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## Exposing the 'pretty woman' myth: A qualitative investigation of the lives of female streetwalkers

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# Exposing the “Pretty Woman” Myth: A Qualitative Examination of the Lives of Female Streetwalking Prostitutes

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*Intensive interviews were conducted with 43 women involved in streetwalking prostitution. Data were analyzed according to Phenomenological Descriptive Analysis, results of which are presented in two parts. Detailed accounts of the lives of a subgroup of 5 participants are described first, followed by a broader discussion of results including the entire sample of 43. Themes common across the larger group are presented in three segments, including (a) early development, (b) life in “the game,” and (c) leaving the streets. Implications for advocacy and further research are presented.*

A prostitute, by definition, is one who exchanges sex or sexual favors for money, drugs, or other desirable commodities (Overall, 1992). The past decade has witnessed a substantial increase in attention focused on the sex industry, and on women who engage in prostitution specifically. To address the needs of governmental funding sources, recent investigations have often focused on drug-related (e.g., drug or alcohol addictions and abuse) or associated risk-taking (e.g., HIV/AIDS knowledge and condom use) behaviors. Consequently, rich details of the lives of prostituting women are sparse in the available literature. Little is known about these women, as individuals with unique histories and developmental trajectories. Moreover, although diversity between types of prostitution is commonly recognized (i.e., streetwalking, escort services, call-girls, strippers) similarity among women engaged in any particular type (e.g., streetwalking) is often erroneously assumed. Assumptions of homogeneity result in false stereotyping and broad, ill-fitted categorizations (Scambler, 1997). Certainly, recognizing patterns of commonality among prostituted women has significant social and policy implications. Additionally, however, acknowledging the uniqueness that exists among women engaged in similar forms of prostitution (e.g., street-level) has equal utility and application for informing policy and out-reach efforts.

A dichotomy exists in the portrayal of women working the streets. At one extreme are popular images depicted in movies such as *Pretty Woman* (with Julia Roberts), *Leaving Las Vegas* (with Elizabeth Shue), and *Taxi Driver* (with Jodie Foster) of the young, beautiful prostitute who meets a “prince” and is “saved” (the “Pretty Woman” myth). In sharp contrast, at the other extreme exists images of women walking busy thoroughfares late at night, wearing high heels and black fishnet stockings, working for abusive pimps.

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Neither of these portrayals, it was assumed, accurately represents the reality of the lives of streetwalking prostitutes or the phenomenon of street-level sex work. The purpose of this investigation therefore, was to examine, in depth, “the game” known as streetwalking prostitution. This study was meant to expand previous work by (a) introducing the reader to the personal, unique developmental experiences of women involved in street-level prostitution; in conjunction with (b) describing broad-based themes common to many women engaged in streetwalking. Previous research informs the present investigation.

Childhood correlates of later prostitution have been well documented. Investigations of women who prostitute themselves on the streets have revealed systematic (and life-long) patterns of abuse, exploitation, and degradation at the hands of men, including fathers, brothers, intimate partners, clients, and pimps (Earls, 1990; Miller, 1993; Nandon, Koverola, & Schludermann, 1998). Estimates of the percentage of female prostitutes who have experienced early sexual abuse vary considerably, from 10% to 50% (Russell, 1988), to 60% (Silbert & Pines, 1983), to 73% (Bagley & Young, 1987). Unclear and open for further debate are the causal paths linking childhood sexual abuse with prostitution. Two models have been proposed. The first suggests that early sexual abuse is directly linked to later prostitution. James and Meyerding (1977) argue, for instance, that childhood sexual abuse results in separation between emotions and sexual activity. They contend that a young girl’s self-concept changes as a result of sexual abuse, in that she begins to view herself as debased, thus facilitating her identification with prostitution. Likewise, Miller (1986) argues that early sexual victimization provides training in emotional distancing, which is reenacted during sexual activities with clients, thus allowing one to more easily engage in sexual servicing.

In contrast, Seng (1989) and others (Simons & Whitbeck, 1991) report that the causal link is indirect, mediated largely by run-away behavior. Likewise, in a Canadian study, Nandon et al. (1998) compared prostitution-involved

teenagers with sexually abused youth who were not involved in the sex industry. They found similarity in reports of sexual abuse. However, the youth involved in prostitution were more likely to be or to have been runaways. The researchers contend, "The current findings . . . indicate that, when an appropriate comparison group is used, known precursors of prostitution *fail* [italics added] to discriminate between the prostitution and nonprostitution groups" (Nandon et al., p. 207).

Attempts to definitively understand prostitution entry have been elusive, despite persistent attempts. Potterat, Phillips, Rothenberg, and Darrow (1985) sought to examine two concepts (susceptibility and exposure) in a model examining women's reasons for entering prostitution. The susceptibility model contends that psychological characteristics (e.g., alienation, feelings of worthlessness), in conjunction with traumatic events (e.g., incest), make some women vulnerable to the lure of prostitution. The exposure model predicts that interpersonal contact with, and inducement from, others involved in the sex industry leads to personal involvement. Interviews with prostitution-involved women and a comparable control group were conducted. Few differences were found with regard to running away from home, experiencing physical or sexual abuse, feelings of alienation and worthlessness, mental breakdowns, drug use, or arrest records.

