

Independent Female Escort's Strategies for Coping with Sex Work Related Stigma

Juline A. Koken

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Abstract Despite the reframing of 'prostitution' as 'sex work' in research and advocacy literature, the stigma associated with this activity persists. This study examines how independent female sex workers advertising online as "escorts" perceive and manage the stigma associated with their work, and how these coping strategies impact their personal relationships. Thirty escorts participated in semi-structured qualitative interviews; Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma and information management strategies was used as a theoretical framework to guide the analysis of women's experiences. Women who engaged in selective disclosure regarding sex work reported greater access to social support, while women who concealed their work from most people often reported feeling lonely and socially isolated. Escorts' stigma coping strategies may have significant impact on their social relationships and access to social support.

Keywords Stigma · Female escorts · Sex workers · Coping

Female prostitutes have historically symbolized sin in Judeo-Christian religious traditions (Roberts 1992). This trope persists in present day Western culture, which could be said to place prostitutes at the bottom of the "sex hierarchy" (Rubin 1992), reflecting their liminal status in a culture that both celebrates and shames women for sexual expression outside of monogamous heterosexual relationships. Unfortunately, social scientific research on female sex workers has often reflected and reproduced the stigma against prostitution through work which casts these women as victims or deviants (Koken 2010; Pheterson 1990; Vanwesenbeeck 1994, 2001)

J. A. Koken (✉)

Center for Motivation and Change, 276 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10001, USA
e-mail: jkoken@motivationandchange.com

and these stereotypes have become further entrenched as they are embedded in social policy (Weitzer 2010).

Feminist research and theorizing in recent decades has been characterized by a contentious debate regarding the meaning of women in prostitution (Koken 2010). Many radical feminists cast prostitutes in the role of the essence of women's sexual objectification (Dworkin 1997; Farley et al. 1998); in contrast, 'sex positive' feminists argued that prostitutes could be gender/sexual outlaws defying taboos of female chastity (Califia 1988; Leigh 1997; Sprinkle 1998). Other feminist scholars argued that prostitutes should be viewed as "workers" who may choose to engage in sexual labor, while acknowledging that for many women choices are limited by poverty and access to resources (Scoular 2004; Thukral et al. 2005; Vanwesenbeeck 2001). These feminist standpoints on the social meaning of prostitution/sex work have implicitly and explicitly shaped a number of studies on the well-being of women engaged in paid sex (Koken 2010).

The experiences of women in prostitution are diverse (Thukral and Dittmore 2003; Thukral et al. 2005; Vanwesenbeeck 1994, 2005) and defy simplistic reduction to narratives of "victimization" or "liberation". The present study approaches prostitution as a form of paid labor that women may choose to engage in under circumstances ranging from the luxurious to the destitute. Women who were trafficked into prostitution against their will are a highly specific group of sex workers who have been the subject of hotly contested research and social policy (Dittmore 2008; Doezenia 2002); at the same time, women who have asserted that they have consciously chosen employment in sex work have been neglected or viewed by anti-prostitution feminists as non-existent (Fawkes 2005; Vanwesenbeeck 2001). It is these women—those who identify as having chosen their work free of coercion—who will be the focus of the present study.

In spite of the reframing of 'prostitution' to 'sex work', the stigma associated with this activity persists, particularly in regards to women's participation in sex work (Koken 2010; Pheterson 1990; Sallmann 2010). Sex work related stigma, as well as the emotional and sexual nature of the labor itself, place unique demands on the psychological coping resources of female sex workers. This is especially true of the labor performed by 'escorts,' sex workers who endeavor to provide companionship and convey the impression of caring for the client as well as sexual services (Bernstein 2007; Sanders 2005a). The production of a 'working identity' (Sanders 2005a) and other forms of identity management strategies utilized by escorts on the job (Scambler 2007) have been described as helping to construct boundaries between 'personal' or authentic selves while presenting an idealized 'work self' to the client. Yet, in addition to the real emotional and physical demands of working with clients, these women must also manage the impact of stigma associated with sex work on their personal relationships with friends, family members and romantic partners.

Stigmas are context specific, in that behaviors or characteristics may be considered normative in some environments and deviant in others. While a woman who has a casual one night stand may be judged harshly by some, women who exchange sex for money are viewed by most as having violated one of the most powerful taboos in western culture (Rubin 1992). The label "prostitute" carries with

it a powerful stigma, although the bearer may be viewed as deserving of “help” and kindness if the woman has been forced into prostitution; alternatively, those who choose prostitution free of coercion may be judged particularly harshly, as they are held responsible for electing deviancy (Katz 1979).

Persons with “concealable stigmas” possess characteristics (such as being a sex worker) that are not visibly apparent the way that skin color or other visible “marked” characteristics are, yet if revealed could cause a loss of social status (Quinn and Chaudoir 2009). For those with concealable stigmas, the decision to conceal or reveal one’s membership in a stigmatized group becomes a crucial strategy for managing the impact of stigma on one’s life (Goffman 1963; Sanders 2005a; Unger 1998, 2000). Stigma management strategies often take the form of “*information management*” techniques such as “*passing*”, (hiding one’s stigma in order to “pass” as a non-stigmatized person); or “*covering*”, a strategy characterized by selective disclosure to trusted confidantes or family members- “the wise” (Goffman 1963). The information management strategies originally identified by Goffman (1963) may be conceived of as a form of stigma coping. These strategies have previously been identified among gay and bisexual male sex workers advertising on the Internet as escorts (Koken et al. 2004), but have yet to be extended to samples of independent female escorts.

