



Challenges and Benefits of Disclosure of Sex Work to Intimate Partners

Mikael Jansson, Michaela Smith, Cecilia Benoit, Douglas Magnuson & Priscilla Healey

To cite this article: Mikael Jansson, Michaela Smith, Cecilia Benoit, Douglas Magnuson & Priscilla Healey (2022): Challenges and Benefits of Disclosure of Sex Work to Intimate Partners, The Journal of Sex Research, DOI: [10.1080/00224499.2022.2092587](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2022.2092587)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2022.2092587>



Published online: 25 Jul 2022.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



Challenges and Benefits of Disclosure of Sex Work to Intimate Partners

Mikael Jansson^a, Michaela Smith^b, Cecilia Benoit^a, Douglas Magnuson^c, and Priscilla Healey^c

^aCanadian Institute for Substance Use Research & Department of Sociology, University of Victoria; ^bCanadian Institute for Substance Use Research, University of Victoria; ^cSchool of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria

ABSTRACT

Sex workers' noncommercial intimate partnerships are marginalized on two counts – they are non-monogamous and at least one partner is in sex work, an occupation with much stigma. We asked a heterogeneous sample of Canadian sex workers (N = 218) about their decisions to reveal/not reveal their sex work to intimate partners, and the resulting challenges and benefits. A minority (58/183) of participants who had been or were currently involved in an intimate relationship kept their work secret from at least one partner or disclosed limited information, shielding them from stigma but resulting in a burden of secrecy. The majority of participants (151/183) who had been/were currently involved in an intimate relationship chose to disclose their sex work to at least one partner, which for most, had one or more negative consequences. A small group of participants related that disclosure resulted in acceptance, support, and understanding from their intimate partner. Some participants avoided the disclosure dilemma by forming intimate relationships from social connections where sex work status was already known. These relationships were generally supportive. We conclude that intimate relationships provide positive experiences for many people who sell sexual services and that these relationships could be stronger if societal stigma was reduced.

Introduction

Sex workers' noncommercial intimate partnerships fit the definition of marginalized relationships, that is, “non-traditional, romantic involvements in which couple members experience social disapproval” (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006, p. 41), either from those in their social networks and/or the larger society (Lehmiller, 2012). Examples include situations when one or both partners routinely experience disapproval because of involvement in interracial, same-sex, age-gap, interreligious or mixed social class romantic arrangements (Lehmiller & Ioerger, 2014). Non-traditional romantic relationships also include consensual non-monogamous (CNM) relationships – swinging, sexually open relationships, and multiple romantic (e.g., polyamorous, polygamous) relationships – which involve explicit agreement that each partner may have romantic or sexual relationships with others/engage in extra dyadic sexual or romantic liaisons (Balzarini et al., 2019; Conley et al., 2013). These intimate arrangements are generally stigmatized because they disrupt societal values and norms about monogamy (Conley et al., 2013; Rubel & Bogaert, 2015). Nevertheless, consensual non-monogamists seem to have similar psychological well-being and relationship quality as monogamists (Rubel & Bogaert, 2015).

In this article, we focus on the intimate relationships of people who sell sexual services, who have to contend with pervasive societal stigma that has a crippling effect on all aspects of their lives. Adults involved in consensual sex work in Canada face formidable legal and cultural barriers to social inclusion. The country's current prostitution law,

Bill C-36, the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (PCEPA), bans purchasing sexual services, receiving material benefits from prostitution, and procuring services (Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act, 2014). It also makes it illegal for newspaper and magazine publishers, website administrators, and web-hosting services to publish advertisements for any sexual services and prohibits communicating for the sale and purchase of sexual services in a public place next to a school ground, playground, or day-care center (Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act, 2014). Numerous countries have criminalized the purchase of sexual services, including the USA, Sweden, Norway, Northern Ireland, France and the Republic of Ireland (Benoit et al., 2019a). In some other countries, such as England and India, the sale and purchase of sexual services is legal but it is difficult to do so legally because most related activities are illegal. In only a small number of countries or sub-nation states is the buying and selling of sex services fully decriminalized and regulated under other government legislation (Benoit et al., 2019a).

This paper sheds light on the decision-making process sex workers participate in when considering whether to divulge their job to intimate partners, a process complicated by sex work stigma and fear that partners will react negatively once the secret information is revealed. We first briefly review scholarship on sex workers' intimate relationships and then present qualitative results from interviews with a heterogeneous

sample of Canadian sex workers about their decision-making process to reveal or not reveal their sex work to intimate partners, and the resulting challenges and benefits of non-disclosure/disclosure.

Research on Sex Workers' Intimate Relationships

Individuals in CNM relationships contravene societal norms against engaging in non-monogamous sexual relationships with more than one person concurrently. Conley et al. (2013) stated that “prostitution is punishable because it violates our monogamous ideals and highlights people’s willingness to engage in noncommitted relationships that do not revolve around family, fidelity, love, romance, and marriage” (p. 3). Sex workers’ intimate partnerships are also socially challenged because, in addition to being in a CNM relationship, one partner is engaged in a line of work that is highly stigmatized (Benoit et al., 2018, 2020; Jiao & Bungay, 2019; Lazarus et al., 2012). Most sex workers go to great lengths to hide their work from others, fearing a derogatory label such as prostitute, whore, or hooker, being constructed as deviant “other,” and being denied social rights enjoyed by other citizens (Abel, 2011; Benoit et al., 2019b; Pheterson, 1990; Scambler, 2007; Vanwesenbeeck, 2017; Weitzer, 2010). There are many other examples where people in intimate relationships who conceal “off limits” or “taboo” topics from their partner face a similar fate (Anderson et al., 2011; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985), including people living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV; Bird et al., 2017; Green et al., 2018) and/or people with a bi-sexual orientation (Schrimshaw et al., 2018). However, as with all major secrets between intimate couples, the consequences of concealment can be devastating (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004), leading to a reciprocal cycle of hiding information from each other, long-term instability, and even relationship dissolution (Uysal et al., 2012).

Societal context is important in the decision to engage in non-traditional romantic relationships and disclose stigmatizing information to romantic partners. Canadian laws governing sexuality have become less restrictive in recent decades with the removal of abortion, adult pornography and private sexual acts between same sex couples from the Criminal Code (White, 2013). Additionally, today, the Canada Human Rights Act (1985) prohibits discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, marital status, family status, genetic characteristics and disability. Legal changes can help reduce (though usually not eliminate) stigma.

Previous studies show that people who sell sexual services engage in a complex decision-making process about concealing/disclosing their line of work to partners or potential partners, whereby they carefully assess “the costs of revealing the truth by summing up the likelihood of disapproval” (Sanders, 2005, p. 121). Sanders’s (2005) sample of sex workers (N = 44) reported that in their current relationships, 13 women had not told their intimate partner they did sex work, 31 had told their partner, and just over half said they had not told a partner in

a previous relationship. Bellhouse et al. (2015) stated just over half of sex worker participants had revealed their occupation to intimate partners.

There are pros and cons for not disclosing sex work to an intimate partner. On the one hand, concealment is perceived to be a protective factor against stigma and other negative consequences of identity exposure (Jackson et al., 2009). Avoiding a breakdown of the relationship is also noted in the literature (Sanders, 2005). On the other hand, “[w]omen who had not told their partners about their work commonly expressed concerns about lying to their partners and the guilt this caused them to feel” (Bellhouse et al., 2015, p. 8). Concealment was overwhelming, due to a sense of inauthenticity and living in constant fear of “being outed” – i.e. having their occupation becoming known in their social networks and/or the wider society (Jackson et al., 2009; Jiao & Bungay, 2019; Warr & Pyett, 1999). The stress of keeping work secret also reduced the quality of the romantic relationship (Murphy et al., 2015), and at times resulted in negative emotional responses from the partner (Jiao & Bungay, 2019).