Other precursors to prostitution, such as economic necessity and drug abuse, have been examined. Economic vulnerability, some argue, forces women into the streets. Hardman (1997) reports, "Because of their restricted access to financial and material resources, some women may resort to prostitution as a resistance or response to poverty" (p. 20). Prostitution, in other words, may be viewed as an active coping strategy in the face of privation. Likewise, Delacoste and Alexander (1998) maintain that, lacking viable alternatives, female sex-work remains consistently available.

Drug addiction has been widely examined in relation to female prostitution. Crack cocaine, specifically, and its use by street-level prostitutes has garnered much recent attention. Graham and Wish (1994) examined 164 female arrestees in order to examine female drug use in relation to deviant behavior. Approximately 60% of the participants tested positive for cocaine; 50% had a history of prostitution. Interestingly, despite the role of drug use in the continuation of prostitution, Graham and Wish report that drug use did not always precede prostitution work. Drug use, they contend, may evolve as a coping strategy among street-level sex workers. In a more recent investigation however, Potterat, Rothenberg, Muth, Darrow, and Phillips-Plummer (1998) examined the sequence and timing of prostitution entry and drug use among prostitution-involved women and a comparable control group. They found that (a) drug use was more common among the prostitution-involved women than the control group, (b) drug use preceded sexual activity in both groups, and (c) injecting drug use preceded prostitution. Within the prostitution

group specifically, 66% had used drugs prior to entering prostitution, 18% began drug use and prostitution activities concurrently, and only 17% reported drug use following their entry into prostitution. The participants were interviewed again after one year; similar reports were made.

Despite the frequency with which particular antecedents to prostitution have been identified in the extant literature, inconsistency and contradictory evidence have emerged. According to Bullough and Bullough (1996), "when all is said and done, no single factor stands out as causal in a woman becoming a prostitute" (p. 171). Nandon et al. (1998) similarly conclude that "background factors may be *necessary but insufficient* [italics added] conditions to justify prostitution activity" (p. 219). Undoubtedly, entry into prostitution and continued work in the sex industry results from the cumulation of multiple interdependent personal and contextual factors; none of which may exist in the same form or to the same degree for all women who prostitute themselves. A "profile" of the prostituted woman (or one who will eventually turn to prostitution) does not exist.

### *Theoretical Orientation*

Ecological Systems Theory (EST) (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) provides the foundation of this investigation. According to EST, development is a timeless process of interaction between person and environment. One must look beyond an individual's present circumstances to understand the processes which resulted in particular developmental trajectories. Bronfenbrenner argues that development results from the interaction between person (including all of her personal characteristics) and environment (including all people in that environment and their personal characteristics), through time. Development cannot be understood without careful observation of the entire ecological context in which each individual is embedded, including historical events and situations (e.g., childhood), social relationships, and environmental factors (e.g., culture and subculture). Equipotentiality, a concept used within Family Systems Theory, further demonstrates the indeterministic nature of development and refers to the notion that developmental outcome is neither predetermined nor predictable.

Many routes to prostitution exist, as do avenues for beginning the recovery process. Not all women wanting assistance will seek help, and not all women seeking help will leave the streets. Recognizing prostitution-involved women as embedded within unique social and ecological contexts is vital for intervention to effectively meet their individual needs. The purpose of this investigation was to examine, in depth, points of divergence and patterns of similarity among women engaged in streetwalking prostitution. The primary goal was to examine streetwalking women as individuals, first and foremost. Recognizing the unique qualities and characteristics of women engaged in streetwalking will allow for a new dialogue to emerge, with subsequent implications for policy, practice, and social awareness. Attention centered on three primary life segments,

including (a) childhood and life events prior to prostitution entry, (b) life in the game, and (c) leaving the streets.

## METHOD

### Participants

Forty-three women comprised the final sample, a subgroup of 5 were chosen and their developmental experiences are described at length (see Table 1: Demographic information for the entire sample of 43 and the subgroup of 5 is displayed). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 56 (mean = 33.37). Most identified themselves as White ( $n = 20$ ) or Black ( $n = 18$ ); five were Native American. The majority lived in shelters ( $n = 16$ ) or were incarcerated ( $n = 14$ ). Others lived alone or with their children ( $n = 4$ ), with a parent ( $n = 2$ ), with friends ( $n = 1$ ), or with their partners/husbands ( $n = 6$ ). Years of education ranged from seven to college experience (mean = 9.3 years). Most ( $n = 40$ ) of the women were no longer involved in prostitution-related activities, although length of time since the last incident of prostitution varied dramatically, from less than 6 months ( $n = 17$ ), to 6 months to 1 year ( $n = 13$ ), to 1 or more years ( $n = 10$ ). The majority ( $n = 41$ ) reported that they had been addicted to drugs; drugs of choice included alcohol and crack cocaine. Length of sobriety largely corresponded with length of time since last incident of prostitution.

*Subgroup.* The 5 women comprising the subgroup were chosen for two reasons. First, they are representative of the larger sample of 43 with regard to race, age, age of first prostitution-related activity, drug use, length of time since last prostitution experience, and place of residence. Differences included that the subgroup of 5 (a) were more educated (by an average of 2.7 years), and (b) had more children (averaging 4.0 kids compared to 2.5). Second, the women comprising the subgroup appeared extremely comfortable during the interview process. They readily answered questions in great detail and spontaneously offered additional information related to their personal lives and prostitution activities.

