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Sex Work: A Comparative Study\*

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\*Pre-publication version, contact first author for tables

**ABSTRACT**

Explanations of adult involvement in sex work typically adopt one of two approaches. One perspective highlights a variety of negative experiences in childhood and adolescence, including physical and sexual abuse, family instability, poverty, associations with “pimps” and other exploiters, homelessness, and drug use. An alternative account recognizes that some of these factors may be involved, but underscores the contribution of more immediate circumstances, such as current economic needs, human capital, and employment opportunities. Prior research offers a limited assessment of these contrasting claims. Additionally, most studies focus exclusively on people working in the sex industry and they do not assess the independent effects of life course variables central to these two perspectives. We add to this literature with an analysis that draws on insights from life course and life-span development theories and examines the contributions of factors from childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. We adopted a comparative approach and examined predictors of employment in sex work relative to two other low-income service occupations: food and beverage serving and barbering and hairstyling. Using data from a study of almost 600 workers from two cities, one in Canada and the other in the United States, we found evidence consistent with an approach that draws on both perspectives: childhood poverty, abuse, and family instability were independently associated with adult sex work, as were limited education and employment experience, adult drug use, and marital status.

**KEY WORDS:** Sex work; prostitution; life-course; life-span development

## INTRODUCTION

Ethnographies, interviews, and survey research describe a number of paths that lead to involvement in the sex industry. Weitzer (2010) places these accounts on a continuum, with the “oppression” paradigm at one end and the “empowerment” paradigm at the other. The oppression paradigm is characterized by a focus on abuse and victimization (e.g., Farley, 2004) whereas the empowerment paradigm highlights people’s agency and their decision to work in the industry (e.g., Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006; Murphy & Venkatesh, 2006). The list of factors highlighted by these two perspectives is both broad and deep; it includes conditions highlighted by different disciplines (e.g., psychology, gender studies, epidemiology, social work, and sociology) and factors that reflect research on various types of sex work and minority groups (e.g., escort and massage workers and sexual and racial minorities).

According to the oppression paradigm, childhood sexual abuse and the trauma it may engender are common early life contributors to sex work (Simons & Whitbeck, 1991; Stoltz et al., 2007; Wilson & Widom, 2010). In addition to its psychological consequences (e.g., poor-self-esteem, alienation, anxiety, strain, clinical depression) (see Senn, Carey, & Coury-Doniger, 2012), abuse may be a source of perceived stigma and internalized shame. These in turn may negatively impact academic success, social relationships, involvement in deviant activities, work opportunities, and the establishment of a point of view that selling sex services is a “normative, viable solution for meeting one’s needs” (Wilson & Widom 2010, p. 211).

Childhood strain or trauma may also result from a number of other environmental stressors; these include other types of victimization (e.g., physical abuse or being the victim of a crime), being placed in foster care, or the death of a parent or close friend (Avison, 2010). Other types of strain may unfold over long periods of time. Prominent sources include living in a

family in which parents struggle with under- or unemployment and poverty or a family that involves multiple parents or guardians (McCarthy & Hagan, 1992). Other traumatic and strain-inducing experiences linked to sex work include homelessness (Benoit, Jansson, Hallgrimsdottir, & Roth, 2008; McCarthy & Hagan, 1992; Nandon, Koverola, & Schludermann, 1998; Simons & Whitbeck, 1991; Tyler, 2009) and the use of illicit drugs (Earls & David, 1989; Potterat, Rothenberg, Muth, Darrow, & Phillips-Plummer, 1998). Although these may occur in childhood, they are more common in adolescence and emerging adulthood.