Some researchers have reported on the major costs sex workers have to contend with once their work status is revealed to intimate partners. Harms accompanying disclosure include partner’s jealousy, anger about being “cheated on” and attempts to evoke guilt or normalize their experience of jealousy (Bellhouse et al., 2015; Bilardi et al., 2011; Bradley, 2007; Bradley-Egan, 2009; Colosi, 2010; Murphy et al., 2015). Other researchers have reported verbal harassment, such as name-calling, as well as financial exploitation and even victimization by intimate partners when they learn their lover is involved in sex work (Barton, 2006; Benoit et al., 2013a; Bradley, 2007; Dalla, 2001; Onyango et al., 2019; Ulibarri et al., 2019). In some cases, the non-sex work partner threatens to end the relationship unless their mate exits sex work (Colosi, 2010; Jiao & Bungay, 2019). Intimate partners may have trouble comprehending the labor that goes into doing sex work and why sex workers choose to work in the sex industry compared to other jobs available to them (Barton, 2006; Benoit et al., 2017b, 2019b). As Bradley (2007) stated regarding exotic dancers:

“[A]lthough partners may be unsatisfied with characteristics related to a partner’s occupation (spending less time at home, making less money), control techniques in dancer relationships are inherently related to the occupation itself, in that being involved in this career is shameful or identifies them as ‘bad’ and thus deserving of poor treatment”. (p. 390)

There are rare reports in the academic literature of more positive experiences for sex workers who reveal their work status to intimate partners, including a husband/boyfriend playing a protective role (Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006a). Bellhouse et al. (2015) also found that openness about their occupation had helped some sex workers “experience deeper intimacy with their partners and that sex work improved their private sex life as well as their self-esteem and confidence” (p. 9). For some of the participants in Murphy et al.’s (2015) study, being open about their sex work with their romantic partner “made them feel supported and accepted” (p. 1110).

Only a few researchers studied those who intentionally sought intimate partnerships among people involved in the sex industry (i.e., clients, other sex workers). Bellhouse et al. (2015) and Warr and Pyett (1999) mentioned in passing that a few sex work participants had met their current partners as clients but did not present details on relationship quality. Shannon et al. (2008) reported that several women participants who were currently using drugs and involved in survival sex work labeled their boyfriends “glorified pimps” (p. 914). Bradley (2007) reported that some exotic dancers in her study became romantically involved with men they knew through their work and these were “lesser partners”: “[I]ndependent of their profession, women who would otherwise have their choice of very high quality partners appear to often select poor quality partners” (p. 400).

In summary, much of the literature indicates that disclosing their sex work to intimate partners had a negative impact for sex workers, with just a few studies reporting tangible benefits of openness. Of the 16 empirical studies listed above, most included only ciswomen sex workers in their samples (one included transwomen and one focused on cismen in sex work). Except for one study, partners of sex workers were identified as cismen or not described at all. Just two studies provided information on sexual orientation. Data on race/ethnicity was provided for only five studies. In three of these studies, the majority of sex workers was described as White. Two studies identified a significant population of Black and Indigenous sex workers. Sample sizes also tended to be small across the extant literature. Only five studies had a sample size greater than 50 and only one study had a sample size greater than 100 participants. Just five of the studies surveyed sex workers in multiple work locations (street, parlor, home, etc.) of the industry. These limitations increase the probability of sampling bias and threaten the goal to generalize the understanding that the workers and relationships are diverse (Benoit et al., 2019a; Earp & Moen, 2016; Shaver, 2019).

In alignment with Matos and Haze (2019) that “[e]xploring the factors that facilitate a healthy romantic relationship amongst sex workers holds potential to play an important role in improving the well-being of their lives” (p. 380), this article investigates past and current disclosure of occupational status to intimate partners from a demographically diverse sample of sex workers in six communities across Canada. Most participants reported having at least one nonpaying romantic partner at some point during their involvement in sex work. Our results uncover the elaborate decision-making process sex workers participate in when considering whether to divulge their job to intimate partners, whose reactions are unknown until the secret information is revealed.

Materials and Method

Study and Procedures

The data for this article were drawn from a multi-project team grant that examined the perspectives and experiences of each of the following: 1) those who sell sexual services, 2) intimate partners of workers, 3) those who buy sexual services, 4) those who manage the services and 5) those involved in

regulating the industry. The main goal of the team grant was to shed light on the contexts of vulnerabilities, resiliencies and care among adults in sex work in Canada.

The project adopted a community-based participatory approach that is appropriate for studying hard-to-reach/hidden populations contending with social inequalities, stigma and discrimination (Benoit, 2021; Benoit et al., 2017a, 2005; Minkler, 2010; Rhodes et al., 2010). The first and third authors have been learning from sex workers for the last quarter century. Perhaps because of their expertise researching socially excluded and stigmatized groups, in particular, people marginalized by their gender, race/ethnicity, class and other markers of inequality, the first and third authors were approached in the late 1900s by a sex work outreach organization seeking help with designing and carrying out research on their clientele. Remaining authors are colleagues and research assistants who have worked with the first and third authors on multiple projects. All authors have acquired the most insight in sex work directly from sex workers and not through their own selling of sexual services.

Team members included people with past and present sex work experience, representatives from government agencies, universities and outreach agencies serving a wide diversity of users that included detox and needle exchange agencies, sex health clinics, outreach agencies serving Indigenous peoples and trans and non-binary identified clients, sexual assault centers and transition houses serving women and children leaving violent situations, and public health and human rights groups. Many of the collaborators on the research team had worked together on previous research projects. A small number of new collaborators joined after being referred by existing team members. During a series of project meetings, co-researchers designed the study, the data collection strategies and the preliminary research dissemination approach. The latter started with a project working paper that was shared widely with the media, government officials and community organizations (Belle-Isle et al., 2014).

The inclusion criteria for the study were decided with the aim of interviewing adults who had sold sexual services in-person on at least on a part-time basis in the previous year. We defined prostitution/sex work as payment for the exchange of sexual services, similar to the Canadian Criminal Code laws. Eligible participants were 19 years or older and required to have received money in exchange for in-person sexual services on at least 15 different occasions in the 12 months preceding the interview, with the aim of interviewing adults who were habitually involved in sex work.

Randomization of participant selection with a hidden population such as people who sell sexual services is difficult to achieve, so researchers like Weitzer (2010) have recommended sampling in a variety of geographical locations and including different types of sex work, in order to approximate a representative sample of the population. Traditional methods of recruitment, including snowball sampling, key informant sampling, and targeted sampling, are each associated with sampling bias. Furthermore, reporting bias threatens data validity, particularly when participants are asked about behaviors they may perceive as socially unacceptable. We worked to

mitigate sampling bias by using multiple concurrent recruitment strategies used in earlier studies (e.g., McCarthy et al., 2014).

In 2013, participants were recruited from six census metropolitan areas (CMAs) in Canada (Victoria, Calgary, Wood Buffalo, Montreal, St. John's, and Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge). These particular research sites were selected by aiming for heterogeneity of 14 census measures from a sample of 93 Canadian CMAs. These include the prevalence of visible minorities, cultural heterogeneity, population mobility, median household income, and education. Our objective was to represent, as much as possible, the diversity of social, political, and cultural contexts that are likely to condition the organization and practices relating to the sex industry in Canada. The CMAs chosen vary significantly in the percentage of the population who are visible minorities, social/cultural homogeneity measured by ethnic concentration, population mobility (the percentage of people who report a dwelling change in the past year, educational levels, and median household incomes).

Our recruitment strategy within each research location began by identifying all the various sites where we could advertise for our study. We created a list of escort agencies using local telephone and internet directories for escort and adult companionship services. The researchers contacted all unique names and unique contact information. Similarly, an informal list of websites where we advertised our study was compiled. While some of these sites were identified through online research, many were learned about by speaking to key informants at community outreach agencies or by drawing on the research team's personal knowledge and resources. This was deemed an important strategy for determining relevant sites for recruiting more hidden/harder to reach participants. At the same time we compiled a list of "active" independent sex workers who were currently advertising their sexual services in local, on-line and print forums through online searches of sites. We hired local research assistants in each research site who were working in or had recently worked in the sex industry or had links to community organizations and could converse in the official language (important for French-speaking Montreal). The vast majority of people who were contacted more than once (even those we had already interviewed) appeared understanding with our inability to determine that two unique names and contact information actually led to the same individual. We updated a detailed spreadsheet daily with information that included advertised name, website, e-mail address, phone number, and the number of times each individual was contacted. Using the advertised contact information, we attempted to contact each potential participant at least four times, or until we received a positive or negative response.