### Procedure

This investigation was conducted in a midsized Midwestern city. All data were collected by the Principal Investigator (PI). Inclusion required that participants be female, involved in or have former experience in streetwalking prostitution, and be at least 18 years of age. The majority of participants were located through an intervention program designed to keep women off the streets. The program offers weekly group meetings and one-on-one counseling. Most group attendees were transitory, attending group for several weeks then disappearing for weeks or months, and then perhaps (but not always) returning. Some participants attended group on their own accord, others were court ordered to attend. With support of the Program Director and approval from group members, the PI attended weekly group meetings for a period of 17 months, beginning in the spring of 1998. Each week that a new participant attended group,

**Table 1. Demographic Information: Total Sample and Subgroup**

Variables	Total sample ( $n = 43$ )	Subgroup ( $n = 5$ )
Age		
Mean	33.3	38.8
Mode	37.0	
Range	19 - 56	30 - 56
Race/ethnicity ( $n$ )		
Black	18	2
White	20	3
Native American	5	
Marital status ( $n$ )		
Never married	22	2
Married	10	1
Divorced	9	1
Separated	2	1
Residence ( $n$ )		
Shelter	16	2
Friends	3	1
Prison	14	
Partner/husband	6	1
Alone/with children	4	1
Education		
Mean	9.3	11.6
Range	7th - 2 yr. college	9th - 2 yr. college
GED ( $n$ )	14	1
Employed <sup>a</sup> ( $n$ )	21	4
Children		
Mothers ( $n$ )	38	5
Number of children (total)	105 <sup>b</sup>	21
Mean	2.4	4.2
Range	1 - 7	2 - 7
Child(ren)'s Residence ( $n$ )		
Mother	10	1
Father	19	4
Grandparent	9	1
On Own	14	5
Foster Care	22	7
Adopted	8	
Aunt	12	
Other <sup>c</sup>	11	3
Prostitution		
Age at entry		
Mean	19.4	19.6
Mode	18	
Range	11 - 31	14 - 31
Time in sex industry <sup>d</sup>		
Mean	11.45 yrs.	19 yrs.
Range	6 mos. - 44 yrs.	7 - 44 yrs.
Drugs <sup>e</sup> ( $n$ )	41	5
Drug abuse ( $n$ )		
Preprostitution	16	1
Concurrent with prostitution	8	1
Postprostitution	17	3

<sup>a</sup>Types of employment include fast food, housekeeping, maintenance, and clerical. <sup>b</sup>Does not include number of pregnancies; aborted fetuses were reported by numerous participants. <sup>c</sup>Includes individuals living with extended kin, in mental health facilities, and incarcerated. <sup>d</sup>Multiple modes exist. Includes streetwalking as well as nightclub dancing and involvement with Sugar Daddies. <sup>e</sup>Drugs of choice include crack, amphetamines, alcohol, and heroin.

investigation goals were explained. Following group, new attendees were approached and their participation was requested. The remaining participants were located while incarcerated ( $n = 14$ ) and by word of mouth ( $n = 3$ ). Responses to requests for interviews were overwhelmingly positive (47 women were approached, 3 declined to participate and 1 did not show up for a scheduled appointment and never responded to attempts to be reached).

This investigation was part of a much larger study. Thus, although self-report indices were completed by participants (either alone or with the assistance of the PI) prior to being interviewed, data relevant to purposes of the present investigation only are discussed below. In-depth, personal interviews were conducted with each participant. Interviews were semi-structured: Questions were predetermined, although length of time spent discussing each and the order in which they were asked varied depending on each participant's verbosity and response to previously asked questions. This technique allowed for discussion of all significant topics in an informal, nonthreatening manner. Interviews were conducted in private, in residences (or shelters), in parks, or in private rooms in the correctional facility. All interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed verbatim by research assistants. Participants were compensated \$20.00.

### *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using Phenomenological Descriptive Methodology (Colaizzi, 1978), a technique that allows for the analysis of text-based data. The procedure begins with a thorough reading of all text-based data (or protocols) and the extraction of significant statements or phrases, defined as those related to the research questions. The next step entails formulating meanings of each significant phrase or statement, which is then followed by the identification of emergent themes or patterns across each statement. Themes are then organized/clustered and the results are integrated into an exhaustive description of the investigated topic (see Colaizzi, 1978). The final step involves returning to several participants and requesting opinions regarding derived conclusions. Results of this investigation were evaluated by several participants whose comments and suggestions were integrated into the final manuscript.

## RESULTS

A brief biography of 5 female participants is presented. Results from data analyses including the entire sample of 43 are then discussed in three segments: (a) historical events culminating in prostitution entry,<sup>1</sup> (b) life in the game, and (c) looking ahead.