In contrast to the oppression perspective, the empowerment paradigm focuses more on factors that occur first in late adolescence and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). These life stages involve the beginning of financial independence from parents and part-time or full-time paid employment. The empowerment paradigm argues that people with little education and work experience or few employment skills—less human capital—may be more open to considering sex work than more extensively trained or seasoned workers who have more occupational opportunities (Delacoste & Alexander, 1987; Earls & David, 1989; Maher, 1997; Parent, Bruckert, Corriveau, Mensah, & Toupin, 2013; Rosen & Venkatesh, 2008). According to this approach, people choose sex work much as they choose any other line of employment (Murphy & Venkatesh, 2006): they view sex work as a way to earn a living given their economic and social needs, marketable skills, employment options, and any constraints imposed by particular characteristics (e.g., health, parenting). People may decide to work in the sex industry in part because of limited success in legal employment (Rosen & Venkatesh, 2008). Uncoupled individuals, people in relationships with an unemployed partner, or those who are single parents may also choose sex work in part because it provides an income that they cannot realize through other economic activities. The regular use of highly addictive drugs such as heroin or cocaine in

adulthood may also be a factor. The use of these drugs may make it difficult to find and keep other types of employment and the sex industry often increases access to drugs (Mosack et al., 2010; Rosen & Venkatesh, 2008; Vaddiparti et al., 2006).

Weitzer (2010) noted that the evidence for either paradigm is uneven; some studies, for example, report an association between sex work and sexual abuse (Vaddiparti et al., 2006) whereas others fail to find an effect (Mosack et al., 2010; Nandon et al., 1998; Tyler, 2009; Wilson & Widom, 2010); some document an effect of drug use (Vaddiparti et al., 2006) while others describe its consequences as unimportant relative to other factors (Widom & Kuhns, 1996; Wilson & Widom, 2010). Weitzer (2010) argued that this inconsistency reflects the shortcomings of much of the research on sex work (see discussion below); it also underscores the need to draw on insights from both paradigms to understand the diverse paths by which people become involved in sexual commerce. He proposed a “polymorphous” paradigm that recognizes the diversity of life histories and personal circumstances that lead people to the sex industry (see also Vanwesenbeeck, 2001).

Weitzer’s position echoes the arguments of life course (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003) and life-span development theories (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006). These theories maintain that many adult experiences are the products of people’s current, as well as past, conditions and experiences. These approaches emphasize that recognizing agency is essential for understanding behaviors, but they underscore that agency is circumscribed by people’s life histories. Thus, they draw attention to the opportunities and constraints that influence people’s decisions as well as to the consequences of the chronology of events and experiences that constitute people’s life histories. They place particular emphasis on childhood and adolescence

and argue that events and experiences in these periods can have long-term consequences that may only be realized in adulthood (Avison, 2010; Hertzman, Power, Matthews, & Manor, 2001).

Unfortunately, existing research provides limited insight into which factors in early and later life systematically distinguish working in the sex industry from employment in other occupations. Few studies of adult sex work assess the independent contributions of various conditions or experiences from different points in the life course. As well, most research focuses exclusively on people working in this industry and thus offers limited opportunities for examining the independent effects of factors assumed to contribute to involvement in sex work. Only a small set of studies have adopted a comparative approach (Earls & David, 1989; Mosack et al., 2010; Potter et al., 1999; Sausa, Keatley, & Operario, 2007; Widom & Kuhns, 1996; Vaddiparti et al., 2006).

Although informative, most prior comparative research suffers from a number of limitations that are also common to studies that focus exclusively on people working in the sex industry. These include an analysis limited to bivariate comparisons (e.g., Earls & David, 1989; Potter, Martin, & Romans, 1999; Sausa et al., 2007), analyses limited to a few variables (e.g., Mosack et al., 2010; Vaddiparti et al., 2006), or models that include independent variables of experiences in childhood and adolescence, but not adulthood (e.g., Widom & Kuhns, 1996; Wilson & Widom, 2010).

### **Studying Sex Industry Work**

This study addressed some of the shortcomings of previous work. It used data gathered in an investigation of work and health among workers in two cities, one in Canada and one in the U.S., all of whom were employed in one of three low-income service occupations: food and beverage serving, barbering and hairstyling, and sex work. It adopted a comparative approach to

examine predictors of employment in sex work, relative to working in these other occupations. The study drew on a life course approach and examined the links between occupation and experiences from childhood, adolescence, and adulthood emphasized in the oppression and empowerment paradigms. Most studies on sex work focus on a specific type of sex work or activity (e.g., escorting or street-level work), the experiences of one demographic group (e.g., one gender or sexual orientation), or a particular sub-group for which a type of sex work is expected to be more common (e.g., homeless adolescents or high frequency substance users); in contrast, this study adopted a broader approach and examined a number of the more common types of adult sex work and included workers from all genders, racial and ethnic groups, and sexual orientations (Weinberg, Shaver, & Williams, 1999).