For each site, we also compiled a list of community outreach service organizations. Additional organizations were identified by community referrals, websites, service support engines and local community supports where we hoped to recruit a more diverse sample of participants (people in sex work from Indigenous backgrounds, LGBTQ2S+ people and cis-men). We made many in-person visits to escort agencies and outreach agencies to present our study and left posters and contact

cards. Moreover, we posted widely, including in educational institutions, health centers, etc., and closely monitored where participants found out about the study and removed posters/ads if too many were coming from same source.

Finally, we employed the respondent-driven sampling recruitment strategy. In respondent-driven sampling, participants serve as "seeds." Seeds receive recruitment coupons that describe the study and invite others to an interview. The seeds receive a small honorarium for each referred peer (a maximum of three) who participate in the study (Heckathorn, 2002). Respondent-driven sampling assumes that networks of hard-to-reach populations often overlap and that members are more likely to respond to the appeals of their peers than those of unfamiliar researchers.

We adjusted our strategies throughout to ensure that no one strategy became dominant – that is, that the sampling bias from a particular strategy would not greatly affect the overall sample. We recruited 34 participants from the St. John's CMA, 54 from the Montreal CMA, 34 from the Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge CMA, 9 from the Wood Buffalo (Fort McMurray) CMA, 41 from the Calgary CMA, and 46 from the Victoria CMA, for a total of 218 participants who comprised a diverse cross-section of sex workers in regards to age, gender, sexual identity, Indigenous status and racial backgrounds, and who advertised, negotiated, and delivered services in a diversity of settings. Recruitment was challenging in the Wood Buffalo (Fort McMurray) CMA because sex workers tend to travel to, rather than reside in, the area for work, making the time window for both recruitment and conducting an interview prohibitively narrow.

In the end, we feel that our sample of sex workers is one of the most comprehensive to be found in the Canadian research literature. Although the sample from Wood Buffalo is the most limited, in the other locations we are reasonably confident that we have good representation from key subgroups such as independent street-based (though not managed street-based), independent indoor, and managed indoor workers, with diverse ages, family configurations, and variations in gender identity. The Human Research Ethics Board at the authors' institution approved all components of the research protocol.

Interview Procedure

A \$60 CAD honorarium was provided to participants in recognition of their time and expertise shared during the research process. The in-person interview involved closed-ended and open-ended quantitative and qualitative questions. The closed-ended questionnaire included questions about several demographic characteristics, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, median income, and marital status, physical and mental health, unmet health care needs and community belonging, routinely used in Statistics Canada population and health surveys, to develop a descriptive portrait of our sample of sex workers compared to other Canadians. We also asked questions using scales validated by other researchers, including perceived stigma, resilience and childhood trauma, variables of interest for shedding light on the distal and current factors linked to involvement in sex work. Perceived stigma was assessed using an adapted version of a validated scale developed for research

on mental illness, the 12-item Perceived Devaluation Discrimination scale (Link & Phelan, 2001). The Perceived Devaluation-Discrimination scale contained items such as “Most people would think less of a person who is working in the sex industry” and “Most people in my community would treat a sex worker just as they would treat anyone.” The items were scored on a 6-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. We assessed resilience using the 14-Item Resilience Scale (RS-14; Wagnild, 2009), which contains items such as “My belief in myself gets me through hard times” and “In an emergency, I’m someone people can generally rely on,” which were scored on a 7-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Childhood sexual and physical abuse was measured using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein & Fink, 1998).

Most participants reported trying out different work locations/sex markets concurrently and over time. Binary categories such as outdoor/indoor or on street/off street were not used because they fail to illustrate the wide range of locations (home, hotels, motels, studios, bars, vehicles and parks) where participants negotiated and delivered sex work services. During the 12 months preceding the interview, one-third of participants had delivered sexual services in an outdoor location (“park/outdoors” or “vehicle”), while almost everyone (99%) delivered services in an indoor location such as their own residence, a hotel room or an escort agency.

We asked a number of open-ended questions after the closed-ended questionnaire was completed. Open-ended questions included life circumstances when first engaging in sex work, views on prostitution laws, experiences of stigma and discrimination at work and in their personal life, current working conditions in sex work and other jobs held and, of interest to this article, disclosure of sex work to intimate partners. The interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes. The majority of interviews were conducted by the first and third author in a location preferred by the participant, including participants’ homes, coffee shops, and other public spaces. Interviews in English and French were audio-recorded, transcribed and the latter translated to English.

The qualitative data analyzed for this article were taken from the open-ended discussion that followed two related questions: 1) *Earlier you told me you are involved in a romantic relationship. Can we talk a little bit more about what your partner knows and doesn’t know about your involvement in the sex industry?* 2) *Can you tell me a little bit about how much your ex-partners knew about your involvement in sex work?* These two questions were followed by a series of probes examining the dilemma of disclosure, whether the knowledge was a source of conflict or a factor in the dissolution of the relationship, the level of support from the partner, and the impact of sex work on relationship quality. Out of the 218 sex workers who were interviewed, 183 reported having at least one intimate partner during their involvement in sex work. Many participants reported having had more than one ex-partner in the past, in addition to their current partner.

Data Analysis

Participants’ answers were coded using *NVivo* 10 software, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines. Braun and Clarke (2006) described the “bottom up” and “top down” approaches to choosing themes, and in this study, some of both approaches were used to select the appropriate themes. The second author began coding by first reading through all transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the data. Twenty transcripts were randomly selected (10 from the questions about the partner and 10 from the questions about the ex-partner) for the team of authors to review independently and code. The authors subsequently compared their coding schemes, and through numerous steps of re-visiting the data and comparing coding strategies, achieved unanimity on a final coding structure. The second author then applied this coding framework to the full sample. The analysis thus consisted of collaborative, iterative cycles of coding the data, considering themes, reviewing the relevant literature, auditing coding, re-considering themes, and re-coding conducted by multiple authors until consensus was achieved on final codes. Throughout we paid close attention to the “lived experience” of the participants in our study (Charmaz, 1990, p. 1162), i.e., those who possess “personal knowledge of the world gained through direct participation and involvement in the event or phenomenon” (Sibeoni et al., 2020, p. 3). These verification techniques were engaged to help improve consistency in the qualitative analysis and interpretation phases of the study (Morse, 2015). All participants quoted below were given pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

Results

Descriptive Findings

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 61 years, with 34 being the mean age. The mean age of first sale of sexual services was 24 years; 28% first sold a sexual service before age 19. Of participants, 76% identified as ciswomen, 17% as cismen and 7% as another gender, (i.e., transgender, transwoman, transitioning, two-spirited, androgynous, gender queer or gender fluid) or indicated a different sex assigned

at birth. In all, 19% identified as Indigenous (First Nations, Métis or Inuit) and 12% as a visible minority. Participants’ mean score on the Perceived Devaluation-Discrimination scale was 4.8 (SD = 0.67) on a six-point scale, with higher values indicating higher levels of perceived stigma. This is a comparatively high level of stigma compared to other studies of other marginalized populations, including people with mental health conditions (4.2; Link, 1987), people who are legally blind (3.4; Benoit et al., 2013b) and outreach workers providing services to sex workers (3.3; Phillips et al., 2012). Perceived stigma scores did not differ in any notable way across gender or work setting, but Indigenous participants had significantly higher scores when compared to visible minorities ($p < .05$) and other participants ($p < .05$), with scores of 5.1, 4.7 and 4.7, respectively. The mean

resilience score (RS-14) for the group was 5.3 (SD = 0.96) on a seven-point scale, with higher values indicating more resilience. There were no significant differences in resilience scores among genders or ethnicities, but those working predominantly indoors had higher resiliency scores than workers predominantly working close to the street (5.4 vs. 5.0, $p < .05$). Participants who reported a high degree of childhood trauma were more likely to have begun selling sexual services before the age of 19 (43% vs 20%), were more likely than other participants to have been in foster care (38% vs 24%), have experienced moderate to severe sexual abuse (60% vs 46%), and have experienced moderate to severe physical abuse (51% vs 34%; Benoit et al., 2017b).

The participants reported a high occurrence of other social factors related to structural marginalization (see, Table 1). They were more likely to identify as ciswomen, as Indigenous and were younger than other Canadian workers. Participants were also less likely to have finished high school, to be homeowners, and to be currently involved in intimate relationships. Only regarding annual personal income were participants more advantaged than other Canadian workers (Benoit et al., 2016a).

