



# Would you think about doing sex for money? Structure and agency in deciding to sell sex in Canada

Work, employment and society

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**Cecilia Benoit**

University of Victoria, Canada

**Nadia Ouellet**

University of Victoria, Canada

**Mikael Jansson**

University of Victoria, Canada

**Samantha Magnus**

University of Victoria, Canada

**Michaela Smith**

University of Victoria, Canada

## Abstract

Entry into sex work is not typically considered as an occupational choice comparable to entry into other jobs. In the sex work literature, initiation is often thought to occur through predisposing factors deep in the structure of society, including childhood disadvantage, abuse and neglect. Some studies have also identified need for money as the main reason for entry, while others document entry due to a desire for more disposable income. Few studies have focused on agency-level factors guiding entry, including seeing sex work as a viable career or professional choice. Analysis of data from interviews with a purposive multi-gender sample ( $N = 218$ ) reveals the multiple reasons for entry into sex work in Canada. Participants identified three overlapping structural and agentic reasons for entry: critical life events; desire or need for money; and personal appeal of the work. These findings are discussed in light of the occupational choice and sex work literatures.

## Keywords

agency, occupational choice, sex work, sex workers, structure

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### Corresponding author:

Cecilia Benoit, Centre for Addictions Research of BC, Department of Sociology, University of Victoria, 2300 McKenzie Ave, Victoria, BC V8N 5M8, Canada.

Email: cbenoit@uvic.ca

## **Introduction**

Entry into sex work is not typically treated as an occupational choice comparable to entry into other jobs. Initiation to the industry is thought to occur through a series of predisposing factors beyond sex workers' control. These include dysfunctional socialization involving childhood victimization, parental neglect or isolation from social networks (Dodsworth, 2012; Farley, 2004; Miller, 2002; Pheterson, 1993; Stoltz et al., 2007; Vaddiparti et al., 2006; Wilson and Widom, 2010) and socioeconomic factors, including poverty and the retraction of welfare state support, in particular for single mothers (Rosen and Venkatesh, 2008). Yet other research shows that people who sell sexual services exercise rational choices not dissimilar from those of other personal service workers seeking to make a living in post-industrial societies (Hardy and Sanders, 2015; Jeffrey and McDonald, 2006; Smith, 2012; Sullivan, 2010; Weitzer, 2009). The rise of precarious employment in recent decades (Kalleberg, 2009), coupled with the growth of sexual commerce, is making the sex industry a career option for migrant workers (Agustin, 2007), students pursuing higher education (Roberts et al., 2007) and the middle classes (Bernstein, 2007; Brents and Sanders, 2010; Bruckert, 2002). Women are economically advantaged in these commercial sex markets where the gendered wage gap is reversed due to the high value placed on display of the female body (Mears and Connell, 2016). A small body of research has focused on individual/agency-level factors that offer insight on non-material reasons why people enter sex work, including because they find meaning in the job and even see it as a viable career (Murphy and Venkatesh, 2006) or professional choice (Abel, 2011).

It appears then, that both structure and agency (Wharton, 1991) intertwine in decisions to initially engage in sex work in a particular place and time (Bungay et al., 2011; McCarthy et al., 2014). This article examines the accounts of a diverse sample of adults of different genders selling sexual services in six urban centres of Canada to better understand the interplay of factors that are linked to first involvement. These results are framed in the occupational choice literature, with a focus on studies of why and how economically disadvantaged people enter low-prestige jobs.

## **Contributions and limitations of the occupational choice literature**

Occupational choice frameworks have long incorporated both agentic and structural factors. More than a half century ago, Blau et al. (1956) provided an interdisciplinary conceptual framework for systematic research on occupational choice, tying together economic, psychological and sociological dimensions. Levine (1976) built on this conceptual framework, identifying four inter-related determinants of career selection and trajectory: (a) socioeconomic factors including social class, education, religion, race and gender; (b) family factors including birth order, family size and dynamics such as encouragement and children's propensity to view parents as role models; (c) education-related factors such as credentials and quality of schooling; and (d) personal factors, including intelligence, aptitudes, personality, interests and values (see also Musgrave, 1967). In 1984, Astin proposed a gendered model of occupational choice in

which three basic agentic drives ('survival', 'pleasure' and 'contribution') interact with sex-role socialization and structure of opportunity to guide career choice and work behaviour.