### *Part One: Images of Individuality*

Barb was petite, 30 years old, and pregnant with her seventh child when she was interviewed. Beginning early in

<sup>1</sup> All participants were asked to describe their first "prostitution" experience (defined as the exchange of sexual services for desirable commodities); thus, self-identification played a role in determining entry age.

their lives, she and her older sister were molested by their mother and her male friends (Barb believed it started when she was 2). Although other family members were aware of the abuse, no one stepped in to protect her. When asked her feelings about it she commented, "I don't need to cry about it the rest of my life; if it happened, then it happened. Apparently it didn't have any impact on my life that I know of." When her parents divorced at age 12 her mother promised Barb and her sisters that she would be back for them, but her mother never returned. Barb ran away at age 13 because she was "in love"; she prostituted for the first time at age 15. In that same year she was also raped by her sister's husband and had her first child. By the time she was 19 she was shooting Ritalin and prostituting on a daily basis to support her habit and that of a boyfriend. Most of her clients were Sugar Daddies or regulars, and condom use was infrequent. She had never been married, but noted always "[having] a boyfriend." Relationships with male partners were consistently characterized by violence. None of her children lived with her; the four oldest were in foster care and the younger two lived with their respective fathers. She had not spoken to her parents in years and contact with her sisters was sporadic and infrequent. She explained, "When I was emancipated [at 15], as far as family went, I really didn't have one." She had stopped prostituting "recently," had not used in 7 months, and was living with a male friend who "is not supportive of prostitution, at all."

Amy was 34 and the mother of two boys. Although her children were living in foster care, she had recently completed all state-ordered requirements to regain full custody. When interviewed, she was living in a shelter and working at a fast-food franchise. She had never been married, although she had been involved with a man for 12 years. She was the youngest of eight children. Her parents died within a year of one another when Amy was 12. She lived with older siblings, family friends, foster families or boyfriends until she turned 18. Her parents were alcoholics. When asked to describe her most significant childhood memory, Amy replied,

I remember my dad beating the shit out of my mom one night and he ripped her shirt open and she had on a white shirt and a white slip. She sat in the kitchen and her lip was bleeding and she had a butcher knife to her chest and after that I made up my mind that a man would never, ever hit me, because I would kill him.

She knew little about her siblings, as it had been years since she had seen or spoken to any of them. One of her older sisters was a prostitute and heavily addicted to drugs. With reference to her older sister, Amy stated, "I never thought at the time I would become one of her—I did become one of her." At 18, she tried prostitution for the first time, was arrested, and spent 30 days in jail. She would frequently bring "dates" to her home and send her children to the store down the street; many of her clients were regulars so condom use was intermittent. For several years she was addicted to crack cocaine and alcohol, although she commented, "I never did it [prostitution] for

drugs, it was always for the money." She was determined to "break the cycle" and introduce normalcy into her children's lives.

Sam, at 39, was living in a shelter and working as a waitress. She had four children, ranging in age from 12 to 18, none of whom lived with her. She came from a family that was "very well-off, but very disorganized." When she was 6 months old, her father left her mother and took Sam and her brothers to another state. Sam was told that her mother had run out; she and her mother were recently reunited for the first time. Sam's father was a workaholic and an alcoholic and she and her brothers were frequently left in the care of an uncle who, for years, sexually abused them all. She began running away at the age of 10 and spent several years living intermittently with various family members, foster families, and in group homes. By age 24 she had two children, was involved in her second marriage, and being ". . . beaten quite a bit, on a weekly basis." The marriage lasted two years. At age 31, Sam became involved with several prominent business men (Sugar Daddies) who took care of her and her children financially. She tried crack for the first time at age 37 and was immediately addicted; it was then that she started working the streets and truck stops because the Sugar Daddies "didn't want nothing to do with me anymore." Her daughter, her oldest child, had worked the truck stops with her for a period of several months. She had been drug and prostitution free for 8 months when she was interviewed.

Trina was 35 and came from a family of 10 children. She described her family as "real dysfunctional"; her father physically and verbally abused her mother, and both parents physically abused the children. Because Trina was "the pick" she escaped the physical assaults suffered by her siblings. She became pregnant the first time she had sex, at age 17; the child's father was shot and killed by his cousin when she was 4 months pregnant. She described their relationship as "like a puppy love thing, we were real close." At the time, her mother had told Trina, "You're pregnant, so what, that's not my fault. You knew better—go to school." She completed high school and a year of college; she had planned on becoming a nurse. Her second child was born when Trina was 20. When the infant was 3 months old, she left the child's father because he had cheated on her. Five months later she was involved in a car accident that left her in a coma for 3 weeks; she was not expected to walk again. The accident caused a miscarriage, although she had not known she was pregnant. At age 21 Trina was a single mother of two and economically strapped. She was propositioned by a bar owner who promised that "[I] wouldn't have to leave my kids, or work 11-7, and he would buy me this and do that for me." The relationship "worked out real well" for her and lasted 1 year, until she met Greg who introduced her to street prostitution and became her pimp and the father of her third child. She described still mourning the death of her first love. For her, prostitution was ". . . the perfect relationship. I didn't have to fall in love, I didn't have to be heard." Trina explained how she and Greg traveled "all over . . . to Canada,

Michigan, Minneapolis, South Dakota . . . catching hoes." At one point Greg had seven other women working for him. They made a lot of money, drove Cadillacs, and lived in an upper-class neighborhood. Trina commented, however, "Fast money don't last long." One night, on a paranoid high, Greg held a gun to Trina's head and forced her to try crack to prove she was not a police informant. She became addicted. After 5½ years Trina left Greg because "I got tired of him beating me up." On her own again, Trina became "real wild . . . I didn't have a supervisor anymore." Her children were eventually placed with relatives while she ". . . went selling dope and selling [myself] . . . I'd sell anything." She married a man within a year, after knowing him 1 month. The marriage lasted 1 year, although much of that time she had spent in jail "with 178 injuries to my record." It was while in jail that she met her current partner, a detention officer. Trina was interviewed in an apartment they shared; she had been drug- and prostitution-free for 3 months.