The information management strategies utilized by persons with concealable stigma such as being a sex worker may be guided by their expectations of how others would react should they learn of their stigma, a concept known as anticipatory stigma (Quinn and Chaudoir 2009). Stigma coping may also take place internally, in the form of identity management work. The creation of a “sex worker self” as described in recent studies of female sex workers (Sanders 2005a; Scambler 2007) may be conceptualized as a stigma management strategy, as the sex work is performed by the ‘sex worker self’ while simultaneously distancing such activities from one’s ‘authentic’ (presumably non-sex worker) self (Scambler 2007). Thus coping strategies may combine behavioral (information management) as well as intrapsychic (cognitive reframing) aspects.

The literature on stress and coping offers an interpretive framework for examining the intersection between the cognitive and behavioral techniques utilized by sex workers to manage the impact of sex work related stigma on their personal lives. Broadly speaking, coping is often conceptualized as approach or avoidance strategies (Carver 2007). In approach coping, a person works through problem solving, cognitive reframing, or support seeking to create a desired experience (such as disclosing one’s sex work to a trusted friend who may offer emotional support); in avoidance coping, a person may use similar efforts to avoid a negative experience (for example, hiding one’s involvement in sex work from loved ones out of fear of rejection). Thus, “passing” may be thought of as a form of avoidance coping, while “covering” could be viewed as a form of approach coping. The anticipatory stigma of being labeled as a prostitute and the potential loss of status accompanying this label is likely to motivate individuals to approach any disclosure with caution.

Stigma coping strategies may have a direct impact on the health of the individual. This is particularly true for those managing a concealable stigma, who appear to suffer greater negative mental and physical health sequelae than those who live with

visible stigmas (Cole et al. 1996; Frable et al. 1998; Huebner et al. 2002; Meyer 2003; Quinn and Chaudoir 2009; Shehan et al. 2003). Individuals with concealable stigmas are often in the unique position of being able to “pass” as non-stigmatized; however, the cognitive and emotional cost of doing so can be a source of considerable stress for the individual who passes (Pachankis 2007; Quinn and Chaudoir 2009). Though passing, and thus protecting themselves from the loss of status that may accompany revelation of their stigma, the individual with concealable stigma may consequently engage in high levels of hypervigilance and self-monitoring in social situations (Pachankis 2007). Ultimately, they may also inadvertently close themselves off from potential sources of social support from similar or accepting others (Frable et al. 1998).

While sex workers often report concern that friends, lovers and family members may reject them should they learn of their work, many describe feeling further marginalized at the hands of service providers and social policies which are ostensibly aiming to “help” (Sallmann 2010). Stories of being discriminated against even when seeking help from the criminal justice system after being the victim of violence are common (Sallmann 2010; Thukral and Ditmore 2003; Thukral et al. 2005). Sex workers have described being treated as “dirty” or undeserving of respect by health care providers when accessing drug treatment or other health services (Whitaker et al. 2011). The anticipatory stigma of being labeled a prostitute may lead sex workers to hide medically relevant information about their behavior from health care providers and inadvertently endanger their own health or access to proper care. Thus, “whore stigma” has very real consequences on the health and safety of sex workers.

There is a growing body of evidence indicating that the legal status of sex work and the place where sex work occurs play a major role in shaping women’s experience on the job, with street based workers (who are subject to the greatest legal and social persecution) more at risk for violence than those who work indoors in brothels, massage parlors or as escorts (O’Doherty, 2011; Thukral and Ditmore 2003; Thukral et al. 2005; Vanwesenbeeck 1994, 2005). However, studies of ‘female sex workers’ continue to sample predominantly street based or impoverished women (Parsons 2005; Vanwesenbeeck 2001), and too often do not adequately acknowledge the limits to generalizability imposed by such samples (Pheterson 1990; Weitzer 2010). Indoor sex workers have been included in an increasing number of recent studies (Brewis and Linstead 2000; Chapkis 1997; Sanders 2002, 2004, 2005a, b, c; Vanwesenbeeck 1994, 2005); however these studies have been carried out in nations (with the partial exception of Chapkis’ work in the Netherlands and the United States) where sex work is decriminalized or legally tolerated. While indoor sex workers in developed western nations undoubtedly share some degree of common experience, there are clear limits to generalizability presented when attempting to compare the working circumstances of women in Europe to indoor female sex workers who work in the United States, where sex work remains criminalized, further marginalizing an already marginal population (Lewis and Maticka-Tyndale 2000). This legal context presents significant recruitment challenges to researchers who wish to sample indoor sex workers, who are not as publicly visible or accessible as their street based counterparts (Benoit et al. 2005; Shaver 2005). Additionally, few studies to date have been conducted with

samples composed of independent female sex workers, instead grouping together women working in a variety of indoor venues such as escort agencies, brothels, and massage parlors (for example, Thukral et al. 2005; Sanders 2005a; Vanwesenbeeck 2005). Elizabeth Bernstein's recent work (Bernstein 2007) is one of the few exceptions; her study examined the experiences of 15 "middle class" female sex workers who worked independently as masseurs and escorts.