Research examining occupational choice in specific fields has included only some of the determinants of occupational choice identified in these frameworks. For example, studies of paid care workers – including nurses and other care workers – suggest that the desire to help others, or 'contribution' as Astin (1984) puts it, is the most important motive for initial job entry, just above economic reasons (e.g. Beck, 2000; Duffield et al., 2004; Jirwe and Rudman, 2012). In his discussion of career trajectories in medicine, Steinbrook (1994) writes that the choice of a medical career includes a desire to help others but also earning potential, employment opportunities, job stability, prestige, geographic location, intellectual challenge and time for leisure. Although few other careers are studied as extensively as medicine, these motivations, as well as personality characteristics, appear in various combinations with regard to teaching, arts and music careers (e.g. Fokkens-Bruinsma and Carrinus, 2014; Vuust et al., 2010).

Occupational choice studies tend to focus on white collar jobs, where individuals appear to exercise extensive agency in making decisions to enter particular lines of work. For jobs that are more precarious, however, economic motives loom large (Kalleberg, 2009). The fast food workers in Newman's (1999) study cite the main reasons for working in a burger restaurant as poverty, supporting family and paying for post-secondary education. Even these low-prestige jobs without stable career trajectories and chosen under conditions of chronic poverty can involve some agency where individuals seek those jobs most likely to offer dignity, opportunity, escape from violence and avoidance of criminality (Newman, 1999). Willis' (1977) study, *Learning to Labour*, shows how the capitalist economic structure channels working-class 'lads' into manual labour where they demonstrate some agency by actively resisting middle-class notions of mobility through higher education, even if their decisions result in the reproduction of the capitalist class system. Lehmann (2005) reports that economic factors but also strategic choice are present in working-class young people's decision-making about enrolment in apprenticeship programmes in anticipation of placement in the trades or low-prestige service jobs. Likewise Huppatz (2009) reports that making an income (i.e. 'survival', Astin, 1984) is more important for care workers from working-class backgrounds, yet they also articulate a desire to help others as an additional motivation.

In short, occupational choices are determined to a large extent by macro-level economic factors. Yet the opportunity structure at a particular time and place is also shaped by class, gender and other social factors that increase or limit a person's agency in choosing a line of work or career.

## Occupational choice in sex work

The idea that a person might legitimately choose sex work as a viable occupation is, for some, a contradiction in terms. This is because prostitution is typically understood as outside of wage labour; that is, as extreme exploitation or a form of modern slavery (for a critical assessment see O'Connell Davidson, 2015). Indeed, until the 1990s, the

dominant understanding of entry into sex work was the ‘drift into prostitution’ passively experienced by neglected and abused children and teens (Farley, 2004; Miller, 2002; Pheterson, 1993; Stoltz et al., 2007; Vaddiparti et al., 2006; Wilson and Widom, 2010).

Later research reveals that such predisposing factors are ‘much less important than was often expected’ and typically only applicable to street-based workers (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001: 245). Expansion of research into indoor sex work demonstrates that the sex industry is polymorphous (Weitzer, 2012) and class stratified (e.g. Bernstein, 2007; Bruckert, 2002; Hoang, 2011). Weitzer distinguishes between pathways to street-based survival sex (where many sex workers often arrive as runaways) and pathways to indoor work, where entry is gradual and tentative and ‘economic motives predominate, but [sex work] is less about survival than a desire for financial independence or upward mobility’ (2007: 144).

Comparing street-based and parlour-based sex workers, Jeal and Salisbury (2007) find that street-based workers are more likely to be motivated to engage in sex work in order to fund substance use, whereas parlour workers are more likely to be motivated by other economic factors, including the need to pay for living expenses, flexible hours to accommodate childcare and support dependants as a single parent. Similarly, flexibility and higher hourly earnings compared to other accessible service work are key motives for many women to enter the Nevada legalized brothel system (Brents et al., 2010).

Studies which describe entry into other areas of the sex industry such as porn (Abbott, 2000; Griffith et al., 2012; Miller-Young, 2010) and exotic dancing (Bott, 2006) also support conceptions of strategic choice even for the middle classes, whose sexualized labour has become increasingly marketable in late capitalist societies (Bernstein, 2007). As Brents and Sanders argue, these ‘middle-class workers in First World countries find themselves turning to sex work for a liveable wage in a social structure conditioned by high-cost urban living and comparatively low wages for long hours’ (2010: 46). Women involved in body display jobs such as sex work have a substantial wage advantage (Mears and Connell, 2016), and the industry is also attractive to migrant workers (Agustin, 2007) and students seeking to improve their education for more stable careers (Hardy and Sanders, 2015) compared to other work options.

