub centre?

- 4) What are the challenges of working in a body rub centre?

- 5) What has your experience been like with the City of Edmonton and how they deal with body rub centres?

- 6) What has been your experience with police as a body rub practitioner?

- 7) What is your relationship like with the manager and/or owner of the body rub centre you are employed at?

- 8) What is your relationship like with your coworkers where you work?

Closing Question:

Thank you for your time, do you have anything you'd like to add on this topic that we may have missed throughout the interview?