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Achieving Empowerment over Shame through the Arts: A Photovoice Study Exploring Shame and Resistance among Women Sex Workers

Moshoula Capous-Desyllas and Dorothy M. Goulah-Pabst

Department of Sociology, California State University, Northridge, United States of America

ABSTRACT

Informed by Brown's theory of shame resilience and Scheff's symbolic interactionist theory of social bonds as this relates to the emotion of shame, this article presents an in-depth exploration of the emotional and social experiences of eleven women working in the sex industry and the induced stigma and shame of their life situations. Using photovoice methodology, the photographs and interview data revealed that being engaged in sex work was not in and of itself shame inducing, but the personal, social, and institutional stigma of their work made it difficult to maintain their physical, emotional, and mental health. While the findings highlight the highly social aspect of shame and the oppression it brings upon women engaged in sex work, the act of photographing their experiences and sharing them through the arts-based research method of photovoice served as a form of empowerment and resistance, allowing for a redefinition and reconceptualization of the shame, stereotypes and assumptions associated with their work in the sex industry. Incorporating the arts in strengths-based, feminist therapy with sex workers can help individuals reflect on their abilities, identify their experiences, express emotion, and narratives, while offering insights into alternative possibilities and solutions in their lives.

Cooley ([1922](#)) stated there are three predominant elements to the self; the awareness of how we appear to others, imagining their judgment of our appearance, and our feeling in that judgment, be it pride or shame (p. 184). Pride is a confirmation of secure social bond and connection, whereas shame signals a vulnerable or disconnected bond making it "the premier social emotion" (Lewis, [1971](#); Scheff, [2000](#), p. 84, [2013](#)). Goffman ([1967](#)) proposes that every person perceives the level of deference they are given with the smallest inconsistency generating embarrassment or shame. Any comparison with another where self is judged negatively will conjure feelings of shame, or "internal feelings of disgrace" (Retzinger, [1995](#), p. 1104).

Scheff ([2003](#)) differentiates embarrassment from shame by explaining embarrassment as arising from the breaking of rules or conventions, while shame stems from a lapse in morality. There are different levels of shame with embarrassment being the weakest and most transient, shame being the stronger and more durable, and humiliation the most powerful and longest lasting (Scheff, [2003](#), p. 254). Even in the face of overt shame many

CONTACT Moshoula Capous-Desyllas ✉ moshoula@csun.edu 🏢 California State University, Northridge, United States of America

individuals are not able to identify the experience except through other terms such as foolishness, stupidity, inadequacy, defectiveness, incompetence, awkwardness, insecurity, low self-esteem, disappointment, defeat, exposure, failure, disrespect, ridicule, betrayal, rejection, judgment, and so on (Barky, 1990; Retzinger, 1995; Scheff, 1988; Thorburn, 2015). Barky (1990) characterizes shame as a type of "psychic distress" caused by a self "apprehended as inferior, defective, or in some way diminished" (p. 85). Probyn et al. (2018) state that one cannot feel shame about something they do not know or care about.

Guilt as contrasted with shame is much like embarrassment, caused by flawed or bad behavior while the feeling of shame is caused by an inherently flawed or bad self (Brown, 2006a); MacGinley et al., 2019). Focus on the self rather than the behavior, makes shame difficult to remedy with those feeling shame wishing to hide from others, disappearing from society (Gilchrist et al., 2020). Feeling the disempowering reach of shame requires three beliefs according to Taylor (2018). The first is that deviation from a particular norm labels one as less worthy or socially unacceptable. The second is an acknowledgment that one has deviated from the norm, and the third is the belief that having deviated from the norm, one's standing in the world is altered (Barky, 1990, p. 93).