Yet this does not mean occupational choice in sex work is determined by structural factors alone. In her study of street-based sex workers connected to exiting services in the USA, Oselin (2014) reports that some participants also recount the role of excitement and desire for social mobility in their choices. In this way, sex workers, even in structurally vulnerable circumstances, can be understood to be making strategic choices guided by both structure and agency, not unlike the Harlem ‘Burger Barn’ employees studied by Newman (1999). As Rosen and Venkatesh argue, in the context of persistent poverty and instability, sex work ‘offers just enough money and flexibility to make the job worthwhile, and just enough autonomy and professional satisfaction to make it more attractive than other options’ and ‘provides a meaningful option in the quest for a job that provides autonomy and personal fulfilment’ (2008: 417–18).

No studies could be found that situate reasons for initial entry in sex work within frameworks of occupational choice, nor sex work studies that directly focus on the interplay between agentic and structural factors. Drawing on in-person interviews with a

large ( $N = 218$ ) purposive mixed gender sample of workers, this article examines the multiple reasons for initial engagement in sex work in Canada, a post-industrial country marked by growing income inequality resulting from the decline in secure employment, increase in precarious jobs and expansion of commercial sex markets (Bruckert, 2002). The article also investigates links between participants' demographic characteristics, early experiences and current work locations in the decision to sell sex.

## Data and methods

### *The study*

This community-engaged multi-year project examined the perspectives and experiences of each of the following: (1) sex workers; (2) intimate partners of sex workers; (3) sex work customers; (4) sex work managers; and (5) police and other service providers. Collaborators included sex worker-led organizations, outreach agencies and public health or human rights groups. Collaborators assisted in designing the multi-project study, helped with recruitment of participants and supported interpretation of the findings. Sex workers, the focus of the present article, were age of majority (at least 19 years old), legally able to work in Canada and received money in exchange for in-person sexual services on at least 15 different occasions in the previous 12 months. The age threshold was chosen out of interest in recruiting participants who would be subject to potential conviction as adults under the criminal code. The work frequency threshold was determined to only include those who engaged in sex work on at least a part-time regular basis.

Recruitment for face-to-face interviews occurred across six Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) in 2012–13. These research sites were selected from a sample of 93 Canadian CMAs on the basis of 14 census measures with the goal of representing diverse social, political and cultural contexts that likely affect organization and practices relating to the sex industry in Canada (e.g. prevalence of visible minorities, cultural heterogeneity, population mobility, median household income and education). The sample included 218 participants from the six CMAs: 46 from Victoria; 54 from Montreal; 34 from St John's; 34 from Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge; 41 from Calgary; and nine from Wood Buffalo (Fort McMurray). Recruitment in the latter CMA was difficult due to the fact that many of the sex workers travel to, rather than reside in, the metropolitan area, which meant that there was a very narrow period of time to enlist and complete an interview with many of the workers.

Recruitment methods built on those employed in earlier studies (Benoit et al., 2015a, 2015b): direct phone and email contact with sex workers advertising online; placing study ads in local newspapers, on sex work-related websites and on bulletin boards in sex worker outreach agencies, in social support offices and health clinics; and respondent-driven sampling including recruitment by sex workers as hired research assistants. Potential sampling bias introduced within the differing methods of recruitment was minimized through monitoring and adjusting strategies as the study progressed so that no particular recruitment strategy was dominant. Interviews included both a closed-ended and open-ended segment, lasting one-and-a-half hours on average. The majority of the

interviews were conducted by the lead and third author. Each participant received an honorarium of £35. The research project was approved by the research ethics board at the authors' institution.

### *Data analysis*

The quantitative data were analysed using the statistical software SPSS. Qualitative data analysis was conducted with transcribed responses to the following successive open-ended questions: 'Can you tell me about how you first became involved in sex work? What led to the decision to enter the sex industry? What else was going on in your life to help you make this decision?' Braun and Clark's (2006) multiple-step thematic analysis strategy was followed.

