

Night Moves: A Qualitative Investigation of Street-Level Sex Work

Rochelle L. Dalla

Psychology of Women Quarterly 2002 26: 63

DOI: 10.1111/1471-6402.00044

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://pwq.sagepub.com/content/26/1/63>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



Society for the Psychology of Women

Additional services and information for *Psychology of Women Quarterly* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://pwq.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://pwq.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Mar 1, 2002

[What is This?](#)

NIGHT MOVES: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF STREET-LEVEL SEX WORK

Rochelle L. Dalla

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

The subculture of street-level sex work including the social environment, drug use and abuse, and violence was examined. Personal interviews were conducted with 43 women involved in streetwalking prostitution. Data were analyzed using Phenomenological Descriptive Analysis (Colaizzi, 1978). Several participants reported developing emotional relationships and having children with clients, former clients, or pimps; some participants were married to men who pimped them. Supportive relationships with other streetwalkers were largely nonexistent; streetwalking constitutes a solitary business for most. The majority reported drug addiction, although less than half entered prostitution to support an already established drug habit. Financial need propelled many into the streets. Victimization and subjection to multiple forms of abuse were commonly reported but did not constitute justification for leaving the streets. Implications of this investigation are discussed.

The term *prostitute* is derived from the Latin verb *prostituere* which literally means “to set up for sale” (Carr, 1995). A prostitute is defined as one who exchanges sexual favors for money, drugs, or other desirable commodities (Overall, 1992). A single “type” of prostitution does not exist. Across the sex-industry spectrum, one may be labeled “prostitute” for working in a variety of contexts including, but not limited to: escort services, brothels, erotic dance or strip clubs, and massage parlors (Overall, 1992). Some (MacKinnon, 1987) equate modeling with prostitution. Prostitution, like most professions, is hierarchically organized. High-class call girls, who often work within a safe environment (e.g., a penthouse), with regular clientele, and for whom prostitution may be an extremely lucrative business, occupy the highest echelon of the hierarchy. Street-level sex work, in contrast, is considered the most dangerous and least glamorous form of prostitution (Maher, 1996; Miller, 1993). Less than 15% of all prostitutes are considered streetwalkers, although this is a rough estimation given that prostitution “categories” often overlap (Flowers, 1998).

The past decade has witnessed a burgeoning academic interest in the sex industry and in streetwalking prostitu-

tion specifically. Yet, gaps in the current literature remain. First, much of what is understood about street-level sex work has been derived from large-scale designs comprising survey instruments and self-report indices. Data produced from these sources are certainly valuable, but vital information as reported from the female participants’ perspectives is often overlooked. Qualitative data provide a vehicle for understanding underlying processes, which are difficult to gauge through quantitative means. Second, due to governmental funding sources and the need for public health data, the focus of much recent prostitution work has largely centered around drug abuse (i.e., intravenous) and associated risk-taking behaviors (i.e., condom use, and HIV/AIDS knowledge and status). Resultant information is exceedingly important, particularly for reducing socially transmitted diseases. Still, questions remain regarding the lives of women who engage in street-level sex work which may prove equally powerful in informing public policy. For instance, do street-workers perceive all paying clientele as “tricks” or do distinctions exist, such as between “Regulars” and “Sugar Daddies,” which subsequently result in changes in condom use or other potentially risk-compromising behaviors? Finally, what are the nature of the relationships which exist among female street-workers? Little information is available documenting the social milieu of street prostitution, yet understanding street-level social relationships could prove valuable for programs aimed at helping women leave the streets.

Rich, detailed information about the “game”¹ known as street-level sex work, as experienced and perceived by those intimately familiar with the streets, remains largely

This research was partially supported by a grant from the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) (#62-145-08701).

Address correspondence and reprint requests to: Rochelle L. Dalla, Assistant Professor, Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, ASH 105B, University of Nebraska, Omaha Campus, 68182-0214. E-mail: dalla@unomaha.edu

untapped. Erroneous assumptions perpetuated through the media exist regarding streetwalking prostitution. Specifically, 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.” At the other extreme exist images of victimized women walking busy thoroughfares late at night, wearing high heels and black fishnet stockings who work for abusive pimps. It was assumed that neither of these portrayals accurately represents the reality of the lives of streetwalking prostitutes or the phenomenon of street-level sex work.

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the game of streetwalking prostitution. Three issues central to understanding the complex dynamics of streetwalking were the foci of this investigation, including: the social context of streetwalking, patterns of drug use and addiction and the economic implications of such, and exposure to violence and victimization. Close examination of the subculture of streetwalking prostitution derived from the women involved in the game may result in greater social understanding and reduced stigma, and more effective intervention techniques.

Theoretical Orientation

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. According to Ecological Systems Theory (EST; Bronfenbrenner, 1989), development is a *timeless* process of interaction between person and environment and reflects continual interaction between person (including all of her personal characteristics and attributes) and environment (including all people in that environment and their attributes). Bronfenbrenner reminds us that present circumstances cannot be fully understood without careful observation of the entire ecological context within which the individual is embedded, including historical events and situations, social relationships, and environmental factors (including one’s cultural and subcultural membership). Specifically, tenets of EST assert that no one, including female street-workers, exists within a vacuum. Furthermore, contextual factors have the potential of significantly impacting individual development. Among female sex-workers, it was thus assumed that social relationships including those with other street-workers, clients, pimps, and partners may provide valuable information regarding the developmental trajectories of streetwalking prostitutes, including health-compromising behaviors (e.g., drug use and abuse), and coping responses to street-level victimization. Better understanding of the context of street work, it was further assumed, may provide valuable information for programmatic intervention.

