

Fallen Women and Rescued Girls: Social Stigma and Media Narratives of the Sex Industry in Victoria, B.C., from 1980 to 2005*

HELGA KRISTIN HALLGRIMSDOTTIR, RACHEL PHILLIPS
and CECILIA BENOIT *University of Victoria*

Cet article compare les portraits médiatiques de personnes qui travaillent dans l'industrie du sexe avec les représentations de soi de ces travailleurs, représentations qui incluent leurs origines personnelles et leurs expériences vécues au quotidien. Notre objectif est de jauger la distance empirique entre les descriptions médiatiques et la réalité vécue de ces travailleurs puis de comprendre comment les médias contribuent à construire, reproduire et approfondir les stigmates sociaux associés au travail dans l'industrie du sexe. Nous avançons que le fait de distinguer la variabilité historique et spatiale de ces stigmates ainsi que le fait d'expliquer leurs racines dans les activités de sens et de pratiques des auteurs et autorités médiatiques représentent une avancée cruciale pour la compréhension de leur construction sociale.

This paper compares media portrayals of people who work in the sex industry with these workers' self-reports of their personal backgrounds and experiences of what they do for a living. Our aim is to first, gauge the empirical distance between media depictions and workers' lived reality, and second, to understand how the media contributes to constructing, reproducing and deepening the social stigmas associated with working in the sex industry. We argue that pulling apart the historical and spatial variability of these stigmas and explicating their roots in the meaning-making activities of media authors and authorities is a crucial step towards understanding their social construction.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MEDIA as an arbiter of social experience is well recognized. The media—newspapers, television, radio and, more recently, the Internet—educate, inform and entertain, all the while reflecting and refracting images and understandings of our social worlds with varying accuracy and truth. This paper compares media portrayals of people who

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work in the sex industry with these workers' self-reports of their personal backgrounds and experiences of what they do for a living. Our aim is to first, gauge the empirical distance between media depictions and workers' lived reality, and second, to understand how the media contributes to constructing, reproducing and deepening the social stigmas associated with working in the sex industry. We argue that pulling apart the historical and spatial variability of these stigmas and explicating their links to socio-structural contexts is a crucial step towards understanding their social construction. Exposing the socio-structural and human architecture of sex industry stigmas opens them to reinterpretation: insofar as new understandings position sex industry workers as individuals deserving of similar rights and protections as other "legitimate" workers, they have the capacity to facilitate a better and safer experience for this clandestine population.

We rely on two data sources for this paper. First, we analyse print media discussion of the sex industry in one metropolitan area of Canada, the Census Metropolitan Area of Victoria, British Columbia (B.C.), between 1980 and 2004 in a single regional daily newspaper, the *Victoria Times Colonist*. We then compare these media narratives with the self-reported experiences of sex industry workers in the same city and over a comparable time period.

Media Narratives and the Production/Reproduction of Stigmas

Academic interest in the sex industry has predominantly been focussed on understanding how the commodification of women's bodies, sexualities and sexual labour shapes and is shaped by larger orders of sexual and gender inequality. In recent years, this scholarship has become quite polarized between those who regard the commercial exchange of sex as inherently oppressive and violent and those who regard it as simply an economic activity, problematic largely because those involved are persecuted (Jenness, 1990; MacKinnon, 1987). The parameters of this debate have constrained the impact of a growing body of empirical and theoretical scholarship suggesting that sex industry workers, like other workers, represent a heterogeneity of experiences and identities, encompassing both of the positions noted above (Shaver, 2005).

Also missing in this debate is an interest in the historical and spatial variability of dominant understandings of the sex industry as a "social problem." Symptomatic of this disinterest is the relatively meagre scholarship dedicated to understanding media constructions of sex industry work and, in particular, how these constructions are the sites at which "whore" stigmas are produced and reproduced, contested and transformed, and how they might differ from empirical reality (Lowman, 1987; Stenvoll, 2001).