Using manual coding, the first three authors independently read and re-read answers to the above questions from a randomly selected sample of 10 transcripts to identify codes for the most salient themes. They then examined one another's coding and co-developed a revised coding scheme; this consensus process served to establish inter-observer consistency between the analysts (Bradshaw and Stratford, 2010). The second author then recoded the selection of transcripts, and met with the other two authors to check for consistency and accuracy and finalize the thematic groupings. The second author then recoded the relevant data from all of the transcripts using NVivo coding software. Based on feedback from journal reviewers, the qualitative data were subsequently recoded to further nuance the findings. The analysis thus consists of collaborative iterative cycles of coding portions of the data, considering themes, auditing coding, re-considering themes and re-coding conducted by multiple authors until consensus was achieved on final codes. These codes were then applied across the entire data set. These verification techniques were employed to help ensure reliability and validity and thus increase rigour in qualitative research (Morse et al., 2002). Nine responses were missing for the open-ended questions of interest due to illegibility and poor recording quality, a participant's desire not to be recorded or incomplete responses. As a result, the qualitative findings discussed below are generated from 209 of the 218 interviews.

Participants' work type falls into three broad categories: independent street-based work; independent indoor work; and managed indoor work. These categories are based on where participants reported regularly working over the previous 12 months, with managed work including work via escort agencies, bars, clubs and massage parlours/studios as well as in-call/out-call work with a supervisor. Workers were said to be street-based if they advertised on the street or delivered services outdoors or in vehicles once a week or more in the last year, even if they also solicited through other means. None of the participants in this study reported being currently engaged in street-based work with a supervisor (all street-based workers were independent); however, many recounted that their entry into sex work fit a fourth 'managed street-based' category. Many sex workers dabbled in different work modalities concurrently and over time, typically describing a progression to indoor-based independent work from the other work types. Childhood sexual and physical abuse was measured using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein and Fink, 1998). Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of participants. Information in parentheses following each quote includes the current work type, age at

which they first sold sexual services and the CMA in which they were recruited for our study.

## Results

### *Demographic profile*

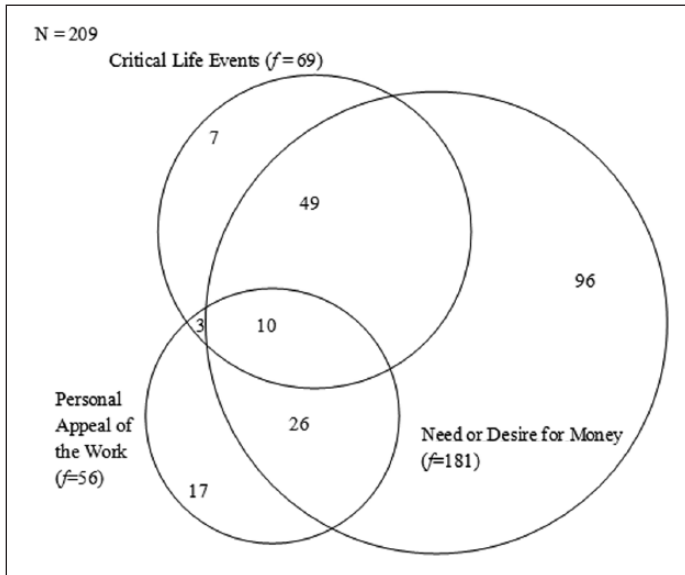
Participants ranged in age from 19 to 61 years old (34 years on average). Seventy-seven per cent identified as women, 17 per cent as men and 6 per cent with another gender identity – that is, transgender, transwoman, transitioning, two-spirited, androgynous, gender queer or gender fluid. Nineteen per cent identified as Indigenous and 12 per cent as another visible minority. The majority (70%) had completed high school. Median annual personal income was £23,193, compared to £18,790 for the general Canadian population in 2013 (Statistics Canada, 2015). Sex workers in this and earlier studies by the authors also reported higher median incomes, including than those of hairdressers and hospitality staff (Benoit et al., 2015a). Of the sex workers interviewed, 35 per cent were currently in receipt of income assistance from the State and a similar portion identified as having a disability. Twenty-eight per cent were married or in a common law relationship at the time of interview. A substantial minority (39%) indicated that they were raising children or supporting other financial dependants.