At 56, Chancey was the oldest woman participating in the investigation. She was raised in a small, rural community where her parents, she emphasized, were very strict, Lutheran, and pillars of the community. She was extremely articulate and had completed 2 years of college. She had two older siblings and a sister 15 months her junior. Chancey explained, "My mother should have only had two children. I probably should have never been born." She was also the mother of five children, one of whom was an accountant. Prostitution for her began, she felt, at age five when she was given money in exchange for oral sex by the chief of police in the town where she was raised. Those exchanges continued for approximately 3 years. In addition to the police chief, Chancey had been sexually molested by several other individuals during her childhood, including her father. Her experiences on the streets began at the age of 14; she was hospitalized at the age of 15 for a drug overdose. At age 17 she married a man who became her pimp. And although she worked in the labor market intermittently and had been the executive director of a health agency at one point, her evenings were often consumed with prostitution. She explained being "addicted to the danger, to the risk, the excitement," and continued, ". . . it was like a high to get home alive a lot of times." Although she had been addicted to heroin, prostitution continued for years after she became clean. She met her second husband in treatment; they were married for 7 years. He was the first and last man with whom she had ever been "in love." During 12 years of her adulthood Chancey had not worked the streets or engaged in any type of sex-work. However, within the last 2 years she had "relapsed" into prostitution and was again seeking help. Work in the sex industry had been a defining factor of her life for over 30 years.

### *Part Two: The Larger Perspective*

The description of the lives of these five women provides a starting point for examining the reality of streetwalking prostitution. Despite their personally unique experiences, threads of similarity bind these women in the world of

streetwalking known as the game. Exploration of those similarities is described below.

*Harsh beginnings.* Sexual abuse is repeatedly identified in the extant literature as a correlate to later prostitution. These data concur; sexual abuse<sup>2</sup> consistently emerged in the participants' life histories. The majority of participants ( $n = 27$ ; 63%) reported being sexually molested during their formative years. Family friends, fathers, stepfathers, brothers, and uncles were most often mentioned as perpetrators. Several women were molested by more than one person and two of the participants were impregnated by their sexual perpetrators; one by her brother, the other by her father. When asked if they reported the abuse, the majority ( $n = 18$ ) of those who had been sexually abused answered negatively, explaining that they feared the consequences. Of the remaining nine women who sought help by reporting the abuse, seven were ignored or not believed, thus resulting in continued victimization. Sexual abuse lasted an average of 4.9 years; six of the women reported being sexually abused for 10 or more years.

Abandonment, either literal or symbolic, emerged as a second defining characteristic and was evident in the lives of 28 of the female participants. Literal abandonment, such as that described above by Amy, Barb, and Sam, occurred most typically through parental death or desertion. Parental alcoholism, drug abuse, mental instability, and severe domestic violence resulted in feelings of emotional (or symbolic) abandonment, as well. Symbolic abandonment also comprised instances when sexual abuse was reported but ignored. When she told her mother her stepfather was sexually abusing her, for instance, one participant explained, verbatim, her mother's reaction: "That's between you and him." Similarly, after disclosing sexual abuse from her uncle, another participant was told by her mother, ". . . sometimes things happen and you just have to let them go." Because of parental death, domestic violence, or drug abuse, nine of the women were removed from their families of origin and placed in foster care. Many moved from one foster home to another; these situations rarely provided a sense of stability or cohesion. One of the participants, for instance, noted having been in 27 different foster homes by the age of 18. Three reported being sexually abused within their foster homes.

Not surprisingly, leaving home appeared more attractive than staying for many of the women. Seventeen of the women ran away from home (or their foster homes) before or during early adolescence (ages 11-13). Several of the women reported running away to be with their boyfriends, others simply hitched rides with truckers and other strangers to unknown destinations. Five of the women noted traveling from one state to another, never staying in any one place more than a few months. One young woman described spending several years traveling intermittently

with various carnivals. She felt the strongest interpersonal connections with street people and carnival friends, stating, "Just because you have [family] doesn't mean they're going to be there for you . . . sometimes you have to learn to detach to save yourself."

*Life in the game.* The average age of entry into prostitution was 19.4 years. Length of time involved in prostitution activities varied. Seven women reported short term involvement (ranging from 5 months to 3 years; mean = 1.6 years; mode = 1 year). Thirty-six reported long term involvement (3.1 to 41 years; mean = 12.9 years; mode = 15 years). Drug abuse and economic necessity were described as the primary reasons for entering the sex industry.