Literature review

Shame and gender

Women struggle with feelings of being trapped, powerless, and isolated in their shame (Brown, 2006a). The categories most relevant to women's shame include "appearance, body image, sexuality, family, motherhood, parenting, professional identity or work, mental and physical health, aging, religion, speaking out, and surviving trauma" (Brown, 2006a, p. 46). Shame, for women, is like an "atmosphere or environment" coloring their relations without relief (Mann, 2018, p. 409). Gilchrist et al. (2020) report that there is a negative association between "physical self-concept and anticipated shame for women but not for men" (p. 763). Men's and women's gender role socialization shapes their feelings of shame differently (Gilchrist et al., 2020). Women are more likely to experience shame as it relates to interpersonal relationships and connection reflected in their culture. The failure to meet cultural expectations whether real or perceived is closely related to feelings of shame (Brown, 2006a).

Existence as a girl or woman, living in a female body, bestows shame status as common statements, "like a girl" and "such a pussy" so powerfully display (Mann, 2018). Howard (1995) points out that women are consistently dishonored and derogated making them ashamed, while taking the role of white males in a patriarchal society forces women to see themselves as seen through the eyes of the dominant males (Howard, 1995). Fischer (2018) uses the example of Simon de Beauvoir's observation in The Second Sex concerning the close association between shame and embodiment in girl children, detailing the difficult and painful experience of shame while living through puberty. Establishing menstruation as a symbol of femininity and naming it "the curse" makes the onset of menses shameful (Fischer, 2018). The biological, hormonal, and physical realities of femininity are shamed through the concept of the female body as "dirty, disgusting, and in need of sanitizing, deodorizing, medicating, managing, exfoliating, and denuding" (Shefer & Munt, 2019, p. 148).

Shame and social control

Most social interactions include some shame and it is always being anticipated (Goffman, 1967). Sanctions encourage conformity. Expectation of reward follows conformity and expectation of punishment follows deviation (Scheff, 1988). Shame is the ultimate form of social control. An individual shamed is someone 'put in their place,' a place of inferiority socially, politically, and morally. The old fashioned and abiding attitudes and ideology of femininity and feminine sexuality as "demure, virtuous, or at least modest" maintains the concept that women and specifically "bad girls" who do not follow the ideal are immoral, dirty, and unreputable (K.G. Weiss, 2010, pp. 288–289).

Gendered and shamed females become susceptible to "coercive and degrading treatment" (Fischer, 2018, p. 374). Shefer and Munt (2019) declare that "femininities are bound up with shame" explaining that normative femininities are policed and regulated by shaming and transgressors are punished (p. 147). The fertile female body is regulated in patriarchal societies, using shame as a valuable manipulative control/disciplining technique to constrain and oppress the sexuality of women (Shefer & Munt, 2019; Fischer, 2018).

Mann (2018) differentiates between ubiquitous shame and unbounded shame. Ubiquitous shame allows for future redemption whereas unbounded shame is often invoked by a traumatic shame event that precludes any redemption with suicide an eventuality. Redemption in a "masculinist economy of desire" concentrates on three events, the incitement of male desire, a proposal of marriage, and a wedding day (Mann, 2018, p. 414). Power and dignity can be restored to women to whom these redemptive events occur. The girlfriend no longer feels shame when marriage is proposed, and the bride becomes immune to shame on her wedding day. However, the desire of the man must be maintained and "if she capitulates in the wrong way, at the wrong time, or to the wrong person, in the wrong circumstance, everything is lost" (Mann, 2018, p. 414).