The average age of first sale of a sexual service among the sex workers in the study was 24 years old, with 10 years being the average number of years of work experience. Twenty-nine per cent first sold a sexual service before age 19. Further, almost half (43%) of those who sold a sexual service before their 19th birthday had lived in government care during childhood compared to less than a quarter of those who first did so after turning 19. As for work types, a quarter were engaged in street-based work in the past year, one-fifth worked in managed indoor settings and the rest were indoor-based and independent.

*Thematic analysis.* From participants' accounts, we identified three broad overlapping reasons or motivations for entering sex work in Canada: (1) critical life events; (2) need or desire for money; and (3) personal appeal of the work. Prevalence of each theme is detailed in Figure 1; only one participant's account could not be identified as including any of these emergent themes. Below we use quotations that capture the dominant codes within each theme.

### *Critical life events*

Occupational choice frameworks place life-course circumstances as one of the main structural determinants of job entry (Astin, 1984; Levine, 1976; Musgrave, 1967). For one out of every three accounts given by our participants, the life events that preceded entry into sex work were unfavourable, involving abuse, neglect and estrangement from family and alienation from public institutions such as schools. Participants who mentioned life-course adversity were more likely to have entered before the age of 19 (43% vs 20%). Further, they were more likely than other participants to have been in foster



**Figure 1.** Prevalence and overlap of three major themes in participants' accounts of entry into sex work in Canada.

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%). Within the accounts under this theme, 59 (85%) also mentioned need or desire for money and 13 (19%) also named personal appeal of the work (Figure 1).

Connecting childhood angst with entry into sex work, Natalie explained how neglect and overwhelming responsibility at a young age pushed her to run away, while 'pimps' recognized and exploited her vulnerability:

Since the age of nine, it was my job to take care of all the other kids. So she [mom] would go to bingo and do her thing, and my dad was in and out of our life. So, the first, I guess real opportunity of somebody paying attention to me, I was about 14. Turned out they were all pimps and all kinds of nasty shit. (Independent indoor, began at 14, Calgary)

A few participants, like Glenna (Independent indoor, 21, Kitchener), described how childhood sexual abuse led her to believe, 'that I had to do that kind of work because that's all that I was good for'. Others said that sex work provided an opportunity to shift personal discourse and self-image for the better. Harley, a transwoman, explained:

I came from a background of being abused and being evicted, being bullied in school, being disempowered. Being told I'm ugly or effeminate, you are man woman... and being beaten up. So you see these women on the streets in short skirts and they're able to handle the guys [...] I thought it was very attractive in terms of liberating myself and empowering myself coming from a victim background. So that's what I did. (Independent indoor, 20, Montreal)



Other participants, like Robin (Independent street-based, 19, Kitchener), described how abandonment by family led to few alternatives for survival: '[o]ur family shut us [Robin and her boyfriend] out, everybody shut us out. We were on the streets and it was just us. So I knew I had to make money somehow.' Losing custody of children and the resulting 'void' was also mentioned as a significant factor in the decision to enter the sex industry, as Kelly (Independent street-based, 29, St John's) described: 'I didn't have custody of my two children at the time, so I was really down and out. So I guess, like seeing the men and stuff was, was some kind of unfilled gap – void in my life.' In short, for some participants, critical life events – ranging from abuse, neglect and estrangement – were predisposing factors to sex work involvement.

### *Need or desire for money*

As the occupational choice literature highlights, most people enter jobs because they either need or desire money (Astin, 1984; Levine, 1976). Yet what constitutes need and desire in regard to money is complex. For people living in poverty or single parents, money for survival pushes people into particular jobs (Huppertz, 2009; Newman, 1999). Sometimes people enter jobs that help them fulfil a particular desire, such as for a post-secondary education credential, or they simultaneously work in another job in which the pay is low but the satisfaction high (Hardy and Sanders, 2015). Working for money to fund more personal expenses, such as paying for drugs or to support an addiction, is all but absent in the occupational choice and recent sex work literature, but often mentioned in studies of street-based sex workers (Stoltz et al., 2007; Young et al., 2000).

The need or desire for money was mentioned by our participants as the most common reason for initial engagement in sex work, mentioned by 87 per cent of the 209 participants who answered the question. The average age of entry for those mentioning this theme was 24.9 years of age. Again emphasizing the complexity of entry, a third of participants also described critical life events of some sort, and one-fifth also cited the intrinsic appeal of the work (Figure 1).