Forty-one of the participants reported drug abuse (drug usage as routine part of their lives). Sixteen of those women were drawn to prostitution to support an established drug habit; eight reported that prostitution entry and drug abuse occurred simultaneously. Crack cocaine was the drug of choice, although heroin, alcohol, and marijuana were also used frequently. One participant explained her addiction to crack by stating, "One hit is too many, one-thousand hits are not enough." Several reported, "There's no reason to be out there if not for the drugs." Still, 41% reported entering prostitution out of (real or perceived) economic necessity. Nine runaways exchanged sexual services for rides, shelter, and food. Twelve others reported that income generated from prostitution paid their rent and fed their children. Amy, described above, was a single mother of two, lacking familial support, education, and marketable skills when she began regular prostitution activity. She engaged in street-level sex work because "I needed it [the money] to survive." She explained further, however, "It's [prostitution] quick and easy money, tax free, but it could cost you your life, and it does cost you your self-worth." Others simply enjoyed the lifestyle they were afforded through prostitution-related activities. "The money," noted one participant, "is more addicting than anything else." Despite economic need propelling these women into prostitution, they were not necessarily drug free. Fifty-three percent reported recreational drug use before prostitution entry, and 76% reported becoming regular users following prostitution entry.<sup>3</sup> Interesting also is that, following routine and consistent drug use, these women often reported that their rates for sexual services declined precipitously (an ironic twist), findings which parallel those described by Feucht (1993).

All 43 participants worked the streets. For some, their only involvement with prostitution came from street-walking, although many participants engaged in other forms of prostitution as well, including working truck stops ( $n = 6$ ), escort services ( $n = 7$ ), massage parlors ( $n = 4$ ), and as stage dancers ( $n = 4$ ). Chancey, for instance, worked in a residence specializing in sadomasochistic sexual services, and 2 participants had made pornographic movies. With

<sup>2</sup> Sexual abuse referred to penetration (by object or body part), fellatio, cunnilingus, masturbation, or other behaviors (e.g., fondling, touching) performed for the sexual pleasure of the perpetrator, and against the female's will.

<sup>3</sup> Participants were not asked to identify the amount of time that elapsed before they began engaging in routine drug use.



regard to their street clientele, 10 of the participants reported having "regulars" whereas others explained seeing each client only once—"dating" the same clients on a regular basis personalized the work to a level beyond which they were comfortable. Finally, 4 of the women, including Sam and Barb, reported being supported by Sugar Daddies before they began working the streets. Barb described meeting her Sugar Daddy at age 14; he was quite wealthy and paid her extremely well. She explained, "So basically, I just did not go through a lot of the street problems that a lot of my friends experienced." Nine of the women reported becoming emotionally involved with clients or former clients.

Despite the popular image of streetwalking prostitutes' lives controlled by pimps, less than half of the women ( $n = 17$ ) reported involvement with a pimp. One of the women began working for her pimp when she was 15 years old, and he was 40. Eight participants reported that their boyfriends or partners forced them onto the streets to pay for their own drug habits. Five women had children with men whom they described as their pimps. And another noted that her brother had been a pimp, but had "reformed" and was now a minister. Similarities between partners/boyfriends and pimps included that both were prone to physical violence and abuse, fathered children of the women, were aware of the women's prostitution and drug-related activities, and often introduced the women to the streets. Yet, distinctions were also made in that (a) pimps "required" their women to make a certain amount of money; (b) took all of the women's earned income and in turn provided shelter, clothing, food, and protection (e.g., from dangerous clients); and (c) the pimps often had several women working for them at once (known as a "stable"). Finally, in asking whether they had worked for a pimp or not, three participants responded, "the rock [crack] was my pimp."

Condom use by the majority of the women was intermittent at best. Some reported using condoms when with strangers only, never with their regular clientele, their pimps, or their partners. Some never used protection. Several noted that their clients did not want to use condoms because ". . . they take away the feeling," whereas other clients would pay extra in order to have unprotected sex. When asked their feelings about condom use, many stated they simply "didn't care" whether they used them or not; becoming pregnant, or being subjected to a sexually transmitted disease or a life-threatening virus such as HIV was not typically of concern, particularly when abusing drugs. Five of the women reported becoming pregnant by clients.

Of the 43 female participants, 38 had born children (number of children ranging from one to seven; mean = 2.4); only 5 still lived with their children. Many children had been placed in temporary foster care ( $n = 9$ ), although some lived with their fathers ( $n = 6$ ) or other family members ( $n = 6$ ) (e.g., grandparents, aunts). The remaining children had been adopted. The women's contact with their children was sporadic. Sixteen participants saw or spoke with their children weekly, others ( $n = 5$ ) saw their

children monthly or several times a year ( $n = 4$ ). Nine of the women had severed all ties with their biological children and had terminated their parental rights.

Most ( $n = 22$ ) of the women were involved in prostitution-related activities *prior to* having children. For these women, life largely proceeded without interruption. They worked the streets while pregnant, picked up dates, and fed their addictions to drugs and alcohol. Ill effects on their children, of the prenatal abuse and later exposure to parental prostitution, was difficult to document. Some had not seen their children in years; only six women reported having a child with symptoms of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome or born addicted to crack cocaine or other substances. Most of the participants, however, reported a conscious awareness that their activities had, ultimately, transferred a legacy of abuse and abandonment, similar to what they had experienced as children, to the next generation.