Other characteristics, including sexual orientation and mental health, tell a comparable chronicle of disadvantage. One-half of participants reported good or excellent general health; one-third reported good or excellent mental health, and nearly half reported unmet health needs. Two-thirds said they were a recipient of income assistance and one-third said they currently had a long-term disability. Two-thirds reported that in the last 12 months, they received free food or meals, half of the respondents disclosed that they borrowed money from friends or family to help meet bill payments and one-third said they had not paid the full amount of their rent or mortgage, or the full amount for utilities (Benoit et al., 2020).

Finally, marginalization of sex workers as a group is evident by their high rates of assault and victimization compared to the general population. Just over 40% of participants reported

experiencing work-based violent victimization in the past year: 18% were robbed, 24% were attacked, and 29% sexually assaulted. Workers reported being victimized by managers, coworkers and clients. It may be helpful to compare these statistics to another occupation. Hesketh et al. (2003) found that emergency care nurses had higher levels of overall workplace violence, although sexual assault was rare and robbery not reported: During the *last five work shifts*, 22% reported that they had been physically assaulted by a patient, visitor, coworker or other person, and 0.5% said they had been sexually assaulted (Hesketh et al., 2003).

Victimization at work is only part of the exposure to violence for sex workers. Just over half (51%) reported being physically or sexually victimized by an intimate partner/spouse in the five years predating our study. By comparison, 4% of Canadians surveyed in the 2014 Canadian General Social Survey reported having been physically and/or sexually victimized by their intimate partner during the prior five years. Canadians identifying as gay, lesbian or bisexual were twice as likely as heterosexuals to report such victimization (8% versus 4%, respectively; Statistics Canada, 2014). The figures for Canadians identifying as Indigenous were more than twice as likely as non-Indigenous Canadians (9% versus 4%, respectively; Burczyk & Conroy, 2016).

In summary, our participants face several ladders of marginalization, the most prominent of which are: childhood and adult economic vulnerability, gender, race, sexuality, and legal contexts, resulting in a reluctance to seek out health and protective services (Benoit et al., 2016a, 2016b). Despite the formidable barriers to social inclusion they face, our earlier results show that participants exercise individual agency (even if at times constrained) in their work. Below we report on their exercise of agency in their personal lives. Broadly, we show that participants engage in a complex decision-making process regarding whether or not to make known their work status to romantic partners, as the consequences are unknown until the point of disclosure. Disclosing sex work to one's intimate partner was the choice of most participants and, surprisingly, the consequences were sometimes positive. We also show some participants avoid the disclosure problem by seeking out partners from within their social and work networks, strategies similar to other marginalized groups. We begin with the topic of non-disclosure, which we predicted would be the most common response but to our surprise was the least mentioned.

Nondisclosure of Sex Work to Intimate Partners

Of the 183 participants who had a partner while they were involved in sex work, just over one-third (58/183) reported that they had kept their work a secret from their partner, mainly because, as Alex put it, "no good would come out of it." Regarding degree of concealment, Brinda declared:

He knows absolutely nothing. And I'm going to keep it that way for as long as I can. I feel like if I tell people they will have the power to ruin my life . . . And it's really my main concern.

Nina, whose partner knows that she had done sex work previously but was unaware of her current involvement, stated that her partner " . . . doesn't see it like the way that I do" because

Table 1. Overview of sex workers' characteristics.

	Adults in the sex industry (n = 218)	Canadian population data* (N = 29,312,160)
Gender		
Women	76%	51%
Men	17%	49%
Trans	7%	-
Age (mean)	34 years	41 years
Ethnicity		
Visible Minority**	12%	22%
Indigenous	19%	5%
Other	69%	73%
Education		
High School	52%	82%
Married/ Common Law	30%	58%
Own Home	11%	67%
Annual Personal Income (median)	\$39,500	\$34,204

* Population data derived from 2016 Canadian census (Statistics Canada, 2017).

**Visible minority people include all non-Caucasian or nonwhite persons except Indigenous peoples.

“he’s embarrassed or ashamed of what other people, and like society thinks. He doesn’t understand it’s just a job, like he would take it personally.” Jeffrey stated that his intimate partner “would have thought it was cheating.” Others, like Dawn, took cues from more generic conversations in deciding whether or not they could expect to be stigmatized by a partner: “Conversations have come up about different things and he is totally against paid sex [. . .] So, I was like ‘oh, never telling you.’”

Some participants worried about partner jealousy once sex work involvement was revealed. Lindsay said that her partner is “a jealous type” so disclosing her sex work to him likely meant that “he would lose his shit. He’d fucking . . . he would be really mad.” According to Mike, “if I tell her, that’d probably be the end of my marriage. That’s a very powerful – that’s a very powerful, you know, reason.” Christy echoed this sentiment by noting, “if he would know, he’d leave me completely.” The threat of violence was a reality for Roxanne, whose partner suspected that she was not being entirely truthful about her work: “He has made comments to kill me – this was like, this month. ‘If I ever found out,’ he’s like ‘that you’re doing anything sexually, I will kill you.’” Erika stated that she did not tell her partner because “he would probably beat me.”

Consequences of Not Telling

Nondisclosure had numerous downsides. Leading a “double life” was emotionally exhausting. As Camilla related: “It’s fucking exhausting . . . It’s really, really hard covering up your tracks all the time.” Sonya noted how it was difficult to balance secretly working with protecting her partner’s physical and emotional health:

I can’t tell him we can’t have sex tonight because I don’t know what happened with another person. And also the stress of where I am, where I go, what I’m doing when he calls me and I’m with a client.

Henrietta spoke about a longer-term negative impact of concealment of her work from a former boyfriend:

He freaked out and told my older daughter and she freaked out and that cascaded the whole thing into the [government agency] and the police getting involved and me losing custody of my younger daughter and being alienated from everybody.

Next we present results of disclosure of sex work to intimate partners, which most participants reported doing in at least one point in time while engaged in sex work.

Disclosure of Sex Work to Intimate Partners

Disclosing sex work to one’s intimate partner was the choice of most participants in at least one of their reported relationships. For those participants whose former or current intimate partners did not have knowledge of their work prior to entering a relationship (125/183), the main motivation for disclosing their sex work centered on the need or desire to be honest. Tasha stated she did not have “[non-paid] sex with anybody without letting them know that I’m a sex worker because I think they should be informed.” Nellie spoke directly about her decision to reveal her occupation: “I felt he had a right to know, and I felt he had a right to hear it from me. I knew he would hear it eventually, right, because it wasn’t a secret.”

Consequences of Telling

Most of those who had revealed their sex work in a past or current partnership (114/183) noted that disclosure of this information had some negative impact on their relationship due to jealousy, stigma, violence, relationship breakdown, and pressures to leave the industry. Expressions of jealousy were linked to participants’ belief that their partners were not able to understand the separation between personal and professional sexual relationships. Lori described how her partner was:

. . . still quite mired in this concept of monogamy in the very traditional sense. So, he could not separate out the fact that my client[s] were my clients and that he was my partner [. . .] He felt I was cheating on him every time.

Some workers felt guilty because their partner was emotionally troubled by their work. As Denise lamented: “He does not like me working, he hates it in fact. It emotionally cripples him.” Other participants said they felt compelled to go out of their way in order to ensure that they did not trigger jealous or emotional reactions from their partners, including Delores:

He knew what I did but it was not ok to talk about it. He also didn’t want to see me in my work clothes. So I couldn’t put on my makeup before I left. I had to do it – well I worked on the street so I did it in cafes. I would go to the restroom of a coffee shop to change my clothes and put on my makeup because he didn’t want to see it. I had to remove my makeup and change my clothes before going home. [. . .] I had to act as if he didn’t know even though he knew.

Lois also noted how her partner’s concerns over her work and his reactions to hearing about interpersonal violence (IPV) caused stress in their relationship and constrained future communication:

He worries about me at work, which I kind of wish he didn’t because it makes me not want to say – like if a bad thing does happen, I don’t want to tell him because I know he’s – like when I told him, like when I told him I got robbed he was so worried about me. I’m like ‘Ah I shouldn’t have told you, I’m fine, whatever.’