For just over one-third of the 209 participants, economic need was described as acute or desperate, often the result of under or unemployment, lack of social support or overwhelming debt. Shawna described her economic situation predating sex work involvement like this:

I had a lot of bills to pay and I was really proud, I didn't want to go on social services and I didn't want to go pump gas or be a waitress. I knew that I had a lot of skills and those skills could be applied to sex work and I knew I could make a lot of money in a very short period of time. (Independent indoor, 39, Victoria)

Others, like Olivia, said at the time they were receiving social assistance, but found that their payments were insufficient to pay for basic necessities such as rent and groceries: 'I was like "Okay, well I could do that because I'm really hard up for money." I was on welfare at the time. And yeah, I was a good budgeter but who doesn't need more money on welfare?' (Independent indoor, 23, Kitchener).

Approximately 15 per cent of participants mentioned supporting children or other dependants as the driving force behind entering sex work. Chelsea, a single parent, recalled:

[M]y son's birthday was coming up, and he wanted this particular thing, and I could not afford it. I thought if I tried this [sex work], maybe I could afford this thing and by the time his birthday rolled around, I could afford 10 of them. I thought, holy cow, I couldn't believe it. (Independent indoor, 39, Kitchener)

Similarly Crystal (Independent indoor, 24, Calgary), another single parent, related: 'I didn't want my daughter to go without and I didn't want to work two, three jobs and never be home.'

Approximately 16 per cent of all participants described the need to pay for substances or support an addiction as a driver of entry into sex work, as Jenna (Independent street-based, 18, Calgary) related: '[t]he drug just took over so I just ended up just going on the street to support my habit'. Several participants described sex work as 'quick', 'easy' and a preferable way to fund their substance use in comparison to other even more criminalized options that they felt were available to them, such as stealing or drug dealing.

In more than a quarter of participants' accounts, choice did not appear so constrained by economic need. Rather, sex work was described as the best way to make money among several options available that consumed more time, were considered to be less attractive and offered less flexibility. Stories like Elaine's were common:

I had just quit school for the second time and my account was slowly dwindling of money and I vowed that I was never going to go back into food service because it made me miserable. [...] So I just, one day, put an ad up [...] I named my price, and 15 minutes later [a client] came over and was gone within five minutes and I looked at my hand, and I had 250 dollars. I went 'Oh my god, I can buy groceries, I can pay my rent.' (Independent indoor, 30, Victoria)

Participants also stressed that money in sex work was not always reliable, as acquiring clients and their business was an ongoing process that varied over time. However, the ability to make a relatively large amount of money in a short period of time dominated participants' economic reasons for entering in sex work.

### *Personal appeal of the work*

As noted above, the occupational choice literature has little to say about the impact of low-prestige personal service jobs on workers' satisfaction and self-worth (the exception is Astin (1984) who lists 'pleasure'). At the same time, ethnographic studies point to the potential rewards and benefits of engaging in hair styling, food and beverage serving and similar types of labour (McCarthy et al., 2014). A case in point is Owings' (2002) ethnographic study of the work of waitresses, many who described deriving personal pleasure and substantial job satisfaction from being able to teach clients about food and wine, facilitate memorable and special occasions and create warm and friendly atmospheres to dine in. Mears and Finlay (2005) found that emotional work served as a self-protective mechanism for models who laid claim to what they do for a living as a 'performance'.

To be able to give a performance required ‘effort, energy and intelligence’ and instilled them with dignity and a much needed sense of professional authenticity (Mears and Finlay, 2005: 339). Thus, performing intimate labour for another human being can be rewarding, even when one is being paid to do so (Zelizer, 2005).

One-quarter of participants were attracted to the inherent qualities of sex work, often in combination with other reasons, in their choice to enter the industry. Participants describing an intrinsic desire to work entered later (mean age = 26, with 19 per cent entering as minors). They were also less likely to have been in foster care (16% vs 33%) and less likely to report moderate to severe childhood physical abuse (29% vs 43%), though prevalence of moderate to extreme sexual abuse was only slightly lower among participants who did versus who did not mention a desire to work in their accounts of entry (45% vs 53%, respectively). While there were no apparent variations by work type for the themes of critical life events and need or desire for money themes examined above, there was some variation for the appeal of the work theme: 68 per cent of independent indoor workers, 25 per cent of managed indoor workers and only 7 per cent of the street-based workers mentioned this latter theme.