The advent of Internet technology has allowed sex workers a new venue through which to reach potential clients (Koken et al. 2009; Sanders 2005b)—one that offers the possibility of removing the need for third party involvement (Bernstein 2007). It is likely that independently employed, Internet advertising female sex workers differ from their street based, brothel based, or even agency based counterparts. Women who advertise for their services, screen their own clients, set their own fees and retain the profits may exert a much higher degree of control over their working circumstances than women who work through a third party. At the same time, very little is known about the potential racial, ethnic, and class diversity of Internet-based sex workers. The growth of escort advertising sites which feature profiles of sex workers with photographs, hyperlinks and ad text for a monthly fee as well as sites which offer an advertising venue free of charge indicate the potential for economic stratification of sex workers who advertise online. The rapid growth of the Internet as a venue for sex workers, and specifically independent sex workers, has been noted (Sanders 2004; Thukral et al. 2005), but few studies to date have explored the experiences of Internet based independent female escorts. Earlier research on male escorts who advertise on the Internet (Koken et al. 2004) indicates that this technology offers increased ease of reaching a large number of potential clientele and the ability to negotiate with clients before meeting them in person.

While a great deal of previous research has examined health consequences of sex work relating to HIV, victimization, and substance abuse (Vanwesenbeeck 2001), much of this research has approached sex work through a framework emphasizing sex work as inherently traumatizing, damaging, or a social threat (Pheterson 1990; Weitzer 2010). Research exploring sex workers' resilience or protective factors, particularly regarding the stigma coping strategies utilized by sex workers, has much to contribute to the literature on the social and psychological aspects of sex work. To date most studies of stigma coping among female sex workers have analyzed the experiences of women who worked primarily on the streets and were additionally marginalized due to their drug use (Sallmann 2010; Whitaker et al. 2011). The experiences of women who work independently, reaching clients through online advertisements (and thus operating in a less public environment than street based sex workers) merit further investigation. In the United States, where sex work remains criminalized in nearly every state and the stigma against engaging in sex work remains high (Sallmann 2010; Thukral et al. 2005), the potential legal, social and personal consequences of openly identifying as a sex worker or escort may be particularly threatening, necessitating the development of sophisticated stigma coping strategies. Thus, the purpose of this study is to qualitatively explore how independent Internet based female sex workers perceive and experience the stigma attached to their work, as well as the strategies utilized by these women to manage the impact of work-related stigma on their personal lives.

Method

Recruitment and Eligibility

Independent women escorts advertising online in a major metropolitan city in the United States were invited to take part in the research project through a variety of outreach efforts. Individual emails were sent to potential participants advertising as independent escorts on Internet websites. An advertisement was placed in *\$pread* magazine (a magazine for sex workers which was produced by sex workers), and some snowball recruiting also occurred, as women who participated referred their friends who were also working as independent escorts. To be eligible for the study, women had to be at least 18 years of age (self reported), fluent in English, identify as a female or transgender woman, self-report having worked as an Internet advertising escort in the 30 days prior to screening, and must make contact with the majority of their clients independently, without the intervention of a third party. For the purposes of this study, an 'independent' female escort was operationally defined as a woman who places advertisements for her escort services on websites, screens her own clientele, and keeps the entirety of the fees she collects from clients, with the exception of any fees she must pay to place advertisement of various websites. A total of 30 women agreed to participate and completed interviews and questionnaires, resulting in a final sample of 30.

Measures

The interview protocol was drafted by the author and circulated among sex workers and community advocates, who provided feedback on its relevance to sex workers experiences and suggested a few additional questions regarding sex worker's personal relationships with other sex workers. After providing informed consent, women completed a semi-structured, open-ended interview consisting of questions regarding disclosure of sex work to friends, romantic partners, and family; ways in which women access social support from other sex workers, friends, and family; how women perceive sex work related stigma; and ways in which women work to minimize their exposure to and the impact of sex work related stigma. All interviews except one were conducted by the author, who has been involved in sex work research and advocacy for several years, and has many ties within the sex work community. Two participants who were friends requested to be interviewed simultaneously, and so a trained volunteer who was familiar with the project and sensitive to the concerns of sex workers conducted one interview in a separate room while the author interviewed her friend. All interviews were conducted privately in the homes or hotel rooms of participants, or in a few cases, in a private room at the research center where the author was employed; two interviews were conducted by telephone. After the interview, women completed a brief questionnaire using Audio Computer Assisted Self Interviewing (ACASI) software. The questionnaire included demographic characteristics (age, race/ethnicity, and place of birth, educational attainment, sexual identity, and relationship status). Women's access to services such as health care, housing, counseling and legal advocacy was also assessed.

These questions were administered via computer, rather than in the interview, as they were standardized and not designed to elicit narratives, as the interview questions were. Additionally, some research has indicated that individuals are more likely to report sensitive information such as sexual behavior in response to a computer survey (Kurth et al. 2004). Interviews ranged from 30 min to 2 h and the questionnaire took on average 15 min to complete. Participants were compensated \$100 for their time in participation, an amount that was much less than the average hourly rate charged by online escorts, and was judged to be appropriate and non-coercive by sex workers who provided feedback on the study design. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of Hunter College of the City University of New York. Any identifying information was removed during transcription of the interviews.