Effects of shame

Shame can illicit feelings of being trapped due to expectations, a lack of options, powerlessness due to undesired change, and finally a feeling of disconnectedness from society as a byproduct of being trapped and powerless (Brown, 2006a). This disconnectedness is the result of the threat and subsequent breaking of the social bond (Scheff, 2000, 2003, 2013). Mann (2018) describes the physical effect of shame as "so powerful that it bends the body over on itself, buries the face in the hands, hangs the head" (p. 403). The person who is shamed can become undone, losing social ties, requiring a complete remake of the self and their relation to the world (Mann, 2018). People will feel shame about being ashamed, as the feeling is considered taboo and not to be expressed (Scheff, 2000, 2003). This constitutes a shame-shame loop that creates the need to hide one's shame causing repression and giving shame a primary role in the cause of mental illness (Scheff, 2003). The idea of inferiority complex can be conceptualized as chronic low self-esteem otherwise known as chronic shame, which can tend toward an endless, intense, and durable shame loop (Scheff, 1988, 2003). The act of hiding shame can generate anger leading to rejection, loss of social status, and a search for recognition (Scheff, 2003, 2013). The shame of one's position, in the social hierarchy of gender, race, class, sexuality, and nationality, and the desire to hide it can exacerbate physical violence, depression, addiction, and isolation (Scheff, 2016).

Shame and abuse

Shame in women carries with it the mark of powerlessness and vulnerability especially in their fear of assault and rape (Barky, 1990). K.G. Weiss (2010) sees the cultural narratives based on sexual crimes, gender, and sexuality as an "overriding entanglement of rape with shame" (p. 147). Reportage of rape is inhibited due to the cultural narrative that women are responsible to protect themselves and are often blamed and shamed for suffering abuse (K. G. Weiss, 2010). Abuse, whether sexual, physical, or emotional, triggers negative emotions that can contribute to feelings of self-condemnation, disgrace, powerlessness, and inadequacy. The humiliating and dehumanizing experiences of rape and abuse affect how women not only feel about themselves but how they react to crime afterward (K.G. Weiss, 2010). Feeling ashamed, fear of disapproval, and the humiliation of public scrutiny results in reluctance to report incidents to authorities or share their victimization with others (K.G. Weiss, 2010). K.G. Weiss (2010) reports that "some women are concerned that they will be viewed as unclean or dirty" (p. 296).

The humiliation of sexual violence is alienating, undermining relationships between oneself and others. Humiliation, according to Taylor (2018), cycles the victims back to the deference that preceded the assault. Encouraging women to deny the true humiliation of sexual assault forces them to accept that they are responsible for and expected to overcome the shame and humiliation or be blamed for it (Taylor, 2018). "It has been so drummed into women that we can say we are ashamed but not that we are enraged" (Probyn et al., 2018, p. 328).

The humiliation and shame following childhood sexual abuse (CSA) can destroy a person's sense of self and their understanding of their place in the world. The extreme shame that accompanies CSA leads to feelings of worthlessness, social isolation, and degradation not only at the time of the event but long afterward. The deep shame experienced after CSA can interfere with psychological healing and adjustment and is associated with re-victimization and suicidal ideation. The higher the levels of shame, the higher the levels of dissociation (MacGinley et al., 2019).

Shame and sex work

Reports of shaming and punitive responses to sex workers by figures of authority including medical practitioners impedes them from using services. Humiliation in public health spaces, lower quality or denial of care, and insensitivity and abusive language can be the result of disclosing their occupation. The rejection can leave them feeling unworthy, inadequate and suicidal (Benoit et al., 2018; Thorburn, 2015). Their experiences with social services, independent of their needs, were negative and emotionally damaging (Thorburn, 2015). "Sex workers come to believe that the violence and discrimination they experience is deserved and 'comes with the territory,'" with those making their living in street work suffering from the most oppression and shame (Benoit et al., 2018, p. 460; Schloss & Harper, 2004). Justice systems around the world discriminate against those who sell sex treating them as "unworthy of protection," through public humiliation, excessive force, verbal harassment, aggressive searches, and gratuitous arrests (Benoit et al., 2018, p. 461).

Street workers who are mothers tend not to seek helping services for themselves or their families due to the fear that they will be considered unfit as mothers and have their children removed from their care. Mothers who are separated from their children suffer the highest risk for drug problems and emotional challenges (Schloss & Harper, 2004). Sex workers mediate the shame and stigma of their occupation by "living a double life," where a phone sex worker becomes a telemarketer, and an exotic dancer becomes an entertainer (Benoit et al., 2018, p. 465). The intersecting shame and stigma faced by sex workers creates barriers, hindering any alternative options for employment for those who wish to leave sex work (Benoit et al., 2018).