Partners’ emotional responses were often coupled with requests (or demands) that the participant leave sex work. Anita recounted how her partner “wants me to quit because he doesn’t like being – me being out there. Even for like safety reasons, and, of course, he wants me to himself.” Georgia described how her ex-husband “hated it [. . .] every day he was begging me to quit, ‘stop, stop, stop, stop.’” Constant reminders of their partners’ dislike of the work led a few participants to stop selling sexual services (albeit often temporarily until the relationship dissolved); Angel said her exit was “a forceful stop. I wanted to keep working, I enjoyed working.”

Some sex workers’ were victims of IPV – whether physical, emotional, or sexual – that they related to their work in the sex industry. For participants like Sabrina, the violence perpetrated by partners was attributed to their fears about others finding out she worked as a stripper:

The first time he hit me, it was because I left a party – I left my phone at a party and he was scared that – he was drunk and high on whatever, and he was scared that people would look for my phone

and realize that I was a stripper. So I think he had all this anxiety and paranoia about me and about people knowing things about me that affected our relationship.

Paulette recounted how her ex-partner exploited her after learning about her work. “He started using it against me, he started selling me to his friends, and his friends used to come by and give him weed or something and then they’d get a blowjob from me, and I’d be forced to do it.”

Partners’ verbal degradation and disrespect had a significant emotional impact on the participants. Misty said an ex-partner “wanted to have sex and I just didn’t and he threw fifty bucks on my coffee table and said ‘will you do it now?’ I’m like ‘you know what, you need to pack your shit and get the fuck out of my house.’” This type of humiliation was not limited to the private sphere, but also occurred in the presence of others, as Jeannie explains:

When he [ex-partner] got drunk is when all of his insecurities would come out. He’d be a like ‘did you fucking suck his dick? Did you fuck him?’ Or in the cab, he’d be like ‘did you suck the cab drivers cock? Do you know what she is? She’s a fucking whore’ and he used to beat me down all the time because he could not handle his own jealousy or his own fucking problems.

Participants reported that some relationships ended because of their sex work. Frieda discussed how this often occurred near the beginning of the relationship when the partner learned of her work: “Most relationships that I’ve started to get on the cusp of seriousness have been – have ended before that could happen just because they say they couldn’t handle it [sex work].” June stated knowledge about involvement in sex work “tears relationships apart.” Reese was incensed when she told her boyfriend about her sex work:

he told me ‘yeah, we’re still going to hang out and stuff but if anyone ever asks if you and I ever went out. No, we were always just friends.’ Fuck you. So that’s people, relationships. That really hurts. I don’t think I’ll be trusting anyone for a while after that.

There were, however, some surprisingly positive consequences of sharing work status with a romantic partner. A minority (11/125) of the participants reported that being open and honest about their sex work with their intimate partner had a beneficial impact on their relationship, leading to understanding from an intimate partner that would not have been available otherwise. Bobby said her partner:

doesn’t like it, but he understands why I do it. And it helps - I showed him this really interesting article online, on Perb, that was written from a male’s perspective of how to date a sex worker ... [A] guy wrote a blog about it, you know, just ‘let her talk about work, this is a job’ and ‘talk about it with her, because there is nothing - anything that goes on in your head is way, way worse than anything that actually happened.’ So, and he knows what I do, when I do it.

Gerry said that understanding was based on the level of details known:

[I]t’s almost knowing, but also not knowing. It’s the haziness of him that makes it uncomfortable, but he also doesn’t want to know the details either, and I don’t really want to share them. I mean, as long as he trusts that I’m not going to fall in love with anybody, which is never going to happen. Then, yeah, that’s usually what the understanding is.

Carrie related that her intimate partner understands and is comfortable with her work:

like he knows my hours. Like I bring the money home obviously, we count it, put it in the bank and decide what we’re going to need for food and stuff like that. We do all that together. I call him, if I don’t answer my phone he knows I’m in a call, that kind of thing. But he’s not like overprotective ... He knows that I love him and I’m not going to leave him for anyone else.

For many of these participants, including Faith, benefits were identified in the increased support that they were able to receive from partners, particularly if something upsetting or frustrating occurred in the work context: “If there’s stress or tension, I feel like someone’s been shitty to me at work then I’ll, I’ll talk about that. And yeah he’s incredibly supportive and understanding, so I think I’m really really lucky.” Support was also experienced through the ability of participants to utilize their partners as safety measures, such as Paulette:

Say I do need a trick or something like that because we’re running low on rent. He’s in the [other] room; he’s my spotter. [...] So it’s pretty decent. I think he’s really understanding of it all and he doesn’t - it doesn’t bother him because he’s there; he knows what’s happening; he can protect me. He can keep me safe.

Others, like Rosa, felt that removing the veil of secrecy surrounding the work allowed for open communication and strengthened bonds: “The honesty with it has brought us closer together and allowed us to remain a part of the relationship.”

For Gina, openness before sexual intercourse resulted in increased intimacy and improve relationship quality:

When we first became romantically involved, I did tell him before we had intercourse, so he knew that from the very beginning ... I think initially it kind of pushed him back a bit, just because he really had to wrap his head around it and he - because it completely shattered this image that he had created of me and - but over time it came to be a very positive thing because he really values honesty so it was difficult but it awoke something, it awoke something within him that he didn’t even realize ... overall the honesty with it has brought us closer together ...

Sidestepping the Disclosure Dilemma

Given the challenges resulting from keeping their work status secret and the negative outcomes for many sex workers when they reveal this secret, it is not surprising that some of the them (44/183) chose to form intimate relationships from preexisting social connections where sex work status was already known. The dilemma of disclosure was thus taken care of before the couple became romantically involved.

Often a “love at first sight” linked to these narratives was that the partner started out as a client and the relationship progressed to an intimate relationship. Candice described this progression:

We met because he was a client, but I, I went to his house the very first time that we met [...] I stayed much longer than the hour and he walked me home. So it was different right from the start.

Similarly, Miriam said that her partner “booked me for an hour, ended up with me for three days.” Paula said her partner was a client who:

Just showed up at my door one day and we just like, fell in love, and from that moment on, we were together. So we were together for 2 and a half years . . . He was obviously well aware of what it is that I did, he cared for me a great deal. He obviously would have preferred that I did not do this work but it never caused a problem in our relationship.

Blake said transparency from the very beginning helped her set the terms of the intimate relationship:

Well, we met, he picked me up. He was actually a client . . . I made an agreement with him at the beginning of the relationship that sex trade work could never be held against me. That was my condition to being his girlfriend before we got into the relationship, was 'I will be your girlfriend as long as you never hold it against me that I'm a sex trade worker. Don't call me a whore, don't tell me I'm cheating on you, don't be like 'but you did this' and he has, for 99 percent he has respected that.

This was also the case for Jamie, who felt empowered to call a partner out for hypocrisy:

When I met him, he never cared, never. And then after like, we started kind of get in a serious relationship, and this is when the judgmental part come [...] he's like 'You don't know how I feel about you having sex with other people la la da da da' so, and then when it comes I go: 'Remember you were a client' you know.

Some participants had formed romantic relationships with others in their social networks who had previous knowledge of their sex work, such as friends or coworkers. Lynda stated: "We were friends before we got together, so he knew what I did." The same was true for Faith: "We've known each other for about two years, or he's – I've been a sex worker ever since I've known him, so he knew that side of my life before we started dating." Similarly, Paulette stated: "he, he's done it [sex work] himself in the past. And we've all experimented, he's really understanding and accepting of everything . . . So he knows, he gets it, and he knows that when you need money, you need money."

A few participants remarked that their intimate (ex) partners had worked with them in the sex industry. Farah said her past two intimate partners "were aware [of her sex work] because both of them were also sex workers so it was fine. My husband now has also done sex work. Not now . . . but these are open people." In Bryant's case: "He knew when I met him [...] he did the same thing [sex work] as me." Phil related:

Yeah, I'd say pretty much all of our surroundings know about the work we do. She's obviously understanding because she does the same line of work, obviously there's some jealousy involved on both of us. But a lot of comprehension also.