Data Analysis

The author drafted an initial qualitative codebook of 'structural' codes (MacQueen et al. 1998) guided by the study aims and theoretical framework: the perception of sex work related stigma, stigma management strategies, and disclosure within personal relationships. The codebook included a definition for each code, inclusion and exclusion criteria for the code, and an example of text that would be appropriate for this code. The author then consulted two additional trained volunteers, one who had involvement in sex work advocacy and one who did not, and these individuals provided suggestions and feedback on the clarity and relevance of the codes. The author and the two volunteers then coded through consensus a total of ten interviews selected to provide a wide variety of participant perspectives. QSR NVIVO software was used to organize the qualitative data for this project; this program allows the creation of nested coding schemes, eases the application of codes to interview text, and can produce coding reports that collect all of the coded material, including quotations and demographic data for the participant being quoted. The 30 interview transcripts were loaded into an NVIVO project file and the codes which had been applied to the 10 consensually coded interviews were applied in NVIVO; the author then coded the remaining 20 interviews in NVIVO using the coding scheme. The final stage of analysis took place after the initial round of thematic coding when reports were reviewed for emerging patterns and 'meta themes.' These 'meta themes' will be illustrated in the results section through the use of selected quotes which exemplify each theme, accompanied by the participant's race/ethnicity, age, and hourly fee to provide some demographic and economic context to the narrative.

Results

Participant Characteristics

The sample was diverse in terms of place of birth and age, although less diverse in race/ethnicity; participants reported a high level of educational attainment (see Table 1). The women ranged in age from 21 to 57 (all ages were self reported), with

a mean age of 33.9. Reported income was high as well: 40% of the women ($n = 12$) chose “\$75,000 or more” per year, the highest option listed in the income response items; 63% ($n = 19$) reported earning \$50,000 and above. One woman chose not to answer this question. The mode rate for escorting services among white women was \$500.00 per hour, while women of color reported a mode rate of \$400.00 per hour, although this difference was not statistically significant. However, no woman of color reported a rate above \$500 per hour, while one-third of the white women reported rates above \$500 an hour, ranging up to \$1,000 per hour. The majority of the women self identified as heterosexual (63.3%, $n = 19$), 30% ($n = 9$) identified as bisexual, and the two transgender women in the sample identified as “queer” and “other;” none of the women sampled identified as lesbian. The sample were mainly single (63%, $n = 19$), although one third (33.3%, $n = 10$) reported having a male partner (none reported having a female main partner). One woman (3%) reported being legally married, but was separated from her husband.

Interview Themes

The narratives regarding disclosure in this sample ranged from stories of social isolation and secrecy to ones of coming out and gaining acceptance, with many variations between. Anticipated stigma relating to women’s concerns over how others would react to their work guided women’s use of information management strategies.

Fear of Being Labeled a Prostitute

Regardless of women’s individual strategies for managing disclosure and their own perceptions of their work, the stigma attached to engaging in prostitution was a central theme. Additionally, some women felt that social perceptions and stereotypes of their gender, race, and economic status led them to be labeled as a prostitute even when they *didn’t* reveal their involvement in sex work. One woman expressed a desire to use her earnings from escorting to purchase luxury items, but felt that because of her race, age and gender doing this would effectively “out” her in public:

And I want to get a fur coat, this winter...But I have my, I- it might be too obvious. [Q: What would be too obvious?] Come on, like I’m walking down Lexington Avenue in like a ten thousand dollar fur coat... But still, people just walk up to me and say “oh hey you want a date or something?” Because I’m African American and, and I guess it’s a very wealthy area. Maybe that’s why. Or maybe I’m just being paranoid. [African American, age 23, \$400]

While it is impossible to know whether or not this woman’s perception of being labeled a prostitute in public areas was accurate, many of the women in this sample expressed strong concerns that their involvement in sex work had marked them for life, separating them from “normals” and limiting their options for careers and relationships. One woman who had described her desire to leave sex work related a

Table 1 Demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>		
African American/Caribbean American	5	16.6
Asian/South Asian	3	10
White/European	21	70
Multi-Racial	1	3.3
<i>Country of origin</i>		
United States	21	70
Canada	3	10
Australia	1	3.3
Singapore	1	3.3
Estonia	1	3.3
Poland	1	3.3
Sweden	1	3.3
France	1	3.3
<i>Educational attainment</i>		
Ph.D., MA or other graduate degree	4	13.3
Some graduate school	3	10
Bachelors degree	5	16.6
Associates degree	1	3
Some college	13	43.3
Other degree/certificate	1	3
High school or equivalent	2	6.6
Less than high school	1	3
Total	30	100

fear that no matter what job she moved into after escorting, her past history as a sex worker would follow her:

It's—it is a worry but it's a concern, and it's a very real concern, and it's a reality. And sometimes when I think of getting another job, I think, well, you're not going to be running for President of the United States. Maybe it would be easier just to get a bartending job and say, yes, so? Big deal? Because, I mean, let's say being a bartender, not that that's good, bad or I think criteria of my moral character, let's say, would be far less under scrutiny than let's say if I wanted to work as um, I don't—at a law firm...It will come back. [White, age 53, \$350]

Like many previous studies of female sex workers (see Vanwesenbeeck 2001 for a review) the majority of women who participated in this project stated that money was their primary motivation for entering sex work; some women even related feeling economically coerced into the business. While none of the women who participated had been forced or trafficked into sex work, many felt that the money earned in sex work was better than the earnings they could command in other jobs,

and thus felt “trapped” into remaining in sex work. The stigma of being labeled a sex worker provided an additional obstacle to exiting the business, for those who wished to do so.