Surprisingly little has been written about the social milieu of street-level prostitution. Information on the clientele of female streetwalkers is visibly absent. As noted by Bullough and Bullough (1996), “Missing from almost all of the reported studies of prostitution is an examination of the patrons” (p. 171). Moreover, information documenting the nature of relationships *among* street-level sex workers is nonexistent. It is possible that a sense of comradery and kinship among female streetwalkers exists. Supportive relationships with other sex-workers could potentially provide protection from harm and a “buffer” against negative experiences. Conversely, it is equally likely that competition characterizes relationships between female streetwalkers as each attempts to procure more and better-paying clientele. Given the lack of attention to the social context of street-level sex work, this is an area ripe for exploration.

Economic need and drug abuse have been implicated as precursors to prostitution entry. 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 when faced with privation. Likewise, Delacoste and Alexander (1998) maintain that, lacking viable alternatives, female sex work remains consistently available. In addition to economic need, the connection between street-level prostitution and drug use cannot be ignored; drug addiction has been frequently implicated as a precursor to prostitution entry.

Crack cocaine, specifically, and its use by street-level prostitutes, has garnered much recent attention. It has been estimated that anywhere from one-fifth to one-half of female prostitutes use drugs regularly (Flowers, 1990), although higher percentages have also been reported (see Potterat, Rothenberg, Muth, Darrow, & Phillips-Plummer, 1998). Graham and Wish (1994) examined female drug use in relation to deviant behavior among 164 female arrestees. Sixty percent tested positive for cocaine and 50% had a history of prostitution. Nonetheless, Graham and Wish (1994) report that drug use did not always *precede* prostitution involvement. They contend that drug use may evolve as a coping strategy among street-level sex workers. In a more recent investigation, Potterat and colleagues (1998) examined the sequence and timing of prostitution entry and drug abuse among prostitution-involved women and a comparable control group. They found that (1) drug use was more common among the prostitution-involved women; (2) drug use preceded sexual activity in both groups; and (3) injecting drug use preceded prostitution. Among the prostitution-involved women, 66% reported using drugs prior to entering prostitution, 18% began drug use and prostitution concurrently, and the remaining 16% reported drug use following prostitution entry. Feucht (1993) examined the complex relationship between illicit drug use and street-level prostitution and concluded that for many

streetwalkers prostitution constituted a means only of securing funds needed to purchase drugs. However, other findings suggest that cocaine is used as a means of coping with work on the streets, as a sexual stimulant, and as a means of decreasing inhibitions. Feucht (1993) further notes that prostitutes are often couriers for drug buyers and sellers. As partial (or full) payment for their services, sex-workers may be given (or take) some of the illicit drugs for personal use. Finally, crack dealers and prostitutes often have overlapping markets and common interests necessitate frequent interaction.

The presence of crack cocaine on the streets has been both directly and indirectly related to the diminishing price of street-level sexual services (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). Maher (1996) reports that women involved in prostitution *prior* to using crack are less likely to accept crack as payment for sexual services. Yet the "new girls," whose street-level prostitution is often addiction-motivated, are increasingly willing to provide cheap (and degrading) sexual services in exchange for the drug. This is not a new phenomenon. Heroin "bag brides" (Goldstein, 1979) engaged in similar behavior; the difference rests in the sheer magnitude with which the behavior has expanded among female crack addicts (Feucht, 1993). According to Maher (1996), the entire culture and context of street-level prostitution has been altered, impacting even those women whose prostitution involvement is not addiction-motivated. Not only have the tricks become cheaper and the violence more pronounced, but street-workers are increasingly viewed as carriers of HIV and as morally contaminated (Maher, 1996, p. 144).

Finally, street-level sex work is inherently dangerous. Male violence against female streetwalkers is endemic (O'Neill, 1997; 1995). Miller (1993) interviewed 16 street prostitutes and found that: 93.8% experienced some form of sexual assault, 43.8% were forced or coerced into sexual activity with men identifying themselves as police officers, 75% had been raped by one or more tricks or clients, and that more than half had been robbed. Additional victimization including physical assault (with and without various types of weapons), kidnapping, and torture was reported. Clients are not the only sources of crime and violence against female prostitutes. Pimps, boyfriends, and strangers are also implicated in the rapings, beatings, and deaths of female sex-workers (Flowers, 1998). Reference to female sex-workers abandoning the streets due to personal safety concerns, however, could not be located in the existing literature.

Recognizing prostitution-involved women as embedded within unique social and ecological contexts is vital for intervention to effectively meet individual needs. To thoroughly understand the complexity of street-level sex work, interrelationships among various factors (e.g., drug use and social relationships) must be examined simultaneously. Equally important, these factors must be examined from the perspectives of those women with personal experience work-

ing the streets. This investigation was designed to examine the subculture of street-level sex work, with emphases on the social context of streetwalking, patterns of drug use and abuse and the economic implications of such, and exposure to violence and victimization.

METHOD

Participants

This investigation was conducted in a midsized Midwestern city. Forty-three women participated. They ranged in age from 19 to 56 (mean = 33.37; mode = 37; SD = 7.2) when interviewed. Most identified themselves as Caucasian ($n = 20$) or Black ($n = 18$); five were Native American. Twenty-two were single and had never been married, 9 were divorced, 10 were married, and 2 reported legal separation from their spouses. 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; mode = 12; SD = 4.5); 14 had received a General Education Degree (GED). Most participants ($n = 38$) were mothers, with the number of children ranging from one to seven (mean = 2.4; mode = 2.0; SD = 1.6). Of 105 total children, only 10 remained in residence with their biological mothers. Age of first prostitution activity ranged from 11 to 31 (mean = 19.4; mode = 18; SD = 5.10). Most participants ($n = 40$) were no longer involved in sex work, although length of time since the last incident of prostitution varied dramatically, from less than six months ($n = 17$), to six months to one year ($n = 13$), to one or more years ($n = 10$). Total time spent in the sex industry varied considerably and ranged from 6 months to 44 years (mean = 11.5 years; multiple modes exist).