The research was restricted to workers who had one-to-one direct physical contact with their customers and who were paid directly by them. In the sex industry, this included people who worked as escorts, did erotic massage, or sold sex in public places such as street corners. Excluded were workers who labored in areas that involved no direct physical contact with clients (e.g., phone sex or media productions). The various types of sex work were combined into one category because of the dynamic nature of employment in this and other service-sector industries. In the sex industry, people often work in more than one sector (e.g., combining erotic in-home massage with escort services), transition from one type of work to another (e.g., from exotic dancing to escorting), and change where they work (e.g., moving from escorting to on-street soliciting) (Benoit & Millar, 2001; Vanwesenbeeck, 1994). Some people also held multiple jobs and worked in both sex work and other front-line service industries and many had worked in other occupations prior to entering their current job. We avoided reifying occupation as a master

status to classify people and refer to the sector in which participants primarily worked in (e.g., sex work) rather than by their current occupational title (e.g., “sex worker”).

At first glance, the three service sector jobs studied—sex work, hairstyling, and food and beverage serving—may seem too disparate to warrant a comparative analysis; yet, they share several important features. They are “feminized” service occupations that fall near the bottom of the occupational prestige ladder (Harvey, 2005). They involve considerable “emotional labor” (Hochschild, 1983) whereby workers manage their own and their clients’ emotions to produce a positive response in the customer, create a loyal clientele, and increase their earnings (Hall, 1993; Sanders, 2005; Schroeder, 1987). Most workers in each of these occupations rely on a combination of income (hourly wages or a fee per-service charge) and tips. Tips are typically given by customers to workers and are directly related to workers’ successful management of emotional labor (Bernstein, 2007; Butler & Skipper, 1981; Cohen, 2010; Lawson, 1999). These three occupations are also disproportionately female, have a smaller age distribution than many other occupations (i.e., fewer workers in the over 55 category), and do not require a high school diploma. Much of the work is part-time and insecure, leading many workers to work multiple jobs and change workplaces frequently (Benoit & Millar, 2001; Butler & Skipper, 1983; Cohen, 2010; Lawson, 1999; Schroeder, 1987; Vanwesenbeeck, 1994). Moreover, on average, workers in these three occupations report comparable incomes (Jansson, McCarthy, & Benoit, 2013).

There are, of course, important differences between these occupations, namely the activities performed, as well as their legal and social acceptance. Although styling and serving are both highly regulated, individual workers are only rarely sanctioned for contravening laws or regulations. There is notable variation in the ways nations, states or provinces, and municipalities legislate sex work (McCarthy, Benoit, Jansson, & Kolar, 2012; Weitzer, 2012) and some of the

sex work we study is legal in some contexts (e.g., escorts); however, much of it is outlawed (e.g., on-street soliciting) or is frequently investigated for illegal activities that may occur in a licensed establishment (e.g., massage parlors). The level of stigma further distinguishes sex work and has important consequences for people employed in this industry (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2010; Benoit, McCarthy, & Jansson, in press).

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Data were from a study of 595 workers employed in one of three occupations: sex work ( $n = 212$ ), serving ( $n = 204$ ), and styling ( $n = 179$ ). Demographic data for participants who provided information indicated that about 92% of the people interviewed from the sex industry identified as females as did 70% of those employed in the food and beverage industry, and 83% of those working in salons and related settings. The average age for participants in these three occupations was 36, 32, and 44 years, respectively. Approximately 41%, 8%, and 10% of participants from each occupation identified as non-heterosexual, while 43%, 17%, and 24% identified as a racial minority. Only a small number of participants were immigrants: 7%, 5%, and 18% of people in the sex, serving, and styling industries, respectively. Approximately 54%, 32%, and 31% of people in these three occupations were single. About 48% of people working in the sex industry had completed high school compared to 88% of participants who were working as servers, and 84% of those employed as stylists. *T* and *chi-squared* tests of differences revealed that people working in styling or serving were comparable on many measures (see Table 1); they were, therefore, collapsed into one group in the analyses reported below.