Summary and Discussion

Much of the research on sex workers' noncommercial intimate partnerships has focused on problems related to condom use and public health concerns regarding sexually transmitted infections (STIs; Deering et al., 2011; Guida et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2011; Luchters et al., 2013), and on sex workers' experience of IPV (Barton, 2006; Muldoon et al., 2015; Onyango et al., 2019; Shannon et al., 2008; Ulibarri et al., 2019). While important, one downside of these studies is that they serve to perpetuate popular notions that sex workers'

intimate relationships are inherently troubled and result in physical and mental health harms (Bradley, 2007; Dalla, 2001; Muldoon et al., 2015). In this article, we sought to investigate the characteristics of their intimate relationships to explore the accuracy of these popular notions. We show the complexity of the decision-making process that sex workers engage in searching out intimacy while simultaneously protecting themselves from the harms of stigma (Matos & Haze, 2019).

Based on interviews with a diverse sample of sex workers located in different regions of Canada, we found the vast majority of them sought romantic relationships that, like for other people, involves "conscious and consistent efforts to maintain harmony, communication, transparency and trust" (Belleau et al., 2020, p. 32). However, sex workers' relationships are marginalized in our society where monogamy remains the gold standard from which other types of non-monogamous relationships are measured (Conley et al., 2013; Lehmler & Agnew, 2006; Rubel & Bogaert, 2015). Sex workers are also marginalized because they have a tabooed "putative" secret (Anderson et al., 2011; Caughlin et al., 2009) – their job – that in most cases has consequences whether it is known or not to romantic partners. Our participants – over-represented by ciswomen, Indigenous and sexual minorities – also contended with sexist, homophobic and transphobic stigmas (Benoit et al., 2018, 2016b). Despite these challenges, most of our participants in the past and/or currently sought intimacy in their personal lives and gave considerable thought as to whether or not to disclose their discredited work identity. They told us about three main choices available to them: keep sex work secret; disclose it to your partner, or sidestep the dilemma altogether by partnering with people who already know what you do for a living.

A minority of participants chose not to disclose their occupational status to at least some of their noncommercial partners. Participants reported concealment helped them avoid being "outed" and thus ward off stigmatization linked to sex work (Benoit et al., 2018, 2020; Jiao & Bungay, 2019; Lazarus et al., 2012; Pheterson, 1990; Scambler, 2007; Vanwesenbeeck, 2017; Weitzer, 2010). However, there were downsides to such secrecy, including the emotional burden of keeping their sex work activities underground and the continuous stress of living a "double life" with separate identities for their work and personal roles (Benoit et al., 2018, 2019b; Jiao & Bungay, 2019). For at least one of our participants, anger from a partner who inadvertently found out about her sex work resulted in state agency intervention and the loss of her child.

Divulging their occupational status to an intimate partner was the choice of most participants in at least one of their relationships reported. The consequences of this disclosure came with predictable costs for the majority of participants. Similar to what has been reported in other studies, negative outcomes ranged from jealousy and the need to control the amount of information they shared about their work in order to minimize adverse reactions from their partner, to experiences of exploitation and sometimes abuse from partners (Bradley, 2007; Dalla, 2001; Mittal et al., 2018; Sanders, 2005). Participants connected these costs accompanying disclosure to the stigma associated with working in the sex industry (Abel, 2011; Benoit et al., 2018, 2020, 2019b; Jiao & Bungay, 2019; Lazarus et al., 2012).

On the other hand, disclosure of sex work had a positive impact for a minority of sex workers' intimate relationships in our study. After revealing their sex work, some participants conveyed their partners remained a source of support and understanding and that relationship quality improved. Similar findings have been reported in a small number of other studies (Bellhouse et al., 2015; Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006b). In Onyango et al.'s (2019) study in Ghana,

Most relationships between sex workers and their male partners were reciprocal. The woman supported her partner financially and gave him gifts, while he protected her in her work and provided companionship and intimacy. Both men and women referred to helping one another financially, sharing resources and supporting one another emotionally. (p. 38)

A final theme was formation of intimate relationships from preexisting social connections where sex work status was already known. A sizable minority of our participants reported that they had in the past or were currently involved in romantic partnerships with people from their existing social networks, including sex work clients, friends or other sex workers. This strategy for finding intimate partners was not only convenient but may also have been strategic in that they were engaging in intimate relationships with people who were already aware of their sex work. Participants reported there was greater understanding and support from partners who had knowledge about the operation of the sex industry from the get-go. Participants' narratives also suggested they had higher levels of intimate relationship power compared to their other romantic partnerships where disclosure was an issue (Muldoon et al., 2015; Orchard, 2007). Some of the sex workers in our study made calculated decisions to mediate the stigma attached to their work by choosing partners from the existing pool of people who were aware of their work and willing to talk about it. Referring to sex workers' romantic relationships, Matos and Haze (2019) noted: "coping with stigma is best managed through healthy communication and communication appears to be very important to determining overall relationship quality" (p. 379).

As with all research, there are limitations to this study, particularly surrounding the self-reported data from the qualitative questions about current and ex-noncommercial partners. Our data are reflective of this constraint. Moreover, participants may be more likely to remember negative accounts of their relationships, particularly if the relationship has dissolved, thus biasing the answers toward more undesirable themes. Additionally, it is particularly challenging to gather a representative sample from hidden populations such as those doing sex work; while efforts were made during recruitment of participants to collect data from a diversity of sex workers, there are restrictions to generalizing these results beyond this sample. We also did not learn about the circumstances of sex workers who were not involved in romantic partnerships while pursuing sex work. Finally, we did not investigate possible relationship experiences differing by covariates such as race, gender and sexual orientation. We aim to explore possible variations in future papers.

Conclusion

We began the article by challenging the conventional picture often portrayed about sex workers' intimate relationships, namely that they are harmful and sex workers are primarily victims. Our descriptive data show sex workers are indeed structurally marginalized and have limited socioeconomic opportunities. Yet they also show agency in making decisions, including about their romantic relationships. Most participants did not want to keep serious secrets from their partners because they compromised honesty and trust in their partnership, not unlike couples in other marginalized relationships and in traditional marriages. We have extended past studies by investigating the breadth of issues and possibilities connected to whether to tell or not tell intimate partners about sex work involvement and highlighted ways sex workers navigate this difficult decision. While the consequences were sometimes negative, our findings were surprising to the extent that openness with intimate partners often resulted in improved relationship quality.

Future research should investigate why some intimate relationships survive and remain healthy for both sex workers and their partners. Studies might also examine the association between romantic relationship quality and levels of IPV experienced by sex workers. Additionally, studies that follow couples over time would help gain a better understanding of the circumstances under which this type of marginalized relationship is likely to endure. Future studies that examine the marginalization of sex workers relationships due to sex work stigma as well as other pertinent intersecting taboo statuses (e.g., HIV status, non-heterosexual identities, disability, etc.) is also germane. Finally, studies of sex workers and their romantic partners living under decriminalized legal regimes, such as currently is the case in New Zealand and some states in Australia where sex work stigma has reported been reduced (Abel, 2011), would be timely.

An important implication of this research is that intimate relationships can be a significant determinant of health and safety for sex workers. As with other romantic couples, sex workers should have access to counseling services aimed at supporting healthy intimate partnerships. In addition to resources at the interpersonal level, our results suggest the need for equitable policies and programs that support sex workers' empowerment at the community level, including anti-stigma interventions that promote relational resilience and fortify healthy noncommercial partnerships.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our community partners for their numerous contributions to the study and our participants who took part in the interviews. Without their narratives, this work would not have been possible. We also express gratitude to the anonymous reviewers of our article and the JSR editors.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This research was funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research [grant number 115614].