Procedure

All data were collected by the Principal Investigator (PI). Inclusion required that participants be female, involved (or formerly involved) in streetwalking prostitution, and be at least 18 years of age. The majority of participants ($n = 26$) were located through an intervention program designed to help women leave 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 voluntarily, others were court-ordered to attend.² With support from the Program Director and approval of group members, the PI attended weekly group meetings for 17 months. Investigation goals were explained and the participation of new attendees was requested. Remaining participants were located while incarcerated

($n = 14$) or by word of mouth ($n = 3$). Responses to requests for interviews were overwhelmingly positive (47 women were approached, 3 declined to participate, and 1 failed to show for a scheduled appointment and could not be reached).

In-depth personal interviews were conducted with each participant. Interviews were *semistructured* in that questions were predetermined (see Appendix),³ although length of time spent discussing each and the ordering of questions varied depending on participant verbosity and responses to previously asked questions. This technique allowed for discussion in an informal, nonthreatening manner. Interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes (range = 50 to 180 minutes). They were conducted in private (i.e., residences, shelters, parks, or private rooms in a correctional facility), tape-recorded, and later transcribed verbatim by research assistants. Participants were compensated \$20.00 for their time.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Phenomenological Descriptive Methodology (Colaizzi, 1978). The procedure begins with a thorough reading of all text-based data (protocols) and the *extraction of significant statements or phrases*. Significant statements included all those referring to the research questions of interest (e.g., relationships with pimps, drug use, victimization). The next step entails *formulating meanings* of the extracted phrases or statements. According to Colaizzi (1978), the investigator's task is to integrate the participants' reality with the inquirer's interpretations of that reality, while remaining loyal to the original descriptions (p. 59). Colaizzi provides an example in which a participant reacted to *The Catcher in the Rye* with the following: "It was as if the characters in the novel were purposely dredging up the most personal of my own philosophical beliefs." Colaizzi reformulated this statement as: "The book's different characters reflect the different dimensions of the self, or the different selves, of the participant." The next step in the analyses process involves identifying emergent *themes or patterns* across each significant statement/phrase. In this investigation, for instance, all statements referring to drug addiction determining prostitution were examined together, as were all statements referring to economic need as a precursor to prostitution entry. Themes are then *clustered* and results are integrated into an *exhaustive description* of the topic. The final step involves returning to several participants and requesting opinions regarding derived conclusions. Results of this investigation were evaluated by two participants whose comments and suggestions were integrated into the final manuscript.⁴ All data were coded by the PI and a graduate-level research assistant. When coding discrepancies arose, original protocols were re-examined until coding agreement could be reached.

RESULTS

The Social Milieu of Street-Level Sex Work

All 43 participants worked the streets. For some, their only involvement with prostitution came from streetwalking, although many participants engaged in other forms of prostitution as well. They reported working: truck stops ($n = 6$), escort services ($n = 7$), massage parlors ($n = 4$), and as nude/seminude dancers ($n = 4$). One participant worked in a residence specializing in Sado-Masochistic sexual services and two had made pornographic movies. Type and timing of prostitution activity appears largely based on chemical dependence. Specifically, those who originally entered prostitution to pay for an existing drug addiction typically described going straight to the streets to support their habits. Moreover, as their addictions increased, so did their willingness to accept less (money or crack) in exchange for services performed. Those who turned to prostitution out of financial need described a slow downward spiral which culminated into street prostitution. Their sex work often began through relationships developed with sugar daddies, performing in strip clubs, or working in massage parlors. Given time and prolonged participation in various forms of sexual services, a pattern was described in which drug use began (or became more severe), perhaps as a coping mechanism or escape route. This apparently allowed them to psychologically accept the label "sex-worker" and move into more daring (and admittedly lower status) forms of prostitution (i.e., street-level).

Relationships with pimps and sugar daddies. Despite the popular image of streetwalking prostitutes' lives controlled by pimps, less than half of the women ($n = 17$) reported such involvement. Five women had children with men whom they described as their pimps and two of them, Tara and Monika,⁵ reported relationships with their pimps lasting more than 10 years. Pimps were typically described as having several women working for them simultaneously (women whom the pimps also slept with and frequently beat), a situation described as a "stable." Often, the stable would travel from state to state to pick up new women to join the group. Relationships between the women comprising the stable were not characterized as friendly but largely based on jealousy. Trina, for instance, explained her experiences in the stable with the following:

There was a time when he had seven other hoes besides me, and two or three of them were living in the basement. And he'd say, "I got to leave tonight, I got to go spend some time with so-and-so." And he'd take one of them to a motel and spend the night with them . . . I didn't like that a bit. I was real jealous and I wanted him all to myself. I'd let them [the other women] stay for a little while, but then after about three months I'd be like "You know you don't mean nothing to him don't you?" And, "you know that he

loves me and that he got a baby and two other kids that call him daddy don't you?"

Like Trina, Tara also reported feeling little concern for the other women working for her pimp, although she did report taking pity on "one of my little ho sisters and helped her escape [from the stable]" because the woman was frequently beaten by the pimp.

Involvement with a "pimp" was described as beginning in one of two ways. In the first instance, a woman already involved in the sex industry may develop an ongoing relationship with a man who then begins "pimping" her for drug money or other desirable commodities. Eventually, she begins assisting him in finding other women to join the group (the stable), but she is generally considered the "main" woman. In this investigation Tara and Monika were stable members. When asked how they felt about being one of many, each responded: "It meant less work for me." The second process by which someone begins working for a pimp involves young females, usually runaways, who are befriended by (typically) much older men who provide them with shelter and clothing. Only later do they discover they are indebted and expected to return the favors. About the man who became her pimp when she was 14, one participant reported: "I thought he was just being a friend and helping out, I thought 'well cool.'" Of interest, when asked whether they had worked for a pimp or not, three participants simply responded, "the rock [crack] was my pimp." Their lives, in other words, were completely controlled by their addictions.