Approximately 18% of the participants were missing information on one or more of the variables used in the analyses. For most variables, however, fewer than 3% of participants were

missing information; the three exceptions involved measures of drug use for which approximately 10% of the sample was missing information. T-tests of mean differences (analyses not shown, available on request) indicated that the dropped participants were, on average, significantly older, from racial and sexual-orientation minorities, started paid employment later in life, had fewer jobs, were single, had spent time in a group or foster home, reported more use of cocaine and heroin, and, at the time of the survey, worked in the sex industry. Data for missing values were imputed using multiple imputation with 35 datasets imputed and then combined. All models were estimated with the imputed data as well as with the data in which cases missing data were dropped. The results strongly resembled each other and the few differences that did occur are described in the results section.

### **Procedures**

The data for this study were collected in 2003 through 2007 as part of a four-wave panel study of service workers' emotional labor (for study details, see Jansson et al., 2013). The study used a comparative design and gathered data from two locations: the Census Metropolitan Area of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, and three counties that are part of the greater metropolitan region of Sacramento, California. Three factors contributed to the choice of these research sites: they were located in two countries that share many features but which have different sex industry legislation; the researchers had previous contacts with agencies that provided outreach to people who worked in the sex industry in Victoria and were able to establish similar relationships in Sacramento; and the two areas share several political and demographic features. For example, both have a large proportion of government workers and they have higher than average national median incomes, mobility rates, and levels of education.

A team that included the authors, graduate students, and former service workers conducted the interviews for this research. People who had worked in the sex trade or in the other two service industries were hired and trained as interviewers so that participants had the option of being interviewed by someone intimately familiar with the occupation (they could also request a female or male interviewer). The in-person interviews included open and closed ended questions and a self-report component. This combination of methods was used because many participants find personal interviews more satisfying than telephone or mailed surveys, because some questions were best answered privately (e.g., drug use), and to give participants an opportunity to speak in detail about important topics. The research was approved by the ethics boards at the authors' institutions.

Promises of anonymity and confidentiality were given to all participants and all U.S. participants were given a National Institute of Health's *Certificate of Confidentiality* that guaranteed anonymity even if the data were subpoenaed. This statute-based protection is not available to researchers in Canada; however, the study was designed to satisfy the Wigmore criteria used by the courts to determine if they will support the promises of confidentiality (Palys & Lowman, 2010). Interviews typically lasted for 1.5 hours and participants received a \$25 honorarium. Interviews were tape-recorded unless the participant asked not to be taped or there was a technological problem (this occurred in 19 cases from the sex industry, 19 from serving, and 7 from styling).

A number of conditions complicated the sampling for this study. First, there were no population lists for people employed in sex work or serving jobs; there was a list of licensed hairstylists in California, but not for British Columbia where styling had been deregulated. Second, each occupation involves a wide array of businesses (e.g., hairstyling occurs in chain

stores, in rented chairs in independent salons, and in the homes of owner-operated businesses) and, although lists for some businesses could be constructed (e.g., from Chamber of Commerce and phone directories or through on-line searches), the available information was often dated and contained many foreign entries. Third, the stigma associated with sex work and the illegality of many of the activities it includes required additional steps to locate and recruit people (Shaver, 2005).

The study used both random and purposive sampling strategies to locate potential participants. The California State Board of Barbering and Cosmetology list of the addresses of licensed California barbers and stylists was used to draw a random sample of people to whom letters were sent describing the study and inviting them to participate. Telephone directories and municipal business lists were utilized in each site to generate samples of hair cutting and styling businesses and of restaurants that served both food and alcohol. Where possible, these businesses were stratified by the number of service seats available. In both research sites, sex services advertised in phone directories, local newspapers or on the internet were contacted. One of the counties in Sacramento issues licenses for “adult businesses” and all of the establishments that had a physical or internet address were contacted.