Women of color, and particularly African American women, related negative experiences with racism and discrimination in the industry and at the hands of police:

My goal is...that I am retiring everything on Dec. 31st as I should be working full time with my college and studies. And I am so over it [escorting] and I think it's mainly because I am afraid to take new clients on because of the whole police situation... It's not just the fact that I am spending the night in jail. It just makes me sick. Like I feel like molested... they [police] are so sneaky sometimes you know and they ask you the most rude things and they treat you like garbage. Oh my god. And at first they treat you like garbage when they first arrest you they have someone shit talk, like why don't you get a job, you shouldn't do this. You know, they pass such judgmental comments. And then it's like I myself don't feel so much glamorous any more. [African American, age 23, \$250]

By pursuing higher education and developing other aspects of her business (this participant had a website featuring webcam shows for paying subscribers), this woman is using a proactive coping strategy to work towards leaving sex work. While her quote above did not explicitly mention race, she and other African American women in the sample described more confrontations with police, and more negative experiences with police, than White women. The woman quoted above related that she had been arrested for prostitution and related offenses five times, and reported that she felt women of color were targeted for arrest. Many of these women expressed concern that they were “marked” by the stigma associated with sex work and would have trouble obtaining employment outside of the sex industry. As a result, they worked to protect themselves from sex work related stigma by keeping escorting a secret. Unfortunately, for many women this avoidance coping strategy had the unintended personal consequence of increasing their social isolation.

Living in the Closet

Social isolation was a common theme among the narratives of women who chose to keep their work secret from loved ones. The anticipated stigma associated with sex work shaped women's decisions regarding disclosure of their work to loved ones, and in an effort to protect themselves from the judgments of outsiders, many women lost access to potential sources of social support. Ironically, the avoidance coping strategy they employed, keeping their work a secret in order to protect themselves from a loss of social status, resulted in social isolation and loneliness.

Well I'm, I don't have any really, close friends right now. I've been distancing myself from people... I just, a lot of my energy has been focused on my work—that I don't want to, expose them to any baggage that I may have. And then, if

anyone does find out [about escorting], I don't want- I'm just afraid of getting found out. By these folks because- a lot of people know that I'm very open minded sexually and stuff, but they don't know how open I am, so. I don't know how they're going to react. I guess I'm kind of afraid of how they're going to react, and then also, I honestly don't know. I guess I'm kind of ashamed of what I do, and I don't want them to know. [Q: What's shameful about it?] That I went to school, I went all the way up to grad school, and I have to do this work, and I can't even do what I went to school for. So it's not the sex work per se; it's that I can't get a job doing what I went to school for. For years. [African American, age 26, \$400]

This woman's feelings of shame about her work were linked to a sense of having lost status or 'failed' as a highly educated woman aspiring to a prestigious career. Her strategy of avoiding the potential judgments of friends by not telling them about escorting may be framed as a form of avoidance coping. Unfortunately, she may have diminished the amount of social support she might have received from friends by keeping her work a secret- which may have contributed to her sense of isolation.

In another woman's narrative, social isolation appeared to play a role in her attitude change towards her work:

I used to be a lot more high profile. Um, I have an ad on [website] uh you know a few photographs and then my face is kind of blurred out just enough so that people won't recognize me on the street. And just enough for you know to create plausible deniability (laughs)...Um yeah it's pretty isolating. Um and when I moved, my friends in [major western city] knew I was pretty open about it and when I moved to [major eastern city] I wanted to start uh, uh a career and I just kind of kept it quiet, you know? I just figured it was best to kind of keep it discreet so it doesn't pop up. And it ended up being very isolating. You know it's like it's hard to get close to people because people ask you questions about what you do for work and you know I, I'm not really good at lying. [White, age 39, \$300]

In this woman's earlier experience of sex work, she had many friends in and out of the industry and was open about her work, thus receiving solid social support. However, a move to a new city and a decision to go 'into the closet' as a sex worker resulted in a loss of this support. Ironically, the decision to switch to a new 'non-disclosure' policy in her new home was not due to personally negative attitudes about sex work, but rather a pragmatic choice aimed at protecting her aspiring non-sex work career path.

Many women expressed a desire to fight the stigma associated with sex work, yet viewed the personal costs associated with coming out as too high. Many expressed anxiety that being labeled a "prostitute" would result in others forming a distorted image of them:

Like my whole desire in my life and what I am trying to do is completely be myself and be open. But I think, I would be a great crusader I could and if I was fearless and all that but what I have learned is that people do judge things very harshly they don't understand and it will have far more negative impact

on me than a positive one I think to go and start telling people... unless you do this I don't think you really understand, you still look at it from outside of the perspective and you forget that these are two real people... people think that 'she's a whore and she could make an honest living and she is being used.'

[White, age 30, \$1000]

This participant expressed high satisfaction with her work but sadness that she could not share her experiences with people in her personal life. The choice to maintain secrecy in order to protect one's self from the loss of status that might come with disclosing their involvement in sex work may come not only at a personal cost (social isolation and internal conflict about lying to loved ones) but has a potential social impact as well. The act of "passing" (Goffman 1963) as a non-sex worker may allow stereotypes about sex workers to persist, as women who do not fit these stereotypes do not reveal themselves as members of the stigmatized group. Bluntly put, maintaining secrecy may in some ways contribute to maintaining the status quo.