Some ($n = 9$) reported developing emotional relationships with clients and still others ($n = 10$) indicated that although their partners were neither tricks nor pimps that they were aware of their prostitution activity. When asked to describe how a marriage or a similar relationship "works" when prostitution is involved, Mandy explained, "They're dysfunctional . . . they [the men] are usually using [drugs] and so they want you to go out prostituting so they can have dope." This was confirmed by several women ($n = 8$) who reported being introduced to sex work by their partners who encouraged (or forced) continued prostitution involvement in order to support their own drug habits. Several participants indicated that their partners would "babysit" their children while they worked the streets. Typically, this type of arrangement benefitted the partners in that the women would return with drugs or enough money to buy drugs. Not all partners who knew about the women's prostitution encouraged or agreed with it. Anna reported that her partner "hated it" that she engaged in sex work for drug money. She reported, "I would give him permission to lock me up at night, with some coke, and then he would go to bed, and that way I wouldn't go out prostituting, I wouldn't take off . . . I was that out of control."

Participants were adamant in distinguishing relationships between men who were "partners" from those who were "pimps," although the differences are subtle. Both

partners and pimps were characterized as prone to physical violence and abuse, both fathered children of the women, both were aware of the women's prostitution and drug-related activities, and often both partners and pimps introduced the women to the streets. The primary differences included that: (1) pimps typically "required" that the women make a specific amount of money; (2) the women gave all of their earnings to their pimps who, in turn, provided shelter and clothing; and (3) the pimps often had several women working for them at once with whom they were also sexually involved. Women with partners not considered "pimps" reported: personally determining the amount of money they made, controlling (at least to some degree) how it was spent, and indicating that their partners did not engage in sexual relations with others.

With reference to clientele, 10 of the participants reported having "Regulars" (long-term relationships with specific clients) in addition to nonregular clientele, whereas others explained seeing each client only once because "dating" the same man on a regular basis personalized the work to a level beyond which they were comfortable. Four women reported being supported by sugar daddies before they began working the streets. Barb met her Sugar Daddy at age 14; he was 40 years old, 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." Amount of time spent with individual clients as well as the amount of money made from each encounter varied considerably depending on the type of service requested, the going rate, and whether the woman was "jonesing" for drugs or not. Regulars, it was typically noted, paid more than the "going rate" and were consistent sources of income. Tia described one of her Regulars as a commercial pilot who visited her three times a week, ". . . and all I would have to do was wear a long dress, high heels, and then I would urinate in a cup and he would jerk off—he'd pay me \$300. That's it, that's all he wanted to do. Then we'd drink wine and have dinner together." Clients sometimes took the women to their homes. One participant reported feeling "disgusted" when a client took her into his daughter's bedroom in his home where the sexual exchange occurred. Some participants also reported refusing to date particular men, decisions made based largely on racial stereotyping. Black men, it was generally agreed, liked to spend more time with a woman and, because of this, some participants felt it was economically inefficient to date them.

Given popular media images, it is typically assumed that street-level sex work occurs only at night. Surprisingly, it was learned that business is also good in the morning between the hours of 5:00 and 9:00 A.M. When asked for clarification, participants explained that married men, or those involved in similar relationships, avoided suspicion from their partners by picking up sex-workers *in the morning—on their way to work*—rather than in the evening. One participant only worked during daylight hours because, "I

felt too scared, I wouldn't do it at nighttime." Condom use was intermittent at best by the majority of the participants. Although one woman noted always using protection and stated, "I've been with 178 different men and I've never had one disease." Others reported using condoms with strangers only, never with Regulars or their pimps or partners; the fact that those men likely slept with other women, many of whom were prostitutes as well, did not seem to be a concern. Several noted that their clients refused to wear condoms and some clients paid extra in order to have unprotected sex. Finally, those participants who described working for drugs only (or drug money) reported never using protection. When asked their feelings about condom use, many stated that they did not care whether they used them or not, pregnancy or exposure to a sexually transmitted disease, such as HIV, was of no concern.

Five participants reported becoming pregnant from tricks. "Trick babies" and the women who bore them were considered to be "lower" status. Some participants explicitly reported, for instance, that the fathers of their children were *not* tricks, or if they were that they had developed ongoing relationships with those men. About her own children, Amy explained,

I would never refer to my kids as trick babies and if somebody did I would go off, but that's what they are okay. That's what they are. But they're mine and I love them with all my heart. I also think there's a lot of babies born to women who don't use protection when they date [prostitute] and I think they need to put a stop to that. I know one girl that dates and she's got like six kids and that's stupid, and they're on welfare—give them a hysterectomy or tie their tubes.

Pregnancy reportedly had little impact on prostitution activity. Twenty-two women became pregnant and carried those pregnancies to term *after* entering the sex industry. For those women, life largely proceeded without interruption. They worked the streets, picked up "dates," and fed their addictions to drugs and alcohol. One participant reported that her pregnancy *attracted* clients and another reported that one Regular continued to visit her throughout her entire pregnancy. She explained, "... as I got further along we quit having sex and I just [performed oral sex]—but he was always there." Ill effects on children from prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol is difficult to document. Some of the women had not seen their children in years; still, six women (16%)⁶ reported having a child with symptoms of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome or born addicted to crack or other substances (see Dalla, in press, for additional information on relationships between street-workers and their children).