Others ( $n = 16$ ), in contrast, became involved in prostitution-related activities after their children were born. Regarding prostitution one commented, "It was so much against my morals years ago. I wanted my kids raised so perfectly and then I just turned, it's like I gave up." Some of the women reported that their children were aware of their prostitution activities and some had brought tricks to their residences. Amy, for instance, would send her sons to the store when "Tony," a regular, arrived. She described a typical encounter with him: "He'd say 'two minutes and I'll give ya \$20.' Okay, fine, so I'd turn on the radio and I'd do two commercials and a song, or I'd do four commercials . . . and that was two minutes. Every Thursday." Amy explained, "It was always for the money back then." It wasn't until her children were taken by the state that her addiction to crack surged. She stated, ". . . after the kids went into foster care, it didn't even matter . . . I just didn't want to feel the pain and I didn't want to admit that they were in foster care so I just used and used and used." Amy's reaction was reiterated by others; losing their children became the impetus for the most severe addictive frenzies among many.

Street prostitution is inherently dangerous. As explained by one participant, "There were times when the only way out of a situation was by the grace of God." Most of the participants ( $n = 31$ ) relayed incidents of severe abuse suffered at the hands of their boyfriends, clients, and/or pimps. Many reported having been raped, beaten with objects, threatened with weapons, and abandoned in remote regions. One young woman reported having her teeth knocked out by her boyfriend and being raped at knife-point by a trick. When asked to explain how she returned to the streets after being raped, she explained, "I just looked at it as not getting paid," and another explained, ". . . you just give them what they want and pray they don't kill you." When asked to describe her feelings of being beaten with a tire iron and left for dead, Sam responded, "I didn't care. I didn't think about it. I got 150 stitches and was back on the streets that same day." Another participant was sold rat poison instead of crack;

she spent 10 days in a coma and was back on the streets the day she was released. When asked if they reported the crimes, their responses were often incredulous. One participant explained her belief that “society and law enforcement consider a prostitute getting raped or beat as something she deserves. It goes along with your lifestyle. There’s nothing that you can do.”

Steps taken to protect themselves from potential harm were described, including relying on intuition in determining the “safety” of a client, meeting clients in designated areas and not traveling with them, and making exchanges in visibly parked cars. Three participants reported jumping from moving vehicles after sensing danger; others carried weapons (e.g., box cutter, knife). Physical safety, however, was not guaranteed. One woman remarked, “Every time I got in a car I knew my life was in danger; I didn’t care.”

*Leaving the streets.* What factors or experiences propel women who have spent much of their existence in abusive, exploitative relationships, living day-by-day without regard for their futures or their lives, into the unfamiliar terrain of sobriety and goal setting? Participants were asked to explain their motivation for leaving the streets. Their responses varied. It is important to note that not all of the women had self-selected themselves out of prostitution; one third ( $n = 14$ ) were incarcerated when interviewed. These women did not seek out respite from the streets; they were forced out of prostitution, at least temporarily, through legal action. The majority ( $n = 26$ ), however, were actively seeking assistance through an intervention program, although their involvement in the program was sporadic at best. The final three participants left the streets on their own accord, without legal intervention or programmatic support. In discussing the participants’ motivations to change, data are presented separately for the incarcerated women versus those who attended the intervention program or left the streets on their own accord.

The average length of time the incarcerated women had spent in prison was 1.2 years (range = 3 months to 4 years). Several had been in and out of prison; one woman had spent 13½ years in prison with intermittent time on the streets and her daughter was in the same penitentiary for prostitution. Crimes leading to imprisonment included prostitution, drug use, larceny, robbery, parole violation, and extortion. The predominant theme characterizing the incarcerated women’s motivations to change centered around their remaining sober, which imprisonment had demanded. In addition, prison provided opportunities to obtain job skills (e.g., computer work) and education (e.g., GED) which these women felt would assist them in finding ways to stay away from the streets. Several reported simply being exhausted (physically and emotionally). Yet the incarcerated women, specifically, were less certain than the others that their efforts would be met with success. They expressed concern that the “old playgrounds and playmates” would prove too tempting to abandon entirely. And one remarked, “I’m not done selling drugs”; the work, she felt, was just too lucrative.

Participants who were not forced out of prostitution due to incarceration reported attempts to leave the streets between the ages of 19 and 55 (mean = 33.3; mode = 32). Time spent engaging in prostitution-related activities varied greatly, from short term ( $n = 4$ ; range = 5 months - 3 years; mean = 1.6 years) to long term ( $n = 22$ ; range = 3.1 - 41 years; mean = 14.7 years; mode = 15 years) involvement. Three factors were described. Intervention-involved women reported hitting bottom (e.g., being homeless, being jailed, nearly dying) as a primary reason for seeking help. One stated, “It wasn’t until I faced death that I realized there was a reason to live.” Regaining physical custody of children was also frequently mentioned. One participant explained, “I wasn’t there for my kids when they were little; I just keep telling myself that they will need me even more in the future.” Faith in a higher power and the desire for spiritual healing was also described by intervention-involved women as influencing their decision to attempt lifestyle change.

Among those who left the streets without intervention, reasons given included the fear of AIDS and the increasing danger and decreasing income associated with street-level prostitution. Due to widespread crack use, the tricks were getting cheaper; contemporary street prostitutes, it was explained, are eager to please for little in return. One of these women succinctly stated, “I’m not giving it away . . . I’m no \$10, \$15 ho.”