Information packages were sent to managers of the selected businesses explaining the nature of the study and population of interest. These were followed-up with onsite visits to talk with managers about the project and to ask them to post flyers in staff lunchrooms or other places where employees would see them. Recruitment flyers reported the name of the study’s funder, the researchers’ university affiliation, the study’s focus on work and health, and that participants would be offered a \$25 honorarium.

The study also used respondent-driven sampling (Heckathorn, 2002; Johnston, Grazioplene, & Mai, 2006) a variation on snowball sampling. In respondent-driven sampling, participants served as “seeds.” After their interviews, seeds received recruitment coupons that described the study and invited others to an interview. The seeds and any subsequent recruits who enlisted additional participants received a small honorarium for each peer who participated in the study. Payment occurred at the participant’s next interview (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. Limiting the number of secondary participants enrolled by seeds avoided the problem in snowball sampling of differential recruitment caused by some seeds recruiting far more, or fewer, participants than others (Heckathorn, Semaan, Broadhead, & Hughes, 2002). Seeds recruited 58 people for the study (15 from styling, 18 from serving, and 25 from sex work).

A number of additional techniques were used to contact participants: notices about the study were placed in local newspapers that advertised sex work (e.g., massage and escort services); email messages were sent to people who advertised sexual services on a local webpage and phone messages were left for those who advertised in local newspapers; notices about the project were placed in social service agencies that worked with people employed in the sex industry; and social service workers were asked to refer clients to the study. Although it is impossible to assess the representativeness of the three samples of workers—there are no accurate population lists—the descriptive data presented below suggest that the techniques used resulted in a sample that reflected a diversity of workers from each occupation.

## **Measures**

Table 1 shows summary statistics for the variables used in the analysis. Separate statistics are provided for each occupation, as are the results of *t* and *chi-square* tests of differences between the groups. Occupation was measured with a single item that asked participants about their primary job at the time of their first interview. Demographic controls included age (in years) and dichotomous measures of gender (1 = male), race (1 = racial minority), sexuality (1 = sexual minority), immigrant status (1 = immigrant), and country of residence (1 = U.S.).

Several aspects of childhood and adolescence common to the oppressive paradigm were measured. There were three indicators of economic insecurity and one of familial insecurity while the participant was growing up: parents' education (highest education of either parent in grades, 13 = any post-secondary education), unemployment (one or both parents unemployed, 1 = never to 5 = almost always), receipt of social assistance; and the number of parents or guardians with whom the participant lived.

Several types of childhood or early adolescent trauma were also measured. A life-history calendar approach (Freedman, Thornton, Camburn, Alwin, & Young-DeMarco, 1988) asked participants to indicate if they had experienced specific distressing events and, if so, the age or ages when they occurred; a number of these items mirror those from the Life-Event Checklist (Gray, Litz, Hsu, & Lombardo, 2004). The analyses reported below focused on the following: emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, living in a foster or group home, homelessness and criminal victimization. Responses were used to create dichotomous measures that reflected the occurrence of each experience before a participant's 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. This age cut-point was used to establish the independent consequences of trauma for working in the sex industry. Although there are no rigorously-designed studies of age of entry into the sex work industry, the

available research suggested that the great majority of people begin working after the age of 14 (Roe-Sepowitz, 2012).

A number of adolescence and emergent adulthood variables emphasized by the empowerment paradigm were also measured. Data were collected on five indicators of human capital resources: the number of years of schooling (see parental education); the age at first paid employment (including work in the sex industry); the age of first employment in the current occupation; the number of occupations worked in; and having worked in the same occupation for a period of five years or more. Data on the last four of these variables were gathered with an employment experience calendar in which participants indicated when they started and stopped each occupation they worked in beginning at age 14 until the time of their interview. Two adult measures reflected economic need: the number of children for whom the participant currently provided care; and dummy variables that compare single people and people in a relationship with an unemployed partner, to people in a relationship with an employed partner.