References

- Abel, G. M. (2011). Different stage, different performance: The protective strategy of role play on emotional health in sex work. *Social Science and Medicine*, 72(7), 1177–1184. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.01.021>
- Anderson, M., Kunkel, A., & Dennis, M. R. (2011). Let's (not) talk about that: Bridging the past sexual experiences taboo to build healthy romantic relationships. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 48(4), 381–391. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2010.482215>
- Balzarini, R. N., Dharma, C., Kohut, T., Campbell, L., Lehmler, J. J., Harman, J. J., & Holmes, B. M. (2019). Comparing relationship quality across different types of romantic partners in polyamorous and monogamous relationships. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 48(6), 1749–1767. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-019-1416-7>
- Barton, B. (2006). *Stripped: Inside the lives of exotic dancers*. New York: University Press.
- Baxter, L., & Wilmot, W. (1985). Taboo topics in close relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 2(3), 253–269. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407585023002>
- Belle-Isle, L., Benoit, C., & Pauly, B. (2014). The role of community organizations in addressing health inequities through participatory processes. *Action Research Journal*, 12(2), 177–193. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750314527324>
- Belleau, H., Piazzesi, C., & Seery, A. (2020). Conjugal love from a sociological perspective: Theorizing from observed practices. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 45(1), 23–46. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cjs29434>
- Bellhouse, C., Crebbin, S., Fairley, C. K., & Bilardi, J. E. (2015). The impact of sex work on women's personal romantic relationships and the mental separation of their work and personal lives: A mixed-methods study. *PLoS ONE*, 10(10), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0141575>
- Benoit, C. (2021). Editorial: Understanding exploitation in consensual sex work to inform occupational health & safety regulation: Current issues and policy implications. *Social Sciences*, 10(238), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10070238>
- Benoit, C., Belle-Isle, L., Smith, M., Phillips, R., Shumka, S., Atchison, C., Jansson, M., Loppie, C., & Flagg, J. (2017a). Sex workers as peer health advocates: Community empowerment and transformative learning through a Canadian pilot program. *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 16(160), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-017-0655-2>
- Benoit, C., Jansson, M., Jansenberger, M., & Phillips, R. (2013b). Disability stigmatization as a barrier to employment equity for legally-blind Canadians. *Disability & Society*, 28(7), 970–983. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.741518>
- Benoit, C., Jansson, M., Millar, A., & Phillips, R. (2005). Community-academic research on hard-to-reach populations: Benefits and challenges. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(2), 263–282. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732304267752>
- Benoit, C., Jansson, M., Smith, M., & Flagg, J. (2018). Prostitution stigma and its effect on the working conditions, personal lives, and health of sex workers. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 55(4–5), 457–471. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2017.1393652>
- Benoit, C., Ouellet, N., & Jansson, M. (2016a). Unmet health care needs among sex workers in five census metropolitan areas of Canada. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 107(3), e266–e271. <https://doi.org/10.17269/cjph.107.5178>
- Benoit, C., Ouellet, N., Jansson, M., Magnus, S., & Smith, M. (2017b). Would you think about doing sex for money? Structure and agency in deciding to sell sex in Canada. *Work, Employment & Society*, 31(5), 731–747. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017016679331>
- Benoit, C., Roth, E., Jansson, M., Hallgrimsdottir, H., Ngugi, E., & Sharpe, K. (2013a). Benefits and constraints of intimate partnerships for HIV positive sex workers in Kibera, Kenya. *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 12(76), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1475-9276-12-76>
- Benoit, C., Smith, M., Jansson, M., Healey, P., & Magnuson, D. (2019a). 'The prostitution problem': Claims, evidence, and policy outcomes. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 48(7), 1905–1923. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-018-1276-6>
- Benoit, C., Smith, M., Jansson, M., Healey, P., & Magnuson, D. (2020). The relative quality of sex work. *Work, Employment & Society*, 35(2), 239–255. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017020936872>
- Benoit, C., Smith, M., Jansson, M., Magnus, S., Maurice, R., Flagg, J., & Reist, D. (2019b). Canadian sex workers weigh the costs and benefits of disclosing their occupational status to health providers. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 16(3), 329–341. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-018-0339-8>
- Benoit, C., Smith, M., Jansson, M., Magnus, S., Ouellet, N., Atchison, C., Casey, L., Phillips, R., Reimer, B., Reist, D., & Shaver, F. (2016b). Lack of confidence in police creates a 'blue' ceiling for sex workers' safety. *Canadian Public Policy/Analyse de Politiques*, 42(4), 456–468. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cpp.2016-006>
- Bernstein, D. P., & Fink, L. (1998). *Childhood Trauma Questionnaire: A retrospective self-report: Manual*. San Antonio, TX: The Psychological Corporation.
- Bilardi, J. E., Miller, A., Hocking, J. S., Keogh, L., Cummings, R., Chen, M. Y., Bradshaw, C. S., & Fairley, C. K. (2011). The job satisfaction of female sex workers working in licensed brothels in Victoria, Australia. *Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 8(1), 116–122. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-6109.2010.01967.x>
- Bird, J. D. P., Eversman, M., & Voisin, D. R. (2017). "You just can't trust everybody": The impact of sexual risk, partner type and perceived partner trustworthiness on HIV-status disclosure decisions among HIV-positive black gay and bisexual men. *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 19(8), 829–843. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2016.1267408>
- Bradley, M. S. (2007). Girlfriends, wives, and strippers: Managing stigma in exotic dancer romantic relationships. *Deviant Behavior*, 28(4), 379–406. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639620701233308>
- Bradley-Egan, M. S. (2009). *Naked lives: Inside the worlds of exotic dance*. State University of New York Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Burczycka, M., & Conroy, S. (2016). *Family violence in Canada: A statistical profile*. Juristat: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54893-eng.pdf?st=6SfdVIGA>
- Canada Human Rights Act. (1985). <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/PDF/H-6.pdf>
- Caughlin, J. P., Scott, A. M., Miller, L. E., & Hefner, V. (2009). Putative secrets: When information is supposedly a secret. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 26(5), 713–743. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407509347928>
- Charmaz, K. (1990). 'Discovering' chronic illness: Using grounded theory. *Social Science and Medicine*, 30, 1161–1172. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536\(90\)90256-R](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(90)90256-R)
- Colosi, R. (2010). *Dirty dancing? An ethnography of lap-dancing*. Willan Publishing.
- Conley, T. D., Moors, A. C., Matsick, J. L., & Ziegler, A. (2013). The fewer the merrier?: Assessing stigma surrounding consensually non-monogamous romantic relationships. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 13(1), 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1530-2415.2012.01286.x>
- Dalla, R. L. (2001). Et tu brute?: A qualitative analysis of streetwalking prostitutes' interpersonal support networks. *Journal of Family Issues*, 22(8), 1066–1085. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2F019251301022008006>
- Deering, K. N., Bhattacharjee, P., Bradley, J., Moses, S. S., Shannon, K., Shaw, S. Y., Washington, R., Lowndes, C. M., Boily, M. C., Ramesh, B. M., Rajaram, S., Gurav, K., & Alary, M. (2011). Condom use within non-commercial partnerships of female sex workers in southern India. *BMC Public Health*, 11(SUPPL. 6), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-11-S6-S11>
- Earp, B. D., & Moen, O. M. (2016). Paying for sex-only for people with disabilities? *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 42(1), 54–56. <https://doi.org/10.1136/medethics-2015-103064>