Relationships with fellow street-workers. Popular images often depict female street-workers as traveling in groups and offering one another protection. This was largely unfounded. The majority of participants ($n = 28$; 65%) de-

scribed their beliefs that everyone on the streets is out for themselves. Relationships with other female sex-workers were characteristically based on "competition" rather than mutual support or assistance. Kassa described other female sex-workers as being "... sly, terrible, you can't trust them—there's always a catch." Alissa concurred and reported an incident in which another prostitute told her a particular client paid well; he was an undercover cop. She reported, "[After that] I never trusted anyone who was doing the same thing I was [prostituting] ... I never even talked to the other girls." For Amy, relationships with other sex-workers involved:

... a competition thing for me because I'm heavy and most the girls were real skinny—and then there's a Black versus White thing also. Black girls have a bad reputation. White girls do most of the tricks, Black girls are out to get the money and if they can, they rip them [tricks] off and I don't think that's right. I mean if you say you're going to do it, do it—it can't take that long.

Mira agreed. In reference to female street-workers she stated:

... it's each for her own. They [other street-workers] don't care. They'll say "I got your back" [but] you ain't got my fucking back 'cause the minute you say you got my back that's when I'll get ready to get locked up. I never really like to travel the streets [with others]. I like to be by myself when I'm out there.

Although Sam largely agreed with the opinions of others, she described herself differently:

I looked out for people. I was different from a lot of the crack smokers and a lot of the prostitutes. I had so many tricks that I was giving them to other women, you know, and talking tricks into taking them. Like, some tricks wouldn't date Black women, and I'd say "Oh, but she is cool" you know, so she could get some money. I was just real generous ... I didn't feel like it was a competition for who could get the most, I just wanted friends.

Sam and several others reported forging friendships with other women on the streets, although they were the rare exceptions. It was further noted that if "friendships" developed at all they were typically with one other person only; "cliques" of street-workers did not characterize the experiences of the majority of participants.

To summarize, less than half of the participants indicated involvement with a "pimp," although male partners were often aware of and encouraged the females' continued sex work. Some women developed emotional relationships with pimps or clients. Amount of money obtained varied widely depending on type of service requested, type of client (i.e., regular or not), and whether or not drugs were involved. Relationships with other female sex-workers were

characterized by competition. Street-level prostitution is largely a solo activity.

Patterns of Drug Use and Abuse and Associated Economic Implications

Forty-one participants (95%) reported drug abuse (chemical dependence). Sixteen (37%) of those women were drawn to prostitution to support an established drug habit, and eight (19%) reported that prostitution entry and drug abuse occurred simultaneously. Several participants remarked, "There's no reason to be out there if not for the drugs." Crack cocaine was the drug of choice although heroin, alcohol, and marijuana were also mentioned frequently and were sometimes used in conjunction with cocaine. Addiction to crack, it was explained, does not occur "progressively." Most reported knowing they were hooked after the first or second use. In relation to crack, one young woman explained, "One hit is too many, one-thousand hits are not enough." Reisen, a 40-year-old woman who was interviewed while in prison, described being raised in an upper-class family, attending modeling school, marrying, having two children and working in her family's business. At 33, a friend introduced her to crack; she had no idea what it was and explained that the first time she tried it, "it didn't do anything for me." Two weeks later she tried it again and remarked, "it got me real good." She continued, "I used to bitch about spending \$40 a week on a bag of pot and now, shit, going through \$500 in one day on crack doesn't even phase me." She began using on a daily basis, spent \$60,000.00 in six months on crack, and sold all jewelry, furniture, and a Jaguar to finance her habit. She became divorced, lost her home and custody of her children, and began working the streets. Crack, she admitted, "is pure evil."

Importantly however, drug addiction was not the primary instigator for initial sex work among all participants, as 44% ($n = 19$) of the total sample reported entering prostitution out of (real or perceived) economic necessity (i.e., to pay rent, buy groceries, receive shelter when on the run). Still, the connection between drug use and street-level prostitution cannot be ignored in that 89% ($n = 17$) of those who had *not* entered prostitution to finance an already established drug habit reported becoming regular users as their prostitution tenure continued.⁷ Sam, for instance, described a slow decline into drug addiction and street-level sex work. At 31, she and her four children ran from her severely abusive husband; economic need propelled her into ongoing relationships with several sugar daddies (wealthy businessmen who provided her with significant financial assistance). She explained, "They were tricks, but not like the tricks I did when I started doing drugs." She used crack for the first time when she was 37 and it became an "hourly" addiction. She started working the streets because "They [the sugar daddies] didn't want nothing to do with me anymore." She described her feelings regarding the connection between drug use and prostitution with the following:

I think it's possible to prostitute without drugs if you've never done them before. Once you get started on the drugs though, I think it's impossible to go back to just prostituting. It would take a real strong person to prostitute without drugs, if they've done them before.

Amy described similar experiences. Prostitution, she explained, "was all about the money" when she first started engaging in sex work. Eventually however, she started "hustling" (running drugs for dealers) because the money was better. However she "got into it [crack] real bad" and explained,

... it's a disease, it just progresses. At first [I used] just Fridays and then slowly it turned into like Wednesdays and Fridays and Saturdays and then it went to every day, like three times a day every day, and then it went to all day every day.

Like Sam, Amy's early sex work involved Regulars only, but after she began using heavily she turned to the streets and became significantly less discriminating in her clientele.