Selective Disclosure

The stigma associated with prostitution was reflected in the myriad ways women imagined people would perceive them should they disclose. The desire to avoid being judged and labeled as a prostitute led many women to rely on avoidance coping, limiting the extent to which they would become intimate with people in their personal life:

I date but I don't like to make a serious commitment because I don't think that's fair to someone because I'm not gonna tell them that I do this and I don't want to lie to someone, you know what I mean? Like I can lie by omission a little bit but not straight up say that I'm monogamous with someone and be doing this on the side. I'm especially worried about women's judgment, and I kind of struggle with this in myself, like it's like an easy way out or, oh you're selling yourself or you're a bad feminist, or it's gross, you have diseases, you're, you know you're easy, whatever, like there's a million stereotypes, or that I'm tragic, or that I'm fucked up, or that I got raped when I was younger, like I don't feel like I come off as someone who would do this and I don't want to be someone's stereotype and it's such a taboo thing I don't want someone like focusing on that when they meet me...I want people focusing on who I am without having this big thing, like "oh she's an escort."

You know? [White, age 23, \$1000]

Fear of being labeled converges with this woman's own uncertainty over the meaning of her involvement in sex work. The imagined reactions of others should they find out she is working in sex work prevent her from disclosing. This woman reported that she had two resources for support when she wanted to talk about her work: her therapist, and a close friend who had briefly worked as an escort as well.

Women's fears regarding the potential judgments and loss of social status that may follow disclosure of their involvement in sex work were founded in social reality. For women who did disclose being an escort, negative reactions from

those told were frequent. In an effort to maintain relationships that were potentially threatened by the disclosure of their stigmatized behavior, some women reported 'coming out' and then going 'back into the closet' after disclosing sex work:

Um, who does know? Another girl that does this, um, my boyfriend knew, but now he thinks I've stopped. I met my boyfriend when I was, um, doing this. Which at first when weren't dating seriously. He was okay with it because he uh, he had no feelings for me, so. So now I unfortunately lie about it. It's been hard and it's been easy because, it's easy because, who do you think, I mean to me, any guys that would want to date me, if they know that I have done this before, they would never want to have anything to do with me, but to him- But, to me that was a stigma on my head, you know? Because if I've been used and abused, who would want me?... That was my idea of how, so to me that, this wonderful guy would, who knew I was doing this and didn't think I was the worst piece of uh, shit on the earth and thought it was already wonderful. Because you can be yourself and it can be... I think about that all the time because, because to me it's more important, you know what we have is very important, very beautiful and you never know about the future, but I can't let something so trivial, so little bother him. Although I make a lot of money and it's important, it's not in the grand scheme of things, it's not important. My job is not that important. [White, age 34, \$600]

This woman's experience illustrates the dilemma faced by many of the women who participated in the study. Her statement reflects ambivalence about the cost/benefit of being honest with her partner, and her perceptions of the stereotypes about women who engage in sex work. She values that he accepts her knowing that she 'used to' do sex work, but when the relationship became significant she felt the need to go 'back in the closet' to protect it. This information management technique was fairly common across the sample, as women described receiving negative reactions to their disclosure and a desire to maintain relationships with people who were not accepting of sex work.

Many women engaged in skillful 'information management techniques' similar to those originally described by Goffman as "covering" (1963). These women were neither 'completely out' nor 'completely closeted' regarding their involvement with sex work, but instead made selective judgments about with whom they would share information, when to disclose this information, and how to 'spin' their involvement with sex work. This "middle road" strategy of disclosure was a common strategy emerging from this sample, as it allows women to access social support from trusted insiders (Goffman's "wise"), while minimizing the potential for loss of status that might come with a more open approach to disclosure.

You know I have what I call my "normal friends." [Q: Your normal friends? What do you mean by that?] The ones that don't even understand the whole concept of being an escort. I don't talk about it with them. They have no idea and I don't plan on telling them only because I know what they're like. [Asian/Pacific Islander, age 30, \$500]

This woman, who had one friend also in the sex industry she was open with, describes feeling that some friends shouldn't be told because of the possibility of their judgments (anticipated stigma). Her choice of the word "normal" aptly captures the divisions created in her mind regarding her stigmatized identity, i.e. "people who are not sex workers are normal" and by implication "I'm not normal". However, she did not rule out the possibility of disclosing within the context of an important personal relationship, even after relating an experience of being rejected by a boyfriend after she disclosed being an escort to him:

I would still handle it the way I did. I'm not gonna change my views or change the way I am. One thing my ex told me was "the next person you are going to be with, you should never tell them." My girlfriend was like "maybe it's better they don't know." And I am like NO! They should know as this is who I am. This is part of my life. You can't just forget about it. If they want to be with me, they have to accept me for all that I am. [Asian/Pacific Islander, age 30, \$500]

Although this woman chose to avoid disclosing being an escort to most of her friends, she still took the risk to disclose in a relationship that she felt was serious. In this way she works to minimize her exposure to stigma and rejection through avoidance coping, although she remains willing to take the risk of disclosure in important situations. Her comment that "If they want to be with me, they have to accept me for all that I am" indicates a level of self-acceptance regarding her involvement in sex work. While her narrative reflects the potential costs of "coming out" as a sex worker, some women related more positive experiences of disclosure and gaining support from loved ones.