Media constructions of the sex industry, however, do constitute an important area of inquiry from both theoretical and harm-reduction perspec-

tives. First of all, media representations of gender, class, race and sexuality are important loci of self and personal identity construction (Seale, 2003). For those who become objects of negative or subjugating media narratives, whether or not these narratives are "truth," does not mitigate their ability to detrimentally affect physical health and emotional well-being (Benoit and Millar, 2001). In addition, contemporary media create social understanding between spatially distanced and/or socially segregated groups (Gitlin, 2003); as the sex industry work force constitutes a particularly clandestine and hidden population, for a significant portion of the citizenry media narratives represent the *only* sites at which they might interact with sex industry workers. The fictive characters and relationships created by media narratives in this context become relatively unassailable, at least to the extent that media audiences lack empirical experience by which to challenge them. Essentially, in the absence of any lived interaction with the sex industry, media texts are key cultural sites at which stigmas of sex work are produced and consumed by the majority of citizens.

Academic understandings of the role of media in the production/reproduction of dominant knowledges have been influenced by the work of Stuart Hall, among other cultural theorists (Barak, 1994; Hall, 1978; Kitzinger, 2000; Pateman, 1988; Sacks, 1996; Seale, 2003; Watkins and Emerson, 2000). Cultural studies approaches to media are distinguished by an attention to power as a player in the transmission of social knowledge and in the reception of values and meanings. This means that analyses of media should include interrogation of the structural relations in which media practices are embedded. A sizeable literature has fleshed out the various ways in which media narratives nourish gender stereotypes and normative orders of gender inequality by, for example, selective omission of issues that are more salient to women and the punctuation of issues that involve male newsmakers and authority figures (Watkins and Emerson, 2000). This literature underscores the more general claim that mainstream media practices are structurally embedded within hegemonic moral, economic and political orders, that media news, information and entertainment are told from particular social locations, and that these locations correspond with positions of moral, economic and political power (Sacks, 1996; Watkins and Emerson, 2000).

This is not to say that media knowledge is always false, nor does it have a necessary correspondence to hegemonic knowledge. Even if media narratives become encoded with meanings and values that shore up dominant moral orders, audiences must bring their own experiences and agendas to the interpretative lenses through which they decode media texts. The social meaning of any text is thus an interactive product of the process by which both news writers and audiences use their knowledge and experience to make sense of the news. In fact, this *emergent* nature of media meaning highlights how a myriad of other factors, which speak to the contexts in which news writers and audiences live, impinge upon and mediate text

signification and interpretation. We draw here upon concepts from the literature on cultural framing in order to bring these contextual factors into our discussion.

Cultural framing has been an important concept in the more recent psychocognitive school of social movement studies; here, framing is applied to describe the ways in which social movement actors strive to communicate "actionable" goals to their constituents (Benford and Snow, 2000a; Benford and Snow, 2000b; Snow and Benford, 1988; Snow, Rochford, Worden and Benford, 1986). In the field of media studies, framing has been widely used in order to understand how media authors can tilt story interpretation by drawing on specific narrative techniques, such as situating new events within older news stories, or drawing up actor typifications (Kitzinger, 2000; Lundman, Douglass and Hanson, 2004; Sacks, 1996). Of particular importance is how media authors can utilize frames to render news events that are foreign and strange at once familiar and comprehensible to an audience (Gitlin, 2003).

The success of a frame is measured by its resonance; in turn, resonance is primarily the interactive function of its credibility, empirical commensurability, and salience to audience experience (Benford and Snow, 2000a: 619–22). Resonance is essentially an ecological variable that situates framing processes within specific socio-historical contexts (Berbrier, 1998; Kubal, 1998; Mirola, 2003). Resonant framing means using contextually available cultural tools—relevant and salient metaphors, recognizable stereotypes, and familiar story templates—to render news stories immediately accessible and satisfying to audiences. In essence, fulfilling the resonance requirement of a media frame leads authors to privilege certain kinds of characters and storylines; this not only helps us understand how stigma representations in the media come to be filled with socio-historically specific content, but also how stigmas come to be important narrative tools in media stories. Finally, shifts in both the contents and scope of stigmas as found in media narratives are thus likely to reflect socio-historical changes that pertain to the moral and social location of stigmatized subjects.