Just as sex work generally is hierarchically organized, participants described street-level prostitution, specifically, in terms based on "status" as well, with sexual services provided in direct exchange for drugs as the lowest form of degradation. This type of behavior was clearly distinguished from even the apparently similar practice of obtaining money for sexual services and then purchasing drugs with income generated. About prostitution Alissa remarked, "I thought it was disgusting, but it was cool because it was quick money . . . I never did anything for \$20 like others will do, prostitution is degrading enough, but if you're gonna do it, get paid for it." Participants reported that the inundation of crack cocaine had significantly altered the street-prostitution subculture for all involved because: (1) crack-addicted prostitutes would do "anything at any cost" for the drug, thus lowering the going rate for sexual services in general; (2) crack-heads (or "strawberries") degraded the reputation of street-workers, generally, lowering their image; and (3) the presence of vast quantities of crack cocaine and the potentially lucrative business of drug dealing had significantly increased street crime and violence. Marjorie, who had spent nearly 15 years in the sex industry and had made a considerable amount of money doing so explained,

The girls that are out there now are *not* like we used to be. They're out there for drugs. That's why the business is so bad. It's not even worth it. They're crack-heads and will do anything for a little bit of money . . . they're *not real* ones [prostitutes].

In other words, the "game" had been altered; women willing to do anything at any cost cheated "real" prostitutes out of a living. She continued by describing how a former client offered her \$20 to perform oral sex, a service she had previously performed for him for \$200. She told him, ". . . you're

crazy. You can't even look at me for \$20." Needless to say, she was no longer involved in sex work.

In sum, nearly equal numbers of participants were drawn to street-level prostitution to support an established drug habit as were lured into sex-work out of economic need. Nonetheless, 95% reported drug addiction during their prostitution tenure. Similar to Feucht's (1993) findings, crack was implicated in the changing nature of street-level sex work. Simply put, the tricks were getting cheaper and the violence more rampant and more severe. Through direct and indirect routes, the street-prostitution subculture had been altered significantly by the presence of crack-cocaine.

Violence and Victimization

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." Another reported, "Once you hit the streets, there's no guarantee you'll come back." Most participants ($n = 31$) relayed incidents of severe abuse suffered at the hands of their partners, clients, and/or pimps. Many reported having been raped, beaten with objects, threatened with weapons, and abandoned in remote regions. Rape was commonly reported (three had been gang-raped, four had been raped on multiple occasions). One participant's teeth had been knocked out by her boyfriend, and she was also 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." Her response likely indicates a coping mechanism that apparently allowed her to return to the dangerous street environment without paralyzing fear and perhaps also with some level of personal dignity intact. Another participant explained her attitude toward the potential of being harmed with the following: "... 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." Participants rarely reported crimes of victimization. One explained why with the following: "Society and law enforcement consider a prostitute getting raped or beat as something she deserves. It goes along with the lifestyle. There's nothing that you can do."

Steps taken to protect themselves from potential harm were described and included: relying on intuition in determining the "safety" of a client, meeting clients in designated areas, refusing to travel more than a few blocks with them, and making exchanges in visible areas (e.g., near street lights). One participant explicitly noted that she would not date "White men driving red trucks." She explained the word on the streets was that they were "dangerous." Three participants reported jumping from moving vehicles after sensing danger, although most participants refused to get into clients' cars, the potential for violence

was too great. Others reported always carrying weapons, as Alissa explained, "I carried a knife—and I let it be known." Physical safety however, was never guaranteed. One woman remarked, "Every time I got in a car I knew my life was in danger; I didn't care." Moreover, despite the potential for harm several participants ($n = 8$) reported thriving on the "excitement" of the streets, the lights, the sounds, and, as one woman remarked, "... it was a high just getting home alive some nights." It is possible that these women had become so emotionally numb, that life-threatening situations were necessary in order to feel any sensation at all.

Yet, even those women who reported feeling attraction to the glamour and the excitement of the streets also admitted that the streets held a much darker side. For instance, Tara reported liking it when she worked the streets and then stated "... [but] I wouldn't encourage nobody to do it. It's dangerous. It's not a life to have." Similarly, Sam explained: "I was addicted to the prostitution too, to the excitement, not just the drugs ... I just loved it out there." After reflection, however, she described a recent experience:

We had a class and they played tapes and we had to write down how we felt while we were listening to the songs. And they played 'Roxanne, you don't have to put on that red dress tonight,' and a vision came to me. I was walking down the street at 3 or 4 in the morning and it was drizzling and one car was going by every half-hour, just lonely as could be. And it made me realize how lonely that life really was, that it wasn't anything exciting. It was lonely. It was very lonely.

In sum, participants reported extensive experience with street violence. Several indicated surprise that they were still alive. Moreover, despite the danger inherent in street-work, several participants were drawn to the danger, the excitement, and the "glamour" of street-prostitution; surviving life-threatening encounters created an emotional high.

DISCUSSION

Bronfenbrenner (1989) contends that individual development and present circumstances cannot be understood without examination of the environmental context within which one is embedded. Yet, few investigations of female sex-workers have examined the social context of street-level prostitution or the psycho-social implications of such. Prostitution involved women, particularly those who work the streets, are stigmatized and often forced to live on the periphery of society (Weiner, 1996). They are in dire need of a variety of social services. Yet to be effective, intervention programs must address their unique needs, understanding of which is largely dependent on gathering information on the environmental and social contexts of their daily lives. This investigation was designed to examine the environmental and social contexts of street-prostitution, as perceived by women with personal experience working the streets.

Few prior attempts have been made to examine the social milieu of street-level sex work. Yet, in contrast to Barry's (1995) findings that 80% to 95% of all prostitution is pimp-controlled, a much lower percentage of participants (39%) reported working for a "pimp." Moreover, it is erroneous to believe that emotional attachments do not develop between female sex-workers and their pimps or clients, as evidenced in this investigation. Of concern is that emotional attachments to others in the sex industry, particularly authority figures such as pimps, may challenge females' abilities (or desires) to leave the streets. Moreover, surprisingly few participants reported developing "friendships" or emotional attachments with other female sex-workers—the very individuals who may be in the best positions to offer assistance to those hoping to leave the streets. With this in mind, intervention programs could be designed to increase rapport and promote mutual support among female street-workers as they leave the streets and attempt to forge new, prostitution-free lives. These programs should focus on the women's mutual life experiences, including sexual and physical victimization, and their shared future goals, including those of regaining custody of their children, obtaining legal employment, and remaining drug-free.