Coming Out as a Sex Worker

The narratives of women who kept their escorting secret stand in striking contrast to the experiences related by women who chose to be very open about their work. For one woman, the act of 'coming out' as an escort to her friends and family marked the beginning of a period of positive adjustment to sex work. This is especially notable as she had initially entered sex work out of financial desperation and had felt highly conflicted on an emotional and moral level about her involvement:

Well I'm out, I'm actually out everyone. Like all my friends know, my family knows yeah so I'm completely out with it... and talking about burnout, I think the biggest contributor to burnout is not having a support system. You know, that's where it is, that's where most of your conflict lies is that whole "oh am I gonna be judged? How's it gonna be if my mom finds out? How's it gonna be if my boyfriend finds out? Or is my best friend since kindergarten gonna disown me because now all of a sudden I'm doing this." [Q: All the consequences.] And all of that stress. I mean of course there's stress involved in the business regardless but when you couple that on top of everything else that there's no changing the other, certain other factors that are stressors in the business, you know? But when you can take out the variable of having a

support system in place um I think that really is one of the biggest keys of reducing burnout for me. And that was when I stopped being conflicted about it, really. [White, age 36, \$500]

Although this woman initially entered sex work in a situation of financial duress, with what could have been framed as a “negative orientation towards the work”, one of the factors which can predict burnout (Vanwesenbeeck 2005), she made the decision to be open with loved ones about her work and experienced increase social support as a result. Her approach coping strategy (coming out and seeking support) resulted in a relief from the stress associated with anticipated judgment from loved ones. This participant, who self-identified as feminist earlier in this narrative, explained some of her some of her initial resistance to the stigma associated with prostitution as a reluctance to internalize or reinforce the “virgin/whore” sexual double standard. This woman also frequently “toured” (traveled to various cities to expand her client base) with close friends who were also escorts, thus surrounding herself with supportive others. Two of her friends later participated in the study and they were indeed “birds of a feather”, in terms of their feelings about their work. All three women related positive feelings about their work and a surprising degree of openness. It is likely that these women formed friendships partly due to their shared positive perspective on sex work (a form of approach coping), which then resulted in ongoing reinforcement for their positive beliefs.

Resisting the stigma associated with sex work begins with an internal re-framing of the work. Reimagining the meaning of sex work away from deviancy is the beginning of taking pride in sex work:

I never felt like “Oh my God I’m ashamed that I’m doing this for a living.” If anything I was like “It sucks I get treated this way.” You know? I don’t think that there’s anything shameful about it. I make an honest living and, and I always treat people honestly. [White, age 45, \$180]

This woman articulated feelings of pride about her work, her body, and her ability to use sex work to help stabilize her life financially. She was open with friends and loved ones (approach coping) about her involvement in the industry and even went so far as to work under her real name (one of two women in the sample who did so). During the interview, she related the multiple ways in which she lived with stigmas, both concealable and visible, which shaped her daily life. She was obese (a visible stigma), and in spite of her “fat pride” she was often faced with other people’s negative attitudes about her body size. She had been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (a concealable stigma), and expressed that following her diagnosis she felt the label of mental illness impacted the way doctors, therapists, and social service providers treated her. She reported that her mental illness had been so acute at one point that she had become homeless, and at the time of the interview was living in subsidized housing. For her, sex work was an effective way to supplement her meager income from disability; she also expressed feeling affirmed by the positive attention from clients who valued her appearance and did not view her primarily as a ‘disabled’ or ‘pathological’ person.

Throughout women's narratives regarding stigma and sex work, beliefs about the meaning of sex work's criminalized legal status surfaced. A variety of feelings concerning the legal status of sex work were expressed by the women in this study. Women who expressed pride and satisfaction in their work, however, were the most explicit and articulate regarding their ideas about how the laws should change:

Yeah, you know, that's the only struggle is I would love to shout it from the rooftops. You know, I'm not looking for this profession to be legalized. Just decriminalized. I don't want to, you know, have my file and fingerprints down at the police station because I'm a registered sex worker. I don't want to have the Health Department knocking on my doors to make sure my sheets are clean and that my, you know, my condom supply is fresh. And I don't want to be forced to go to the doctor and get—have my health records made public for everybody. You know, I don't want to have a license number. So what I want, first of all I want the hearts of the people to change. You know, because that's the stigma—you know if the people were to say, hey, sex is fine. We, you know—doing what you want with your own body as a woman is, you know, is your business.” And then, why would people support, putting in their money on to chasing us down—and trying to make us into criminals. I feel like we're witches being, you know, burned at the stake. [White, age 40, \$500]

This woman draws a direct connection between the marginalized legal status of sex work and the marginalized social status of sex workers. In her own personal life, she described being open about her work with nearly everyone (boyfriend, friends, etc.) except for her parents. Her approach and emotion focused coping strategies to fight stigma was located in her personal reframing of the work (which she described earlier in the interview as “two souls coming together”) and was extended into the way she lived her life, open about her job. For her, fighting the stigma associated with sex work was a battle that needed to be fought before significant changes in the status of sex workers could be enacted on a social and legal level.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore the stigma coping strategies of Internet based women escorts who work independently and how these strategies impact their personal relationships. Goffman's (1963) information management techniques were found to have retained their usefulness in the sample presented here. Working in sex work is a concealable stigma that women managed by passing, covering or “coming out”. The majority of the women in this sample told very few people about their work, and these selected confidants were most often other sex workers. Many women chose to “pass” completely, telling no one of their work, and chose not to socialize with other sex workers. For those who disclosed to non-sex worker friends and loved ones, “going back into the closet” was a common stigma avoidance technique for trying to maintain or repair relationships that were endangered by the revelation of women's involvement in sex work. Some women in the sample did engage in approach coping, disclosing their work to friends,

boyfriends and family members and working to build relationships with accepting others. However, women who lived this openly were in the minority in this sample.