A final set of variables concerned substance use. The study collected data on a variety of substances, but the focus here was on three “hard” drugs; it is this type of drug use that is commonly emphasized in the oppression paradigm as contributing to working in the sex industry (Maher, 1997): crystal methamphetamine (“meth”), cocaine, and heroin. There were two binary measures for each drug: in the first, people who had ever used the drug but had not used it in the four months prior to their interview were coded as one (non-users were coded as 0) whereas, in the second measure, people who used the drug in the previous four months were coded as one (non-users were coded as 0).

### **Statistical Analysis**

A series of logistic regression models were estimated comparing working in the sex industry with employment in serving and styling combined. Results from a multinomial logit analysis (not shown but available from the authors) that separated the three occupations were similar to those reported below, underscoring the similarities in the backgrounds of those working in serving and styling, relative to sex work. The square root of the largest Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) score for the independent variables was 1.3 suggesting that multicollinearity did not adversely influence the analyses (Fox, 1991).

A number of additional, exploratory models were also estimated. These models assess the extent to which the patterns observed were moderated by four factors: the different legal contexts of sex work in the two countries studied (as well as structural and cultural contexts); and participants' gender, race, and sexual orientation.

## RESULTS

*T* and *chi-squared* tests of differences among demographic variables indicated that, compared to the people working as servers or stylists, people employed in the sex industry had a significantly higher representation who identified as a racial or sexual-orientation minority; the sex work sample had fewer males than the sample of servers and a larger number of immigrants than the sample of stylists (see Table 1). As well, a greater proportion of people working in the sex industry reported negative experiences from across the life course. As a group, they had significantly higher means on parental social assistance and the number of parents or guardians. A notably greater proportion of people working in the sex industry had the following experiences prior to their 15th birthday: they had been physically, emotionally, or sexually abused; they had been the victim of a crime; they had lived in a foster or group home; or they had been homeless.

Compared with other service workers, people working in the sex industry also had, on average, significantly less education and fewer jobs, and more of them were single. Significantly greater proportions of people employed in the sex industry had used heroin, cocaine, or crystal methamphetamine in the four months prior to their interviews and had ever used heroin. People working in the sex industry did not, however, differ from those employed as servers and stylists in their *ever* having used crystal methamphetamine, or from the latter in *ever* having used cocaine.

Overall, the descriptive data indicated that, on average, a greater proportion of people employed in the sex industry had many of the early life course experiences—from childhood poverty and abuse, to homelessness—that the oppression paradigm cites as contributing factors to sex work. However, the data also indicated that, compared to other adult service workers, a greater proportion of those involved in sex work had lower levels of human capital. They had less education than others and, on average, had worked in fewer occupations (however, the mean difference with stylists was not significant). They were also less able to rely on a partner's income. Thus, there was some evidence of the factors highlighted by the empowerment perspective; namely, that experiences in adulthood, as well as in earlier life course stages, contributed to working in the sex industry.

Table 2 shows bivariate correlations between occupation and the independent variables. These served as a guide for the multivariate analysis: variables that were not significantly associated with occupation were dropped from the multivariate models (the associations between sex work and two variables, age at first job and age first worked in current occupation, were significant only in the imputed data). The non-significant factors include variables emphasized in

both the oppression and the empowerment paradigms (respectively: parental unemployment and long tenure in an occupation, number of children, and ever having used crystal meth or cocaine).

Five multivariate equations that reflected various stages in the life course were estimated: two concerned childhood and early adolescence whereas three focused on emerging adulthood and adulthood. The regression models in the tables provide parameter estimates in the form of beta coefficients, which can be interpreted as log odds ratios. For clarity, these were transformed to odds ratios in the text. The results from the first equation (see Table 3) indicated that three family background measures influenced working in the sex industry: a one unit increase in the number of parents or guardians increased the expected odds of sex work by about 14% ( $e^{0.13} = 1.14$ ). Conversely, a one unit increase in parents' education decreased the expected odds of sex work by about 18% ( $e^{-0.20} = 0.82$ ). The odds of sex work were about 99% higher ( $e^{0.69} = 1.99$ ) for participants whose parents received social assistance.