Streetwalking prostitution and drug abuse are intricately connected. Yet, compared with findings by Potterat et al. (1998), a much lower percentage of participants reported *entering* prostitution to support an existing addiction (66% versus 37%, respectively). Nonetheless, 95% reported chemical dependence indicating that prolonged exposure to street-work instigates addiction. Regardless of whether addiction instigated, occurred simultaneously with, or developed following prostitution entry is somewhat irrelevant. Of programmatic significance is that the connection between drug abuse and street-level sex work cannot be ignored. Successful intervention on behalf of women involved in street-level prostitution must address the prevention and treatment of drug addiction, including the social and psychological factors leading to addiction.

Interestingly, social comparisons among street-level sex-workers were described. Specifically, crack-prostitutes and women who bore "trick babies" were looked down upon by others, perhaps as a means of maintaining a sense of personal integrity. Miller (1995) reports a similar phenomenon, noting that prostitutes who exchange sex for money, rather than sex for crack, experience less stigmatization and a greater sense of dignity. Still, the willingness of crack-prostitutes to exchange sexual services cheaply has upset the social context of street-level prostitution. In addition to lowering the price of street-level sex work, Maher (1996) and others (Romero-Daza, Weeks, & Singer, 1998) argue that the presence of crack cocaine has significantly increased the potential for street violence and victimization. Simply put, all street-workers are affected, not only the crack-prostitutes. This information suggests that women considering engaging in the tax-free sex industry for economic

gain may seek other opportunities if aware of the crack-influenced street culture. The time is ripe to increase prevention and intervention efforts aimed at women involved in, or at risk of becoming involved in, prostitution activities and particularly among those for whom economic necessity is the driving force.

Finally, street-level sex-workers experience, with rare exception, incidents of personal abuse and victimization. For many, the primary perpetrators are their partners or pimps, not their clients. Some reported taking steps to protect themselves, such as by carrying a weapon, others simply did not care whether they were harmed or not. Romero-Daza et al. (1998) report similar findings from work conducted in Connecticut. Risks of physical violence against street-workers appears universal, as does the connection between drug use and street violence.

Undoubtedly, and as predicted by Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1989), entry and continued involvement in the sex industry 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. Few programs or intervention services exist which address the unique needs of street-walking prostitutes; no evaluations of those programs could be found. Weiner (1996) contends that addressing chemical dependence is of paramount importance among street-workers, but may require residential treatment. Residential treatment however, may jeopardize legal ties to one's children. Meeting immediate housing, drug dependence, and childcare needs is critically important for women attempting to leave the streets. Additionally critical is the need to address long-term issues such as the development of: (a) new support systems and (b) job-training or educational skills. Clearly, multiple and overlapping needs present remarkable challenges to successful programmatic intervention.

Results from this investigation provide further evidence that psychological factors must also be addressed in tandem with the daily survival needs of female street-workers. Among those who begin sex work out of financial need, there appears to be a psychological progression in the self-acceptance of the "prostitute" label. Acceptance of the label may lead to greater risk-taking behaviors (street-walking versus nude dancing) and less resistance to chemical dependence. According to Weiner (1996) self-labeling occurs after "they [prostitutes] have lost so much that they have nothing left to lose" (p. 100).

Interestingly, Potterat and colleagues (1998) argue for a paradigm shift. Research emphases on external circumstances (e.g., immediate needs), 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 and continued involvement in the sex industry. Plummer and colleagues (1996) further suggest 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.

Several factors limit the generalizability of these results. First, each participant was interviewed only once. Despite the richness of data obtained, changes in beliefs, attitudes, or interpretations of personal experiences which would be evident through a longitudinal design were not captured. Second, the participants represent a unique population of street-level sex-workers in that the majority were no longer: (1) actively involved in the sex industry; and (2) more than half of the sample ($n = 26$ or 61%) were participants in an intervention program. The sampling biases were partially remedied by including a group of women ($n = 17$) who had been involved in street-level sex work but who had never participated in an intervention program. Including active street-workers presents challenges to data collection in that: (a) they comprise an elusive sample and may not be willing to participate in a lengthy tape-recorded in-depth interview, and (b) drug use may interfere with the interview process or the validity of results.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to the *Pretty Woman* myth, none of the participants had been “saved” (however broadly defined) by Prince Charming; most were severely and continuously victimized by the men in their lives. In reality, leaving the streets takes personal motivation and intrinsic desire coupled with intense social services. Where will the women who participated in this investigation be two or five years from now? Relapse rates are exceedingly high, even among those seeking intervention services. Although many will return to the familiarity of the streets, some will not. Future investigations examining the cognitive processes and social factors which distinguish those who do return to the streets, from those who do not, are critically important for decreasing relapse rates and increasing the efficacy of programmatic intervention efforts.

Initial submission: January 11, 2001

Initial acceptance: March 23, 2001

Final acceptance: April 17, 2001

NOTES

1. The “game” is a term used by street-level sex-workers in describing the culture of streetwalking prostitution in which women attempt to receive goods (e.g., money or drugs) doing as little sex work as possible, and in which their clients attempt to obtain sexual services as cheaply as possible. Some also use the term in order to denote that streetwalkers “play with” (i.e., risk) their lives. The term was used by participants and adopted by the author.