Social Stigma and the Material Consequences of Working in the Sex Industry

We argue here that social stigmas are a central example of a normative knowledge that emerges out of and is reinforced by media practices that are aimed at making the news "resonant." Stigma has historically been defined as a social attribute that is deeply discrediting and reduces the bearer from a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one (Goffman, 1963). We elaborate on this conception in two ways. First, following Link and Phelan (2001: 366–67), we expand this definition to understand stigma as "when elements of labelling, separation, stereotyping, status loss and discrimination co-occur." This elaboration of the stigma concept links the meaning-making activity of media authors with the material consequences

associated with labelling and social exclusion. Furthermore, *felt stigma*, the internalization of perceived stigmatized/discrimination, which incorporates both fear of experiencing discrimination and the interpretation of the self within dominant cultural scripts, can be damaging even in the absence of observable instances of discrimination (Cree, Kay, Tisdall and Wallace, 2004; Crocker and Quinn, 2000; Gray, 2002; Scambler, Peswani, Renton and Scambler, 1990). Second, by analysing how "whore" stigmas are articulated in dominant media knowledge, and how they are historically variable in scope and content, this paper adds to a growing literature on the structural mediation of stigma (Bobo, 1999; Kusow, 2004; Riessman, 2000).

Narrative Trends in Media Portrayals of the Sex Industry in Victoria, B.C., 1980–2004

The subject index of the *Victoria Times Colonist (TC)* for the time period in question identified a total of 425 articles concerning the sex industry. Using an open-coding technique, we developed seven narrative categories: vectors of contagion, population at risk or endangered, sexual slavery, moral culpability, predatory pimps, criminal culpability, community failure, and other.¹ Below, we track how these narrative strands were variously woven together to produce three kinds of storylines. Consistent throughout the entire study time period, however, is that, first, sex industry workers are portrayed as vectors of contagion, whether as moral pollutants or as sources of disease. Second, sex industry work is portrayed as both an acute and serious social problem; alternative constructions are almost completely absent in media discourse for the entire period. Third, media narratives focus almost exclusively on outdoor sex work. Fourth, the dominant media motif is strongly gendered: virtually all the media coverage over the entire period focusses on women of different age groups (adults, teenagers and children) with men appearing only as clients, pimps or law enforcers.

There are three notable shifts in these themes over the study period. Discourses assigning criminal culpability to sex industry workers disappear after the late 1980s, and discourses suggesting that moral culpability lies with individuals also decline rapidly. Replacing them are discussions that move responsibility away from individual workers and toward others, including clients, pimps and the "global sex trade." An additional change is a decline in discussions suggesting that community support systems—religious organizations, schools and families—are responsible for the sex industry problem. Table 1 tracks the shifts in media narratives over our 24-year period.²

1. This latter category includes articles that diverge significantly from dominant themes and were thus not easily classifiable. The increase in the number of articles assigned to this category in the last time period may reflect growing heterogeneity in media portrayals of the sex industry.
2. Although there were a total of 14 articles that did discuss the risks involved in the sex industry, in almost all of the cases this theme was embedded with another, more dominant theme.

Table 1
**Discussions of the Sex Industry
 in the *Victoria Times Colonist*, 1980–2004**

Theme	1980–1990 (N = 115)	1990–2000 (N = 182)	2001–2004 (N = 128)
Vectors of Contagion	43 (37%)	51 (28%)	25 (20%)
Risk	0	33 (18%)	45 (35%)
Sexual Slavery	0	27 (15%)	31 (24%)
Moral Culpability	17 (15%)	18 (10%)	0
Community Failure	19 (17%)	11 (6%)	0
Predatory Pimps	0	42 (23%)	6 (5%)
Criminal Culpability	30 (26%)	0	0
Other	6 (5%)	0	21 (16%)

Narrative Conventions in Media Depictions of the Sex Industry

Media authors, in general, relied on one of three broad (and sometimes overlapping) narrative conventions when writing news stories about the sex industry in Victoria: contagion, culpability and risk. Let us look at each of these narrative conventions in succession.