In their accounts, participants specifically described the desire to use their skills and strengths, satisfy curiosity, increase confidence or independence and meet sexual or emotional needs. For some, like Colleen (Managed indoor, 23, Victoria) the need for money and attraction to sex work merged: ‘I’ve always been very sexually open. So I was like, “well, I need money, I don’t have a sex life, why don’t I do this and then I can kind of satisfy both those needs?”’ For Paige (Independent indoor, 23, Calgary), the money made from sex work was not the principal draw of the work: ‘I had another job. I just thought [sex work] would be interesting to try, and I loved it... “I can’t believe I just got paid to get laid!”’ Taryn (Managed indoor, 21, Victoria) described the personal appeal of upward mobility resulting from an escort job, which she described as a ‘world away’ from street-based work: ‘[t]here was this other world, you know, a seemingly respectable world that I was now able to see myself in. I just kind of jumped in with both feet and I didn’t look back’.

A smaller minority (12% of 209) saw sex work as an opportunity that emerged from an existing promiscuous lifestyle. As Arianna related:

Well, before I decided to start charging for sex, I was always having sex with guys for free. I’d go on [...] Plenty of Fish [an online dating site] and I’d meet with guys and sleep with them the first night and not want to see them again because I just wasn’t interested in them, but, I liked having sex with them. So I said, might as well get paid for it, why should I give it away for free? (Independent indoor, 50, Calgary)

Also present, but less frequently noted, was the progression to paid sexual transactions from related work:

I started dancing [...] After the dances, some of the women would come up and propose different things and I, for the first couple times I said ‘No, no, no’ then, I’m thinking, wait now, I’m a man, I like what they propose, it’s going to be safe, quiet; they’re [female clients] married, they’re rich, and they wanted fun, why not? And so then I just, basically, started from that. (Justin, independent street-based, 28, St John’s)

Lastly, nine per cent of participants mentioned viewing sex work as a way to explore and express their sexuality and gender identity. As Blair, who describes himself as: ‘an extremely sexy and attractive man who dresses up like a woman’ explained:

I was having lots of sex with people and doing online dating and stuff; swinging and stuff. And I just committed to actually becoming a cross-dresser, which means you’re shaving your body. You put a lot of work into becoming feminine. [...] And I enjoyed it. And then I realized I might be able to make money doing this. (Independent indoor, 41, Kitchener)

Thus a substantial minority of participants in this study said sex work appealed to them largely because of the job’s intrinsic qualities, including opportunities for sexual and personal exploration, sexual gratification and expression of sexuality and gender identity. These motivations were often expressed in conjunction with economic need and desire, and were more strongly connected with independent indoor work.

## Discussion

Workers in various fields are assumed to have multiple structural influences determining occupational choice, including socioeconomic, family and educational factors (Levine, 1976), as well as individual agentic motivations that span personal gain and altruism (Beck, 2000; Duffield et al., 2004; Huppatz, 2009; Jirwe and Rudman, 2012; Steinbrook, 1994). This study’s results show that entry into sex work likewise involves the interplay between structure and agency in workers’ lives (Wharton, 1991).

Occupational choice is often understood to be fundamentally rooted in life-course trajectories, with familial and childhood experiences and institutional involvement being critical determinants in career selection (Astin, 1984; Blau et al., 1956; Levine, 1976). When it comes to working in the sex industry, it is often assumed either that coercion under conditions of early victimization and disconnection from societal institutions are *the* reasons for entry into sex work (Dowd and Pinheiro, 2013; Farley, 2004; Miller, 2002; Scoular and O’Neill, 2007; Stoltz et al., 2007; Thomson, 2013; Wilson and Widom, 2010) or critical life events are ignored altogether as a determinant (Abbott, 2000; Bott, 2006; Brents et al., 2010; Griffith et al., 2012; Hardy and Sanders, 2015). The current findings challenge both of these conceptions of sex work entry for adult sex workers in Canada and support the findings of Vanwesenbeeck (1994) who finds evidence that early victimization and disrupted networks are linked to entry into sex work for a minority of Dutch participants, as well as our earlier research (McCarthy et al., 2014). In the current sample, a third of sex workers describe critical life events as playing a role in their decision to begin sex work. For the majority referencing experiences of adversity, the decision to enter sex work was influenced by a disruptive and alienating event in their social lives, such as running away, being kicked out, losing custody of children or experiencing the breakdown of a relationship; these types of events were described as causing distress and hardship, and often resulted in limited alternatives to doing sex work as a method of supporting themselves, as almost all the participants who reference critical life events in their accounts also mention economic factors influencing their entry. This finding contributes to the occupational choice literature by nuancing the role that critical life

experiences can have on the choice to enter an occupation for marginalized populations (Newman, 1999).