Generally, whether involved in the intervention program or not, the participants shared similar dreams for their futures, including providing for their children, marrying, finding steady work, owning a home, and living a “normal” life. Several planned to go to school, with hopes of counseling other women and troubled adolescents. One participant, when asked what she hoped to have in the future, responded simply, “Serenity and peace of mind.” In contrast, a few participants described a conscious effort not to think about the future; their goals centered on daily successes. Finally, rather than discussing what she hoped to have in the future, another participant stated explicitly what she did not want: “No alcohol, drugs, men, or marriages.”

## DISCUSSION

Although their reasons for entering prostitution may differ, streetwalking women have similarly decided (either consciously or not) to engage in life-threatening, abusive, exploitative activities where, according to O’Neill (1997), they “participate in their own annihilation” (p.19). The purpose of this investigation was to examine the unique developmental trajectories of women involved in streetwalking prostitution, in conjunction with illuminating shared experiences and points of convergence. Perhaps greater understanding may facilitate an open dialogue and greater awareness of the women comprising the subculture of streetwalking prostitution.

The brutal realities which nudge, or as Cole (1987) would argue, force, women into the streets were relayed in bitter detail by Barb, Amy, Sam, Trina, and Chancey. Despite their

individual circumstances, they simultaneously shared common experiences of abandonment, abuse, loss, and exploitation. Childhood sexual abuse was described by the majority of participants, as were literal (e.g., through desertion) or symbolic (e.g., through parental alcoholism/neglect) abandonment. Other themes included removal from, or intentionally leaving (i.e., running away), their families of origin.

Involvement in prostitution for many began out of economic necessity, or was due to drug addiction. Interestingly, however, drug use, particularly as an addiction rather than as a recreational activity, began for many after entering the sex industry. In addition to supporting their own drug habits through prostitution, many participants reported supporting the habits of their partners as well. And, in contrast to Barry's (1995) findings that 80% to 95% of all prostitution is pimp controlled, only 39% of the participants reported working for a pimp.

Leaving the streets was a conscious decision made by the majority of participants. They had actively sought help through an intervention program aimed specifically at women involved in streetwalking prostitution. Nonetheless, program attendance was sporadic, and their success in leaving the streets was expected to be tenuous at best. For the remainder of the participants, exiting the sex industry was a consequence of incarceration. Yet, given their time away from the streets, many hoped to continue their progress after being released. These women, specifically, voiced concern regarding their ability to abandon entirely the illegal activities from their pasts.

The women who participated in this investigation reported never imagining that they would one day be engaging in prostitution activities; none reported *prostitute* as a long-term career goal. Prostitution and drug addiction, it is commonly believed, represent symptoms of larger, systematically related issues. O'Neill (1997) writes, "Issues of sexual politics are entwined with economic and political issues . . . to create a catch-22 situation for women who may not have freely chosen to work as prostitutes but nevertheless pragmatically have decided that it is the best option available to them" (p. 19). O'Connell Davidson (1998) further reports, "We do not hear stories about [women] giving up their careers in order to become prostitutes" (p. 3). Which begs the question: If presented with viable and equally lucrative options, would the streets continue to lure women and girls? According to Amy, "Anybody that says that they *like* doing it [prostitution] is in denial." Still, when asked, participants explicitly reported personal responsibility for choices made.

Undoubtedly, entry into prostitution results from the cumulation of multiple interdependent personal and contextual factors. Efforts at teasing apart those variables, and the relative significance of each, have left many questions unanswered and uncertainties remaining. Specifically, what is abundantly clear is that many women are exposed to life experiences similar to those commonly reported by prostitution-involved women (e.g., childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence, drug use), a large majority of whom

never engage in prostitution-related activities (Bullough & Bullough, 1996). Poterat et al. (1998) argue for a paradigm shift; research emphases on external circumstances (e.g., environmental context), they argue, have left pervasive gaps in our understanding of internal mechanisms (i.e., psychological factors) which likely influence, to an as-yet-unknown extent, female entry into the sex industry.

Further research and activism is necessary, particularly with regard to developing policy changes in women's employment and the feminization of poverty, continuing and expanding prevention work with youth at risk, analyzing routes to prostitution entry, and, importantly, designing and evaluating multi-pronged intervention programs that specialize in helping women leave the streets (i.e., addressing joblessness, homelessness, educational limitations, addiction, and victimization). Recent work by Plummer, Poterat, Muth, and Muth (1996) suggests that actively addressing psychological factors including depression and posttraumatic stress disorders may be paramount in successfully intervening on the behalf of women involved in, or at risk of becoming involved in, street-level sex work.

Despite the rich information obtained, limitations of this investigation deserve attention. First, the investigation comprised a nonrandom sample of participants, found largely due to involvement in an intervention program or incarceration. They were no longer actively involved in street-level sex work. Also, each participant was interviewed only once; thus, changes in attitudes and beliefs were not captured. Results of this investigation must be examined within context.

Popular images presented on the big screens often portray prostitution as a temporary course of action, where in the end the heroine finds love and happiness and suffers few, if any, enduring scars from her brief stint on the streets. Reality rarely mimics the movies; Prince Charming does not materialize and save the pretty woman working the streets. For the majority of streetwalking prostitutes, the movie reel continues, days turn into months and months turn into years; there are few, if any, ways out.

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