Vectors of Disease, Criminality and Moral Malaise

"Street prostitution with all its attendant blights, including violence, drug addiction, disease, and degraded neighbourhoods, has long been one of the most unsavoury problems affecting Canadian cities" (editorial, *TC*, Jan. 13, 1996). This suggestion that sex work is a "reservoir" of urban malaise is apparent through the entire time period; however, it is primarily between 1980 and 1990 that the discussion centres most frequently on physical contagion and the need for spatial containment solutions: streets needed to be "cleared of prostitution" (editorial, *TC*, Feb. 19, 1982) because "neighbourhoods are blighted by prostitution" (editorial, *TC*, May 12, 1984). More explicitly: "Whores . . . not only . . . offend . . . the law, they are an embarrassment when the family goes downtown for dinner. They speak of the community's failure. They are also seen as a threat by some wives and mothers and they are bad for business" (editorial, *TC*, Oct. 22, 1981). Underscoring the need for the physical eradication of the sex industry are also media discussions that portray it as a vector of criminality: "prostitution and violence related to prostitution are on the rise" (*TC*, Oct. 22, 1981). This finding is further emphasized by loading the discussions with

metaphors of warfare and violence: "Government street hookers say there will be a territorial war" (Aug. 17, 1985), and "teen sex rings" make for an "eerie feeling of impending violence on city streets" (Oct. 10, 1984).

Although discussions on the health risks associated with sex industry work appear on the surface to be treating a subject other than criminality or violence, they are similar in their focus on outdoor sex industry workers as vectors of contagion: street workers are depicted as the "social ill that defies cure as much as the insidious herpes disease so often associated with it" (*TC*, Dec. 12, 1982). The fact that the territorial bounds of the health risk were identified—"the Victoria street prostitute territory extends along Yates to Douglas, incorporating Broad and Johnson, the corner at Government is where most of the action is. On the street it is known as Herpes Corner" (*TC*, Dec. 12, 1982)—illustrates the centrality of spatial containment to disease, health and criminality discourses. Similarly, when AIDS entered the discussion in the late 80s and early 90s—"Linked as it is with the killer AIDS—prostitution is not a simply persistent social problem but a growing tragedy" (editorial, Apr. 27, 1992)—most AIDS-related discussion in the *Times Colonist* consisted almost solely of panic-tinged descriptions of a single Victoria-area woman who was accused of knowingly spreading AIDS through the exchange of sex for money, allowing readers to qualify their risk of contagion. "AIDS-infected prostitute still working" (*TC*, Aug. 2, 1989), "CRD can't curb AIDS hooker" (*TC*, Sep. 7, 1989), "AIDS-carrying hooker risks two-year penalty" (*TC*, Sep. 9, 1989), "HIV woman barred from city core" (Feb. 20, 1992) are just some of the headlines of these stories, answered by, among others, a letter to the editor stating that: "this woman and the fools who go with her will contribute to the destruction of not only a nation but a civilization" (letter to the editor, *TC*, Sep. 14, 1989). In sum, contagion themes rely on narrative conventions in which sex industry workers are vectors of a variety of malaises. Solutions are aimed at containment in order to protect the innocent, as well as business owners, from the unsightliness of outdoor sex industry work and the supposed attendant crime and disease.

Culpability: Savvy Criminals and Fallen Women

A narrative convention around culpability is the most characteristic feature of discourses of sex industry work in the 1980s. There are two kinds of stories told here. First, sex industry workers are thought of as criminals. Thus, protecting sex industry workers' rights is

the same as protecting the rights of murderers and robbers. Prostitution is a criminal act—no ifs or buts about it! In the process of protecting the rights of criminals, we compromise and give up our own rights to freedom and democracy (letter to the editor, *TC*, Jan. 14, 1981).

However, those who work in the sex industry are far from common criminals. Rather, they are uniquely morally culpable in that they are believed to take pride in circumventing the law and avoiding arrest. This results in a situation where, because of their immunity to legal and moral norms, people who work in the sex industry are "above the law": "Police are hamstrung by the liberalization of prostitution laws" (*TC*, Nov. 21, 1981); similarly, the police chief of Victoria is quoted as saying "We don't have any prosecutorial tool we can use against them. I suppose we could lay charges, but what's the use?" Meanwhile, the Canadian Association of Police Chiefs states: "Laws against soliciting by prostitutes are unenforceable . . . the situation is virtually out of control." Furthermore, "without better laws, they will continue to 'spread their joy, herpes, and other venereal diseases'" (*TC*, Dec. 22, 1982).