The results from the second equation show that three measures of trauma from early in the life course also had significant effects on sex work, independent of demographic, parental, and other trauma variables: the odds of sex work were just over 80% ( $e^{0.60} = 1.82$ ) higher for participants who were victims of sexual abuse, 90% ( $e^{0.64} = 1.90$ ) higher for those who reported physical abuse, and about 640% ( $e^{1.86} = 6.42$ ) higher for those who had lived in a foster or group home (the effect for physical abuse is significant only with a one-tailed test in the non-imputed data). Parental education and receipt of social assistance both remained significant when trauma variables were added in the second equation.

The third equation shifted to emerging adulthood and introduced human capital variables. The results indicated that the odds of working in the sex industry decreased by about 45% with each year of schooling ( $e^{-0.62} = 0.54$ ) and by approximately 34% with each additional occupation

in which the respondent had worked ( $e^{-0.28} = 0.76$ ). As well, the odds of sex work increased by about 6% ( $e^{0.06} = 1.06$ ) with each increase in the age at which participants started in their current occupation. According to the results of the fourth equation, two indicators of economic need, being single or being in a relationship with an unemployed partner, were both associated with higher odds of sex work, relative to being in a relationship with an employed partner. These increased the odds by just under 190% ( $e^{1.06} = 2.89$ ) and 175% ( $e^{1.01} = 2.75$ ), respectively.

The fifth and final equation indicated that the use of cocaine or heroin—but not crystal methamphetamine—in the four months prior to our interviews was associated with working in the sex industry as was the earlier use of heroin. Recent cocaine use increased the odds by almost 200% ( $e^{1.09} = 2.97$ ), whereas recent heroin use raised them by 530% ( $e^{1.84} = 6.30$ ); less recent heroin use increased the odds by just over 185% ( $e^{1.05} = 2.86$ ).

Additional exploratory models examined whether the effects noted above were moderated by race, sexual orientation, gender, or country (results not shown, available upon request). Although the size of the sample limits the power to detect significant differences, a z test for the difference between regression coefficients revealed that, with one exception, the findings discussed above were not moderated by race or sexual orientation. The only deviation from this pattern was a significantly stronger association between homelessness and sex work for white respondents. Country-specific analyses revealed four interaction effects. The positive association between sex work and race was significantly larger in the American sample, whereas the associations involving sex work and homelessness, having an unemployed partner, and ever having used heroin were larger for the Canadian sample.

Gender moderated five associations, three involving human capital and two concerning drug use. The negative association between sex work and education was pronounced for males,

whereas the negative association between sex work and the number of jobs was larger for females. A significant positive association between age of entry into the general labor force occurred only for males. Gender's moderating effect on the connections between drug use and sex work involved the recent use of cocaine and of heroin; the former association was noticeably larger for females, whereas the latter was heightened for males.

## **DISCUSSION**

An extensive body of literature argues that working in the sex industry is the result of negative experiences in early stages of the life course (childhood, adolescence, and emerging adulthood); a smaller set of studies argues that people's current economic opportunities, needs, and other situational adult factors better explains their involvement. Yet, most research on sex work has used only data gathered from a small sample of people and assumed, but has not demonstrated, that the attributes of these people are distinct from those employed elsewhere.

This paper addressed some of the shortcomings of previous work. It used a life course orientation that recognizes the contributions of both distal and proximate factors in explaining outcomes, and it compared working in the sex industry with employment in other front-line service work. A life course approach highlights the ways in which experiences from various life stages influence subsequent decisions and experiences (Baltes et al., 2006; Elder et al., 2003). It underscores the need to include important experiences from childhood, adolescence, and emerging adulthood, in addition to basic demographic factors, in an analysis of adult behaviors.