The shame, ridicule, and humiliation experienced by sex workers revolves around their "risk-taking by the standards of others in the community" (Sanders, 2004, p. 559). Female sex workers are positioned outside of society's conception of femininity which excludes them from the protection given to other citizens (Sanders, 2004). Shaming and stigmatization of sex workers share a distinct link to politically perceived threats to the social order, ensuing power struggles, and enforcement of norms (Benoit et al., 2018). Patriarchal societies gender shame as a disciplining device generating oppression through social structures (Fischer, 2018).

Approach to inquiry

The examination of shame and its effects is engaging more researchers, as it is found to have a role in public and mental health issues as varied as sexual assault, family violence, depression, and addiction (Brown, 2006a). Brown (2006a) proposes a theory of shame resilience suggesting that shame is a "psycho-social-cultural construct" with the psychological factor emphasizing emotions, behaviors, and thoughts, the social including connection and relationships, and the cultural facet relating to the prevalent concern of meeting or failure to meet cultural expectations (p. 45). The theory identifies the many challenges of women living with shame as previously discussed. Scheff's (2003) symbolic interactionist theory of social bonds postulates "the maintenance of bonds as the most crucial human motive" (p. 4). His theory asserts that pride and shame are signals of the state of the bond one has with society. Pride signals a close bond and shame a broken bond (Scheff, 2003). The shame and stigma surrounding sex work elicits a threat to the social bond of the sex worker resulting in personal feelings of shame.

Photovoice methodology is informed by various theories and approaches in this project, including feminist standpoint theories, Freire's (1970) approach to empowerment education (education for critical consciousness), and a participatory approach to documentary photography.

Feminist standpoint theories of Patricia Hill Collins (1990) and Sandra Harding (2004) grant epistemic privilege to women, who are viewed as authorities on their own lives as holders of knowledge construction and self-empowerment through knowledge making. These are important paradigms for understanding the hegemonic forces of patriarchy, challenging the dominant ideologies and calling into question "taken for granted" knowledge and standards. Utilizing the theoretical tenets of feminist thought allows for an expanded understanding of the role of shame in women's lives, as women have a distinctive standpoint by using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge. Standpoint feminists have long espoused the need to recognize the subjectivity of

knowledge, arguing that experiential knowledge should form the basis for theoretical knowledge, recognizing that experiences create a most important foundation for constructing what is written (Puwar & Raghuram, 2003). Feminist standpoint theorists acknowledge that "who we are" and "what we know" will shift and change, in response to the different material conditions, as well as to the fact that everyone occupies more than one experiential and identity location (Hirschmann, 1997).

Brazilian educator, Paolo Freire (1970) maintains that individual and collective liberation is connected to understanding dynamics of power and oppression that is acknowledged in dialogue. Freire asserts that established knowledge comes from those in power; therefore, less powerful individuals are left voiceless. He emphasizes creating collective knowledge that comes from a shared group experience and understanding of the social influences that affect their lives (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988). In Freire's approach to empowerment education, efforts are directed at individual change, community quality of life, and structural changes for social justice. Both feminist standpoint theories and Freire's model of empowerment recognize the power and voices of the oppressed for initiating action toward liberation.

part (Wang & Burris, 1997). A participatory approach to documentary photography allows individuals to record and initiate change within their own communities, instead of being passive subjects of other's intentions and images (Wang & Burris, 1997). The three main goals of photovoice are: (1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through group discussions of photographs and, (3) to reach policy makers and others who can be mobilized for change (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000). Spence (1995) explains that the main objective of participatory photography is to enable people to document aspects of their lives, express themselves, and gain solidarity with one another. By giving people cameras, participants can draw attention to the realities of their lives, ignite public interest and curiosity, and promote the well-being of themselves and their communities (Wang, Burris, & Xiang, 1996; -). Photovoice methodology embodies values that are informed by the theoretical foundations and approaches of feminist standpoint theories, Freire's (1970) empowerment education, and participatory documentary photography (Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000).