Second, culpability narratives tell stories of women who cannot be "rescued." Families are depicted as expending considerable effort to locate and reform their "fallen women," to little avail. These women are the "morally destitute" (*TC*, May 6, 1985) and this, along with their feelings of "worthlessness" (*TC*, Mar. 27, 1982), keeps them on the street: "I feel so helpless. It's in my mind constantly what I have done. I'll never regain my self-respect" (attributed to a former sex industry worker, *TC*, Mar. 18, 1986). Here, narratives around culpability sustain and reproduce the stigma that workers are fundamentally and deeply morally damaged.

*Risk: Entrapment and Slavery
as Routes to the Sex Industry*

The prominence of stories around culpability diminishes in the 1990s, concomitant with the rise of theories of victimhood, as well as a shift in the focus of criminal prosecution: as workers are recast as victims, "johns" and "pimps" become more central to discussions of criminal culpability. Instead of being culpable, sex workers appear to be legally and morally incapacitated, incapable of making safe and reasonable choices for themselves. This is conveyed in particular through stories that emphasize *risk*—of violence, of entrapment, and seduction.

Importantly, while contagion narratives suggest that workers pose a risk to innocent others, victimhood narratives tend to locate and bound risk within the confines of the sex industry: "Predatory pimps target Victoria in teen recruiting" (*TC*, Feb. 14, 1997) and "Prostitution circuit keeps girls in slavery" (*TC*, Aug. 24, 1997). Victimhood/risk stories are often racialized and highlight the vulnerability and youth of the women involved; references to global trafficking of women and children from less-advantaged countries "prostituted girls are essentially slaves . . . in India and Thailand" (*TC*, Aug. 30, 1996) abound and a significant majority of all *TC* media stories appearing after the mid-1990s concern child and juvenile prostitution.

These victimhood/risk narratives gain further resonance through specific rhetorical practices: the labelling of the victims as "teen hooker[s]" (*TC*, June 14, 1991), suggesting that perpetrators are only interested in women in the sex industry (e.g., "prostitute killer," "predator of prostitutes" [*TC*, March 15, 2002]). Here, being in the sex industry operates as the immediate precipitate of violent assault and murder: "each time a prostitute climbs into one of the vehicles cruising Victoria's downtown 'stroll' her life is in danger" (*TC*, Feb. 14, 1997). In sum, risk themes call into question the psychological capacity and, by extension, the agency, of sex industry workers through constructing them as victims and often as vulnerable minors; in turn, the risk is seen to be inherent in the "lifestyles" of sex industry workers.

These rhetorical practices around risk tell us much about how narrative conventions sustain social stigmas. A good example concerns the recent coverage of the Vancouver police department's investigation of the "missing from Vancouver's East Side" who were "struggling with drug addiction and involved in the sex trade" (*TC*, May 23, 2002).³ By identifying lifestyle and spatial context (the Vancouver East Side is famously the poorest urban area in Canada, with the highest concentration of homeless people and drug users) as the causes of violence, these stories reassure readers that this risk is far removed—economically and socio-culturally—from them; at the same time, this kind of narrative distancing perpetuates stigmas by emphasizing that sex industry workers are morally and physically damaged to the point that they have lost the capacity (and right) to care for themselves.

The narrative conventions outlined above amount to dominant scripts that organize and structure most discussions of the sex industry. As scripts, they offer the reader well-known protagonists (a wily prostitute who escapes the law; a damaged, drug-addicted, and desperate teenager), trajectories (an early loss of innocence entails permanent moral damage) and solutions (physical containment, confinement, moral rescue campaigns).