This study provided strong support for an integrated life course comparative occupational model. The results indicated that three background factors were associated with working in the sex industry as an adult: growing up in a family that needed social assistance, having a parent or parents with limited educational resources, and having lived in a family that involved a number

of serial parents and guardians. These associations were testimony to the long-range consequences of childhood economic and familial insecurity. Parents' limited education attainment and the receipt of social assistance are indicators of a family's economic struggles which are associated with more intense strain and conflict within the home and with family disruption. There was also evidence of associations between sex work and several types of childhood trauma: most notably, physical and sexual abuse and having lived in a foster or group home. The consequences of sexual abuse and placement in foster or group homes were particularly pernicious. These early childhood and adolescence factors were associated with sex work independently of other background factors as well as more foreground circumstances associated with a person's economic needs. Collectively, these results support the life course argument that experiences from early in the life course can have long-term consequences influencing development and decisions in and throughout adulthood. Consistent with some—but not all—of the claims of the oppression paradigm, working in the sex industry was associated with a number of negative experiences from childhood and adolescence.

Early life misfortune and trauma did not, however, tell the whole story. The majority of people involved in sex work *did not* have these experiences and a substantial minority of people involved in the other occupations *had* them. In other words, although a number of negative childhood, adolescent, and emerging adulthood experiences were more common among people employed in sex commerce than among workers in other service industries in our study (or the general population), these experiences described only a minority of workers.

Consistent with the empowerment paradigm, education and occupation measures from emerging adulthood and adulthood itself were also independently associated with sex work. These findings suggest that people with lower levels of education and with fewer occupational

experiences may have less employment opportunities than people with greater human capital. Individuals who are unable to build a set of diverse employment skills may find sex work a reasonable alternative to other available jobs or to unemployment, particularly during times when the economy contracts and competition intensifies for low-skill jobs.

Echoing earlier research, the study found that drug use was quite high among the service workers studied and recent drug use was strongly associated with sex work. Yet, high levels of substance use are common to many service occupations (Hoffman, Brittingham, & Larison, 1996; Larson, Eyerman, Foster, & Gfroerer, 2007). In the current study, ever having used some highly addictive drugs, such as crystal methamphetamine and cocaine, was not significantly associated with working in the sex industry. There were, however, sizable associations between sex work and the continued use of these drugs. Heroin appears unique in that current and previous use were each independently associated with sex work. These patterns suggest that there is something particular about heroin use as well as the continued use of other hard drugs that contribute to sex work, be it the encouragement of other users or suppliers, the location of much of the sex work industry in areas where drugs are readily available, or the stress and stigma associated with both the use of hard drugs and sex work.

Collectively, these results provided support for Weitzer's claim that understanding the path to sex work requires a polymorphous paradigm that recognizes the contributions of factors highlighted by both the oppression and empowerment paradigms. Applying this approach to a comparison of occupational trajectories reflects a key tenet of the life course and life span development perspectives: that is, that experiences from childhood, adolescence, and emerging adulthood have lasting effects that influence an array of outcomes in adulthood, including career options, health, and high-risk behaviors.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

There were several limitations to these analyses. The combination of random and non-random sampling procedures limited generalizing. Moreover, the small number of cases for some groups may have resulted in an insufficient level of power to detect small, but important effects. The lack of power may, for example, have contributed to the small number of moderation effects in the data. The analysis relied on self-report information about childhood, adolescence, and emerging adulthood that were collected when most of the participants were adults; participants' answers could therefore be adversely affected by memory loss or recall biases. The analyses focused on current occupation and thus cannot determine if the factors that influenced it contributed in similar ways to initial involvement in an industry. Although the analysis included a diverse array of background and current experiences, the data set did not include measures of the factors that people actively contemplate when they make decisions about what work they will undertake.

Future research will hopefully build on the current study and examine the extent to which decisions about working in the sex industry are influenced by situational contingencies, such as an economic emergency or some other crisis, by various types of opportunities including those provided by knowing others employed in an industry, and by the availability of other types of work that have similar benefits and costs (Benoit & Shaver, 2006). There is also a need to explore the extent to which people weigh the costs and benefits associated with various types of employment. Analyses that investigate these questions will provide further insights into the processes by which people enter the sex industry. Finally, the life course and life span development approach reminds us that both continuity and change in behavior occur; thus, future research needs to explore the factors that lead some people to leave sex work while others remain

in this industry, whether by choice, because of few viable alternatives, or because of entrenched societal stigma (Sanders, 2007).

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