- Green, H. D., Weeks, M. R., Berman, M., Mosher, H. I., Abbott, M., & Garcia, N. (2018). Managing the risk of intimacy: Accounts of disclosure and responsiveness among people with HIV and intimate partners of people with HIV. *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 20(10), 1117–1129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2018.1479535>
- Guida, J., Hu, L., & Liu, H. (2019). Sexual behavior with non-commercial partners: A concurrent partnership study among middle-aged female sex workers in China. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 56(4–5), 670–680. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2018.1434115>
- Heckathorn, D. (2002). Respondent-driven sampling II: Deriving valid population estimates from chain-referral samples of hidden populations. *Social Problems*, 49(1), 11–34. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2002.49.1.11>
- Hesketh, K. L., Duncan, S. M., Estabrooks, C. A., Reimer, M. A., Giovannetti, P., Hyndman, K., & Acorn, S. (2003). Workplace violence in Alberta and British Columbia hospitals. *Health Policy*, 63(3), 311–321. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0168-8510\(02\)00142-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0168-8510(02)00142-2)
- Hoffman, L., Nguyen, H. T. T., Kershaw, T. S., & Niccolai, L. M. (2011). Dangerous subtlety: Relationship-related determinants of consistency of condom use among female sex workers and their regular, non-commercial partners in Hai Phong, Viet Nam. *AIDS and Behavior*, 15(7), 1372–1380. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-010-9819-4>
- Jackson, L. A., Augusta-Scott, T., Burwash-Brennan, M., Karabanow, J., Robertson, K., & Sowinski, B. (2009). Intimate relationships and women involved in the sex trade: Perceptions and experiences of inclusion and exclusion. *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness and Medicine*, 13(1), 25–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363459308097359>
- Jeffrey, L. A., & MacDonald, G. (2006a). “It’s the money, Honey”: The economy of sex work in the Maritimes. *Canadian Review of Sociology*, 43(3), 313–327. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1755-618X.2006.tb02227.x>
- Jeffrey, L. A., & MacDonald, G. (2006b). *Sex workers in the Maritimes talk back*. UBC Press.
- Jiao, S., & Bungay, V. (2019). Intersections of stigma, mental health, and sex work: How Canadian men engaged in sex work navigate and resist stigma to protect their mental health. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 56(4–5), 641–649. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2018.1459446>
- Lazarus, L., Deering, K. N., Nabess, R., Gibson, K., Tyndall, M. W., & Shannon, K. (2012). Occupational stigma as a primary barrier to health care for street-based sex workers in Canada. *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 14(2), 139–150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2011.628411>
- Lehmiller, J. J. (2012). Perceived marginalization and its association with physical and psychological health. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 29(4), 451–469. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407511431187>
- Lehmiller, J. J., & Agnew, C. R. (2006). Marginalized relationships: The impact of social disapproval on romantic relationship commitment. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32(1), 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167205278710>
- Lehmiller, J. J., & Ioerger, M. (2014). Prejudice and stigma in intimate relationships: Implications for relational and personal health outcomes. In C. R. Agnew (Ed.), *Social influences on romantic relationships: Beyond the dyad* (pp. 83–102). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139333610.006>
- Link, B. G. (1987). Understanding labeling effects in the area of mental disorders: An assessment of the effects of expectations of rejection. *American Sociological Review*, 52(1), 96–112. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095395>
- Link, B. G., & Phelan, J. C. (2001). Conceptualizing stigma. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27(1), 363–385. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.363>
- Luchters, S., Richter, M. L., Bosire, W., Nelson, G., Kingola, N., Zhang, X. D., Temmerman, M., & Chersich, M. F. (2013). The contribution of emotional partners to sexual risk taking and violence among female sex workers in Mombasa, Kenya: A cohort study. *PLoS ONE*, 8(8), e68855. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0068855>
- Matos, B., & Haze, L. (2019). Bottoms up: A whorelistic literature review and commentary on sex workers’ romantic relationships. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 34(3), 372–391. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2019.1636958>
- McCarthy, B., Benoit, C., & Jansson, M. (2014). Sex work: A comparative study. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 43(7), 1379–1390. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-014-0281-7>
- Minkler, M. (2010). Linking science and policy through community-based participatory research to study and address health disparities. *American Journal of Public Health*, 100(S1), S81–S94. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2009.165720>
- Mittal, M. L., Bazzi, A. R., Rangel, M. G., Staines, H., Yotebieng, K., Strathdee, S. A., & Syvertsen, J. L. (2018). ‘He’s not my pimp’: Toward an understanding of intimate male partner involvement in female sex work at the Mexico–US border. *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 20(9), 961–975. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2017.1403651>
- Morse, J. (2015). Critical analysis of strategies for determining rigor in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Health Research*, 25(9), 1212–1222. doi:10.1177/1049732315588501
- Muldoon, K. A., Deering, K. N., Feng, C. X., Shoveller, J. A., & Shannon, K. (2015). Sexual relationship power and intimate partner violence among sex workers with non-commercial intimate partners in a Canadian setting. *AIDS Care - Psychological and Socio-Medical Aspects of AIDS/HIV*, 27(4), 512–519. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540121.2014.978732>
- Murphy, H., Dunk-West, P., & Chonody, J. (2015). Emotion work and the management of stigma in female sex workers’ long-term intimate relationships. *Journal of Sociology*, 51(4), 1103–1116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783315614085>
- Onyango, M. A., Adu-Sarkodie, Y., Adjei, R. O., Agyarko-Poku, T., Kopelman, C. H., Green, K., Wambugu, S., Clement, N. F., Wondergem, P., & Beard, J. (2019). Love, power, resilience and vulnerability: Relationship dynamics between female sex workers in Ghana and their intimate partners. *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 21(1), 31–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2018.1446550>
- Orchard, T. (2007). In this life: The impact of gender and tradition on sexuality and relationships for Devadasi sex workers in rural India. *Sexuality & Culture*, 11(1), 3–27. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02853933>
- Pheterson, G. (1990). The category ‘prostitute’ in scientific inquiry. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 27(3), 397–407. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499009551568>
- Phillips, R., Benoit, C., Vallance, K., & Hallgrimsdottir, H. (2012). Courtesy stigma: A hidden health concern among frontline service providers to sex workers. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 34(5), 681–696. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9566.2011.01410.x>
- Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act, (2014). (*testimony of Department of Justice Canada*). https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/annualstatutes/2014_25/FullText.html
- Rhodes, S. D., Malow, R. M., & Jolly, C. (2010). Community-based participatory research (CBPR): A new and not-so-new approach to HIV/AIDS prevention, care, and treatment. *AIDS Education and Prevention*, 11(2), 173–183. <https://doi.org/10.1521/aeap.2010.22.3.173>
- Rubel, A. N., & Bogaert, A. F. (2015). Consensual nonmonogamy: Psychological well-being and relationship quality correlates. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 52(9), 961–982. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2014.942722>
- Sanders, T. (2005). *Sex work: A risky business*. Willan Publishing.
- Scambler, G. (2007). Sex work stigma: Opportunist migrants in London. *Sociology*, 41(6), 1079–1096. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038507082316>
- Schrimshaw, E. W., Downing, M. J., & Cohn, D. J. (2018). Reasons for non-disclosure of sexual orientation among behaviorally bisexual men: Non-disclosure as stigma management. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 47(1), 219–233. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-016-0762-y>
- Shannon, K., Kerr, T., Allinott, S., Chettiar, J., Shoveller, J., & Tyndall, M. W. (2008). Social and structural violence and power relations in mitigating HIV risk of drug-using women in survival sex work. *Social Science & Medicine*, 66(4), 911–921. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2007.11.008
- Shaver, F. M. (2019). The prostitution problem”: Why isn’t evidence used to inform policy initiatives? *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 48(7), 1955–1959. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-018-1374-5>

- Sibeoni, J., Verneuil, L., Manolios, E., & Révah-Levy, A. (2020). A specific method for qualitative medical research: The IPSE (Inductive Process to analyze the Structure of lived Experience) approach. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 20(1), 216. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-020-01099-4>
- Sprecher, S., & Hendrick, S. S. (2004). Self-disclosure in intimate relationships: Associations with individual and relationship characteristics over time. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 23(6), 857–877. <https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.23.6.857.54803>
- Statistics Canada. (2014). *General social survey*. <https://doi.org/10.25318/45250001-eng>
- Statistics Canada. (2017). *Canada [Country] and Canada [Country] (table). Census Profile. 2016 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue Number: 98-316-X2016001*. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>
- Ulibarri, M., Salazar, M., Syvertsen, J., Bazzi, A., Rangel, M., Orozco, H., & Strathdee, S. (2019). Intimate partner violence among female sex workers and their noncommercial male partners in Mexico: A mixed-methods study. *Violence Against Women*, 25(5), 549–571. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801218794302>
- Uysal, A., Lin, H. L., & Bush, A. L. (2012). The reciprocal cycle of self-concealment and trust in romantic relationships. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 42(7), 844–851. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.1904>
- Vanwesenbeeck, I. (2017). Sex work criminalization is barking up the wrong tree. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 46(6), 1631–1640. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-017-1008-3>
- Wagnild, G. (2009). *The Resilience Scale User's Guide: For the U.S. English Version of the Resilience Scale and the 14-Item Resilience Scale (RS-14)*. USA: The Resilience Center. <https://www.resiliencecenter.com/products/publications-including-the-true-resilience-book/resilience-scale-users-guide/>
- Warr, D. J., & Pyett, P. M. (1999). Difficult relations: Sex work, love and intimacy. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 21(3), 290–309. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.00157>
- Weitzer, R. (2010). The mythology of prostitution: Advocacy research and public policy. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 7(1), 15–29. doi:10.1007/s13178-010-0002-5
- White, L. A. (2013). Federalism and equality rights implementation in Canada. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 44(1), 157–182. <https://doi.org/10.1093/publius/pjt019>