The most significant shift in these scripts concerns culpability. Whereas in the 1980s sex industry workers are constructed as being individually responsible, by the early 1990s most stories of the sex industry show workers to lack responsibility, agency and capability. They are now victims of exploitation, addicted to drugs and mentally incapacitated, and at risk of seduction, entrapment and violence from savvy pimps and clients. This shift in media construction parallels wider changes that began in the mid-1980s in the construction of prostitution in state and policy discourse, which identified abuse as the distinguishing feature of sex workers' lives both prior to and during their involvement in the sex trade (Brock, 1998). Running through all of the discussions, however, are constructions of sex work as a vector of malaise and an acute, pressing social problem, a focus

3. Over 60 women are reported as "missing" in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, 27 of whose bodies have been found on the farm of Robert William Pickton, who is currently being tried for their untimely deaths.

on the street trade and a tendency to homogenize the industry as consisting solely of street-walking women and teenage girls, as well as the use of distancing rhetorical practices.

Sex Industry Workers' Own Accounts of Their Personal and Work Lives

We now turn to presenting primary data based on in-person interviews with adults who work in the sex industry in the metropolitan area under study. Our aim here is to reveal how omissions and punctuations in media narratives perpetuate social stigmas, particularly through their reliance on scripts that represent sex industry workers as "lost" or "fallen" others and create and reinforce theories of contagion, victimization and criminality. At the same time, these stigmas reassure a middle-class readership that the "sex work problem" has little direct relevance to their own lives.⁴

Diversity in Demographics and Background

To begin, although a majority (80%) of our total sample of 201 respondents identified as female ($n = 160$), reflecting other estimates of the gendered nature of the sex industry in Canada (Brock, 1998), a sizable minority (18%) of males were also interviewed ($n = 36$). The remaining 2% ($n = 5$) identified as male-to-female transgendered. Thus, one of the first notable media omissions is the experience of males, a gap that is, to a lesser degree, mirrored in the academic literature (Weitzer, 2000).

At the time of interview, respondents ranged in age from 18–63, with a mean age of 32 years. They reported a median age of entry of 18 years, with just over one quarter (26%) of the respondents reporting having "first traded sex" before the age of 16. This indicates that, while child sexual exploitation is a significant concern for our research population, the majority of them entered as older teens or legal adults.⁵

Our empirical data do not support the recent emphasis in the *TC* on the international trafficking of vulnerable women and children: 89% of respondents were born in Canada and all the remaining respondents except one emigrated here from another high-income country. Furthermore, all respondents—whether with permanent residency or Canadian citizenship

4. The data presented are drawn from a convenience sample that was gathered largely through expert referral, advertising and snowball sampling. The resultant sample was heterogeneous and reasonably large; however, while we cannot be confident that the findings are generalizable, they do provide a solid foundation for critically examining the disjuncture between public myths and stereotypes and the self-reported experiences of sex industry workers.
5. Many myths and few facts exist as to the median age of entry into the sex industry in Canada. While popular media reports such as those analysed above, anti-prostitution activists and some researchers tend to place the age of initially receiving payment in money or in kind for sexual favours rendered at 13 or 14, the fact remains that neither the media, police nor academics have solid evidence in respect to this matter, due to the difficulty in gathering representative data from hidden populations (see Lowman, 1987; Shaver, 2005). The empirical data reported on here also falls short, because by focussing on adults it may underestimate the number of youths under 18 who were once involved in the sex industry but did not continue that involvement into their adult years.

status—said they were long-term residents of the country, having lived here between 13 and 50 years, with an average of 30 years.

While the respondents did not stand out in regard to visible minority status, Aboriginal respondents (measured as Status and Non-Status Indian, Métis, and Inuit persons) were notably overrepresented in our sample, constituting 15% of the sample but only 2.8% of the population in the Census Metropolitan Area under study (Statistics Canada, 2001). This overrepresentation of Aboriginal persons is rarely mentioned in the media narratives, with the notable exception of the stories about the missing Vancouver women.

Also missing from the media stories is information on the everyday circumstances of our respondents, including their housing situation. While 63% of all householders in the study area own their own dwellings, this was the case for only 3.5% of our respondents. Furthermore, while three quarters of them said they had a stable living situation, nearly 25% stated that they lived in unstable or very unstable circumstances. It was also apparent from the open-ended comments that many of them were recipients of income assistance, including disability income assistance, which is further evidence of the on-average lower socio-economic status of this population. Finally, 28% of the females and 14% of the males were currently caring for dependent children, another fact that is not commonly noted in the media depictions.