2. It is not known which participants were volunteers in the intervention program and which were court-ordered to attend. This information was confidentially maintained by the Program Director so that all participants were *assumed* to be voluntarily participating by program staff in order to reduce potential biases. Reasons given for voluntarily leaving the streets included: desire to regain custody of one’s children, being emotionally and physically exhausted, and/or “hitting bottom.” (See Dalla, 2000, for a full description of reasons given for wanting to leave the streets).
3. This manuscript describes one piece only of a much larger investigation. Questions provided in the Appendix include only those relevant to present purposes.
4. Two participants reviewed the manuscript. They felt that the format made the paper difficult to read, that the “literature review” was somewhat dull, and that the “procedures” section was too detailed. The author explained that the presentation format was standard and that few liberties could be made in changing the presentation format. They suggested inclusion of more quotations and personal statements from the participants, which was done.
5. All names are pseudonyms.
6. Thirty-eight of the participants were mothers. Six of the 38 (thus, 16%) reported having a child with symptoms of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.
7. Participants were not asked to identify the length of time that they were actively involved in sex work prior to their regular drug use.

REFERENCES

- Barry, K. (1995). *Prostitution and sexuality*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1989). Ecological systems theory. In Ross Vasta (Ed.), *Six theories of child development: Revised formulations and current issues* (pp. 187–249). Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Bullough, B., & Bullough, V. L. (1996). Female prostitution: Current research and changing interpretations. *Annual Review of Sex Research*, 7, 158–180.
- Carr, S. V. (1995). The health of women working in the sex industry—a moral and ethical perspective. *Sexual and Marital Therapy*, 10, 201–213.
- Colaizzi, P. F. (1978). Psychological research as the phenomenologist views it. In R. G. Valle & M. King (Eds.), *Existential phenomenology: Altered views of psychology* (pp. 48–71). New York: Plenum Press.
- Dalla, R. L. (2000). Exposing the “pretty woman” myth: A qualitative examination of the lives of female streetwalking prostitutes. *Journal of Sex Research*, 37, 344–353.
- Dalla, R. L. (in press). Et tú Brutè?: A qualitative analysis of streetwalking prostitutes’ interpersonal support networks. *Journal of Family Issues*, 22(8), 1066–1085.
- Delacoste, F., & Alexander, P. (1998). *Sex work: Writings by women in the sex industry*. San Francisco: Cleis Press.
- Faugier, J., & Sargeant, M. (1997). Boyfriends, ‘pimps’ and clients. In G. Scambler & A. Scambler (Eds.), *Rethinking prostitution: Purchasing sex in the 1990s* (pp. 121–136). New York: Routledge.

- Feucht, T. E. (1993). Prostitutes on crack cocaine: Addiction, utility and marketplace economics. *Deviant Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 14, 91–108.
- Flowers, R. B. (1990). *The adolescent criminal: An examination of today's juvenile offender*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Flowers, R. B. (1998). *The prostitution of women and girls*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company.
- Goldstein, P. J. (1979). *Prostitution and drugs*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Graham, N., & Wish, E. D. (1994). Drug use among female arrestees: Onset, patterns, and relationships to prostitution. *Journal of Drug Issues*, 24(2), 315–329.
- Hardman, K. (1997). A social work group for prostituted women with children. *Social work with groups*, 20(1), 19–31.
- MacKinnon, C. A. (1987). *Feminism unmodified: Discourses on life and the law*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Maher, L. (1996). Hidden in the light: Occupational norms among crack-using street-level sex workers. *Journal of Drug Issues*, 26, 143–173.
- Miller, J. (1993). "Your life is on the line every night you're on the streets": Victimization and the resistance among street prostitutes. *Humanity & Society*, 17, 422–446.
- Miller, J. (1995). Gender and power on the streets: Street prostitution in the era of crack cocaine. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 23, 427–452.
- O'Neill, M. (1995). Prostitution and violence: Towards a feminist praxis. In J. Radford, M. Hester, & L. Kelly (Eds.), *Women, violence and male power: Feminist activism, research, and practice* (pp. 130–147). Oxford: Open University Press.
- O'Neill, M. (1997). Prostitute women now. In G. Scambler & A. Scambler (Eds.), *Rethinking prostitution: Purchasing sex in the 1990s* (pp. 3–28). New York: Routledge.
- Overall, C. (1992). What's wrong with prostitution? Evaluating sex work. *Signs*, 17(4), 705–724.
- Plummer, L., Potterat, J. J., Muth, S. Q., & Muth, J. B. (1996). Providing support and assistance for low-income or homeless women. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 276(23), 1874–1875.
- Potterat, J. J., Rothenberg, R. B., Muth, S. Q., Darrow, W. W., & Phillips-Plummer, L. (1998). Pathways to prostitution: The chronology of sexual and drug abuse milestones. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 35(4), 333–340.
- Romero-Daza, N., Weeks, M., & Singer, M. (1998). Qualitative analysis of sex workers in Hartford, CT. *International Quarterly of Community Health Education*, 18, 107–119.
- Weiner, A. (1996). Understanding the social needs of streetwalking prostitutes. *Social Work*, 41, 97–105.

APPENDIX

Summary of Interview Questions

1. *Entry*: Can you describe your very first prostitution experience for me? Why did you get involved? How long were you involved? When your involvement first began, how long did you think it would last (e.g., number of months, years)? Why did you stay involved?

2. *Drugs*: When did you first use drugs/alcohol? Can you describe those experiences for me? Were you ever addicted to any drugs? When did you know that you were "addicted?" How did your addiction progress?

3. *Social Aspects*: Can you describe the range of money available for different types of services? Did you have regular clientele or not? Were you ever involved with someone who could be considered a "pimp?" How did that relationship develop? How long did it last? Can you describe your experiences with your "pimp?" Can you describe some of your most vivid experiences with specific clients or dates? Did you have "Regulars?" How did those relationships evolve? Do the women on the streets look out for one another? Did you have any female "friends" on the streets? Why/why not?

4. *Violence*: Were you ever afraid you would get hurt or maybe killed? Can you describe some of your most frightening experiences on the streets? How were you able to go back to the streets? What steps did you take to protect yourself on the streets?