Money is an overarching motive for beginning any job (Astin, 1984; Blau et al., 1956; Musgrave, 1967), including body display work (Mears and Connell, 2016) such as pornography (Abbott, 2000; Griffith et al., 2012), exotic dancing (Bott, 2006; Hardy and Sanders, 2015) and brothel work (Brents et al., 2010). This holds true as well for entry into sex work for participants in this research. For many, acute financial duress combined with less favourable work options motivated their selling sexual services. Others explicitly engaged in sex work to help lift children out of poverty or support other dependants. The limits of the job market to offer low-skilled or poorly educated workers sustainable incomes were also strong structural factors that drive the industry. While many of the participants note that they made the decision to enter the sex industry under structural constraint from financial difficulties (a need for money), there was also acknowledgment that sex work was selected *by* many participants out of other acceptable occupational opportunities, rather than having the work selected *for* them by structural disadvantage and limited career options. This nuancing of the numerous and complex economic factors for entering the sex industry is a crucial insight into how agency can be exercised by sex workers, even under conditions of economic constraint, similar to what Willis (1977) and Lehmann (2005) find for young people from the working class. The need to pay for substances creates a complicated kind of financial dependency, as studies of street-based sex workers have reported (Stoltz et al., 2007; Young et al., 2000).

The occupational choice literature also highlights a range of agentic factors, including intelligence, aptitudes, personality, interests, values, pleasure and desire to help others but downplays these factors for lower-prestige jobs (Astin, 1984; Levine, 1976; Musgrave, 1967; Steinbrook, 1994; Vuust et al., 2010). Yet some studies have shown even these jobs that do not promise high wages and upward mobility can involve some agency (Huppatz, 2009; Mears and Finlay, 2005; Newman, 1999; Owings, 2002). Likewise, recent studies have found that independence, sexual/interpersonal fulfilment and enjoyment are also motivations for entering the sex industry (Abbott, 2000; Bott, 2006; Griffith et al., 2012). A large minority of the participants in the current study likewise envision sex work as a means to fulfil sexual needs and/or curiosity, as well as a means for personal or professional growth. While their choice to enter the industry may also be complicated by structural factors, these participants recognize that sex work provides them an opportunity to fulfil multiple needs and desires that span beyond the scope of other job opportunities.

## Conclusion

This is the only study of which the authors are aware that captures the complex recent accounts of initial involvement in sex work of a relatively large and diverse sample of adult sex workers. While the focus has been on Canada, the findings likely have relevance for other post-industrial countries characterized by a decline in standard employment, increase in precarious jobs and rapid expansion of commercial sex markets.

However, there are limitations to the study. The sample is not statistically representative of the population of sex workers in Canada and may have been biased through non-participation by those who did not wish to talk about their past or current situations, by

those who had fears over breaches in confidentiality or those who were prevented from participating. Moreover, the qualitative data may be biased due to inaccuracies in recalling past experiences.

Employing an occupational choice framework is a novel approach in sex work research to understand the complex interplay of structure (e.g. critical life events, need and desire for money) and individual agency (appeal of the work) in the decision to sell sex, allowing for a consideration of occupational choice in sex work akin to entry into other jobs. The many nuances of choice imply that universal approaches to managing, regulating or policing sex work are not justified and are unlikely to be uniformly effective. Instead, both choice and constraints differentially guide both entry into and pathways into different types of sex work, similar to how agentic and structural forces guide entry into and passages into lower-prestige jobs.

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Cecilia Benoit, PhD, is a scientist at the Centre for Addictions Research of BC and professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Victoria, Victoria, BC.

Nadia Ouellet, MA (Sociology) is a research associate at the Centre for Addictions Research of BC.

Mikael Jansson, PhD, is a scientist at the Centre for Addictions Research of BC and adjunct professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Victoria, Victoria, BC.

Samantha Magnus, MPH, BSc (Hons), is a research associate at the Centre for Addictions Research of BC.

Michaela Smith, BA (Hons), is a research coordinator at the Centre for Addictions Research of BC.

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