Other characteristics of our sample run closer to what is depicted in the media stories. For a large number of respondents, childhood was characterized by instability, with frequent changes in their family situation. Almost 40% of the sample had experienced four or more changes in their family living situation by the time they had reached the age of 18. The average age when they first began living without a legal guardian was 16 years, with 11% reporting that they began living on their own before they were 14 years old. Furthermore, a majority of respondents (57%) had at some point in their childhoods resided in government care. This figure was even higher for Aboriginal participants (73.3%). In recent times, the percentage of children in government care in the research site has tended to remain at approximately 1%.⁶

In sum, while an unstable family background was certainly common among our respondents, and may represent partial convergence with some of the depictions of sex industry workers found in media coverage, a more accurate interpretation of the empirical data is that persons involved in the sex industry represent populations that face barriers to mainstream employment, are more likely to belong to discriminated identities, and come from current and historical backgrounds of economic and social hardship. Such an interpretation positions sex industry workers as structurally disadvantaged, not morally corrupt or helpless victims (Link and Phelan, 1995).

6. Anne Batchelor, Acting Regional Research Analyst, Ministry of Children and Family Development, Province of British Columbia, e-mail correspondence with R. Phillips, 2005.

Heterogeneity and Mundaneness of Sex Industry Work

One of the greatest divergences between media and empirical depictions of the sex industry is in the descriptions of work activities and workers' feelings about what they do for a living. Whereas media depictions emphasize violence, forced or abusive circumstances, and the community nuisance caused by the street-level sex industry, workers paint a much more heterogeneous picture and were apt to talk about the many mundane and routine aspects of the work they do. They also hold varied views about their work, ranging from complacency and indifference to strong positions in favour of and against it:

I'd find a job and I would never be in the sex trade if I could live my life over again (female, street, 44).

In my experience I have met so many people I'm close to who can keep it in a good place and achieve their goals, and also those who get swallowed up by the whole thing and end up addicted to drugs or in really bad shape emotionally, spiritually and physically (male, 42, freelance escort).

It's just a job, that's it. I don't come home and break down. There have been times when I'm not too happy with what I do but if I stay in that head space I get depressed. It's not about having sex, it's about the money, it's about providing a good living for myself (female, 26, agency-based escort).

Whereas media narratives generally offer only one kind of explanation for entry into the sex industry—entrapment—respondents described a variety of circumstances that precipitated their entry. Just over one third said that they became involved in the industry because they were enticed by a presenting opportunity, such as having peers who were involved, seeing an employment ad, or having someone approach them with an offer of money for sex. For over one quarter of respondents, however, economic duress—described as being “unable to find a job,” “on welfare with small children,” living “on the streets with no income” or having “bills to pay”—was the main motivating factor, and in many cases economic need overlapped with opportunity. In addition to opportunity-based and economic reasons, a minority of respondents cited the risk factors alluded to in the media stories, such as dependency on illicit drugs and alcohol, as a motivating factor. A few respondents also described what might be characterized as forced or abuse-related involvement.

Media depictions do not emphasize the “work” aspects of the sex industry. In contrast, the most important aspect of the sex industry for respondents was that it was a source of income. A majority of respondents were relatively long-term participants in the sex industry, with an average of eight years' involvement at the time of the interview. Respondents also reported a clear sense of what each service was worth, and that one of the

main reasons that they sold sex was not to pay for drugs, but for normal, "mundane" living costs—rent, food and clothing.

In addition, some of the respondents mentioned moving from one venue or work situation to another in an attempt to carve out a viable living:

After I left the massage parlour, I went back to street stuff again. Then when I was older and I started working for an escort agency, it wasn't too bad, it was okay. I preferred it when I got my own clients and then I didn't have to go through her [agency manager]. [But] if it got slow, then I'd go back to the agency again . . . (female, 43, massage parlour).