Women's coping strategies for managing the impact of sex work related stigma went beyond the behavioral information management techniques they used to minimize their exposure to other people's judgments about their involvement in sex work. Women described wrestling with the meaning of their participation in sex work, and offered a wide variety of interpretive frames. Many women chose to remain fairly "closeted" as sex workers, not out of any personal negative feelings about their work, but to protect themselves from the loss of status that can accompany being identified as a member of a stigmatized group (Goffman 1963).

Unfortunately, protecting one's self from stigma by avoidance coping (non-disclosure) can lead to loneliness and social isolation. Unsurprisingly, women with a highly positive orientation towards their work also described being more open with loved ones about their work (a form of approach coping), and thus also enjoyed access to greater social support. For these women, resisting stigma began with an intrapsychic reframing of the meaning of sex work and was followed by disclosure of their work and seeking relationships with nonjudgmental individuals. It is difficult to say if this strategy, while clearly adaptive, could benefit all sex workers. The United States is markedly conservative in its approach to sexual behavior outside the bounds of heterosexual marriage or committed relationships (Rubin 1992), leading to a climate of intolerance for prostitution (Ditmore 2008; Pheterson 1990). The narratives on stigma which emerged from these interviews were striking in their consistency: women were highly aware of the stigma associated with their participation in sex work and few wanted to risk openly identifying as sex workers. This impacted not only their access to social support, but also was a theme commonly reported by those who expressed a desire to exit the sex industry entirely, citing weariness with the stress of leading a double life. Given the powerful social stigma against sex work in the United States, the potential consequences of coming out may be quite damaging, including loss of relationships, social status, and potentially even arrest and imprisonment.

Several limitations must be considered when evaluating the findings reported here. Although a sample of 30 interviews is small for quantitative research, as a qualitative data set it provided a rich variety of possible themes (Starks and Trinidad 2007). Future research in this area would benefit from a larger and more racially and ethnically diverse sample of women. The sample was majority white, over-representing the experiences of white and northern European women. However, in terms of ethnic representation, this was roughly comparable to the population of women advertising as independent escorts on the major escorting website where most of the participants for this project were recruited.

The narratives explored in this research highlight issues of race, class, and beauty norms in the United States—these issues warrant explicit focus in future research on sex work. Because this sample deliberately explored the experiences of women working independently as escorts, these findings should not be generalized to sex workers who work for third parties such as agencies, madams, brothels and pimps (although some of the women related previous experience working with third parties). Additionally, although some of the women who participated in this study reported feeling economically coerced into sex work, none had been trafficked or

forced into sex work. Unlike prior research on street based sex workers, the sample presented here was overall highly educated and stably housed; thus these findings should not be generalized to samples of street-based sex workers. Moreover, the women in this study worked primarily in large urban cities in the United States, and their experiences may be different than those of sex workers who work outside the US or in less urban environments. Finally, the individuals in this project all identified as women, and their experiences should not be generalized to male sex workers, although recent research has identified areas where their experiences find common ground (Koken et al. 2009). Future research on stigma coping strategies among sex work would benefit from a large sample representing sex workers of all genders and sexual identities, as well as a cross section of working venues. Such research would allow for further exploration of how race, gender, sexuality and economic position intersect with experiences in sex work, and how these factors relate to mental and physical health outcomes.

The sample presented here, composed entirely of independent, Internet based female sex workers not only contributes to the growing body of work on indoor sex workers, but along with Bernstein's (2007) work, may hint at changes to come in the sex industry. Unlike samples of street based sex workers, the sample was well educated and many women were actively pursuing career goals outside of sex work. The Internet served as a convenient way to meet and negotiate with clients remotely prior to in person meetings, and provides a more private arena to engage in these negotiations than the street. As ease of access to the Internet increases it is possible that more sex workers may transition to working independently as the need for third parties such as madams, escort agencies and brothel managers wanes. Additionally, the wide range in fees charged by the women who participated in this project reflect an economic stratification within sex work that appears organized along lines of age, race, and body shape—thus it appears that the Internet is not simply the domain of the most highly privileged sex workers.

Unlike previous samples of street based sex workers (Sallmann 2010; Thukral and Ditmore 2003; Whitaker et al. 2011), although most women in this sample expressed financial motivations for entering sex work, none reported being forced or coerced into the work by pimps or traffickers, and none reported working primarily to support a drug habit. However, narratives regarding women's perception of the stigma attached to sex work, and the potential or real consequences of being labeled a sex worker, were fairly consistent with previous research on stigma among street based, substance using sex workers (Sallmann 2010; Whitaker et al. 2011). It appears that negative tropes regarding women's participation in sex work are widely shared and that even the comparatively privileged group of women sampled for the present study felt vulnerable to being labeled in potentially extreme ways ("dirty" "diseased" "whore").

Future research and social policy aimed at assessing and improving the health of women in the sex industry should aim to identify ways in which stigma surrounding sex work may be reduced. Collaborative partnerships between sex workers, sex work advocates, law enforcement and service providers such as health care workers and therapists could help improve services for sex workers. Sex workers themselves should be included in research and social policy on sex work in order to craft more relevant and effective programs and policies. Partnerships between researchers,

service providers, policy makers and sex workers are needed in order to craft relevant, feasible and effective strategies for improving the health and status of sex workers (Benoit et al. 2005; Harcourt et al. 2010).

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