As also noted earlier, respondents held various views about sex industry work, and these were both more complex and heterogeneous than suggested by the media narratives. Overall, the most positive aspects of the work included its economic benefits (portable work offering cash-in-hand earnings) and the autonomy it offered (being able to work flexible hours or, in the case of independents, control over working conditions). As Peter, a 28-year-old home-based escort reported:

When it comes down to it, I have full control over what I'm doing. I know that I can make my own decisions, my own rates, and I can make my own hours.

The most negative aspects of the work included "fear that a condom might break," "risk of being harmed," "being recognized publicly" and "feeling dirty." Sarah, a 21-year-old escort, had this to say about the perceived stigma associated with what she did for a living: "I have a boyfriend and I promised him that I would never tell our friends and stuff like that. Basically that's how we leave it, I consider myself two people." Respondents' "continuum of risks" associated with working in the sex industry is similar to studies of workers elsewhere (Sanders, 2004), suggesting that media stories only scratch the surface of the mundane realities of sex industry work.

Discussion and Conclusion

Stigmas are sustained in part by asymmetrical power relations that not only show themselves in the encoding and decoding practices of dominant media texts, but also in the variable ability of social actors to counter, resist and rewrite stigmatizing labels. To the extent that stigmas limit access to societal resources and result in downward social mobility, their production and reproduction in media narratives is linked to the material and cultural environments encountered by sex industry workers in Canada. Further, the relationship between media narratives and the reproduction of "whore" stigmas rests on several other socio-structural conditions. First, as noted earlier, the social distance between audiences of mainstream media and the

objects of narratives of the sex industry means that these audiences rely on cultural scripts around gender, sexuality and morality, and not on empirical experience by which to judge the credibility and truthfulness of these narratives. This renders narratives of the sex industry particularly immune to critique. Second, this vulnerable work force has very limited opportunity to challenge these narratives, in part because the clandestine and sometimes criminalized nature of their work activities leaves them unlikely to engage with mediums of public communication. Third, unlike many other stigmatized populations, such as childless women (Riessman, 2000) and people with certain disabilities (Scambler and Hopkins, 1986), who have had some successes in countering stigma labels by resorting to discourses around human and civil rights, sex industry workers, in spite of recent advances in organizing at the political level, have not developed a vocabulary of stigma resistance with widely agreed-upon legitimacy.

Our findings show that media narratives of the sex industry tell us little about the complexities of what sex workers do for a living. Instead, our primary data show that media narratives follow relatively rigid and standardized cultural scripts in which individuals in the sex industry are presented as morally lost and legally corrupt, and as vectors of social and physical malaise. These cultural scripts organize media narratives by directing what gets counted as newsworthy and what gets omitted from news accounts. Scambler and Scambler (1997: 112) refers to this as the "paradox of attention": media attention is paid to the titillating and illicit aspects of trading sex for money, while its less glamorous, ordinary reality is ignored.

Our findings also suggest that the contents of these cultural scripts convey much about, first, how social stigmas become reproduced in media narratives, as well as how *women's* (not men's) sexuality is a specially privileged disciplinary discourse (Sanders, 2004). While the cultural scripts and narrative conventions shifted over the 24-year period under examination, creating new kinds of characters and constructing slightly different power relations between them, across the two decades there is a consistent focus on moral loss and contagion, reminding us that, for many readers, female workers' personhood is so intimately linked with their sexual selves that violation of sexual norms entails utter and complete loss of individuality. In addition, the dominating focus on street work, i.e., a public display of women's sexuality, suggests that sex work stigmas are a key disciplinary site of women's sexuality in general.

Media narratives offer a voyeuristic and consumerist interpretation of the sex industry, through which a mainstream audience is titillated with stories of culpable and wicked females (in the earlier time period) or the entrapment and seduction of innocent girls (in the later period). In so doing, these narratives reproduce social stigmas that suggest that sex industry workers are morally, mentally and psychologically damaged, and, by focussing on individual pathologies and risk behaviours, obscure the various distal forces that shape both entry into the sex industry and the

ordinary and mundane experiences within it (Weitzer, 2000). These narratives thus place the worker at the margins of society, as the stigmatized other, and direct the moral obligations of the audience in particular ways: abandoning fallen women and rescuing lost girls.

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