Method

Data collection strategies

Participants for this research were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling.

Women invited to participate identified as sex workers engaged in the sex industry for at least six months. Eleven women working in various aspects of the sex industry participated in this study. Each participant attended a photovoice training workshop ensuring knowledge of the project goals, the purpose of photovoice methodology, study procedures, and associated risks and ethics prior to taking photographs. Each participant was provided a 35 mm camera (including black and white film) and invited to photograph her lived experiences, focusing on her needs and aspirations. Each participant took part in an individual, in-depth interview to discuss the meaning behind her images. Once interviews were completed, participants were invited to a group dialogue session to share their images with one another in preparation for

a community art exhibit. Participants were compensated $50 in cash and given the camera to keep for their participation in the study. Our University Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects reviewed and approved the research protocol prior to the collection of all data. While various methodological aspects of this research study have already been published (Capous-Desyllas, 2014), this article focuses on the concept of shame and the subsequent empowerment that emerged from the in-depth interviews and photographic data.

Portrait of the participants

The eleven women who participated in this research study were between 18–52 years of age and came from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. They were U.S. citizens, from diverse social classes, ability statuses, and sexual orientations. Their educational background varied from failure to complete middle school to enrollment in a university. The participants worked in various aspects of the sex industry, engaging in street work, escorting, exotic dancing/stripping, erotic massage, and erotic nude modeling. Some participants had children and/or were in a committed relationship. Living situations varied with some participants living on the streets while others lived in apartments or homes with roommates. Table 1 below highlights each participant and their identities and circumstances.

Data analytic strategies

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a detailed exploration of how participants perceive and make sense of their social and personal worlds, was employed for a thematic based analysis of the interviews. This method of analysis revealed the significant experiences of the participants as they were related to shame (Smith & Osborn, 1999). Analysis began with the transcripts being read repeatedly and deliberately, identifying themes corresponding to how and when the feelings of shame were felt. Retzinger (1995) asserts that the state of shame has a vast vocabulary compared with other emotions, suggesting that shame "is a way that we organize our relational experiences" (p. 1105). A close study of Retzinger's (1995) identifications of shame, through vocabulary and gestures, helped to uncover verbal cues, code words/phrases, and paralinguistic gestures noted in the transcripts. As the themes coalesced, a document was created for each participant including quotes as they pertained to each theme as it corresponded to shame. These themes were organized revealing similarities of the participants' experiences of shame in their lived experience. A final theme emerged highlighting how the participants' photography countered their experiences of shame and reclaimed their agency, power, and identity.

Results

Several shame-inducing life situations and consequences of working in the sex industry were revealed through interview analysis. Shame was understood at the personal, social, and institutional level. It is difficult for any person experiencing the multiple negative life situations foist upon sex workers marginalized along lines of race, class, and gender to sustain any level of mental health maintenance. The participants' experiences of shame were initiated not by the sex work they engaged in but in the life circumstances they found themselves in. Their lives were visited with abandonment, violence, harassment, and cruelty

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Age	Self-Identified Ethnicity	Education	Years in Sex Industry	Type of Sex Work	Additional past work experience	Hours per week	# of children	Relationship Status
Alex	33	Scottish-American & Indian	High School	10	Exotic dancing	same	40	0	single
Bee	42	Caucasian	High School, Few terms of c. college	10	Exotic dancing	same	30	1	single
Crystal	29	Hispanic & White	Dropped out of H.S. in 10th grade-GED & 1 yr college	10	Exotic Dancing, Escort, Erotic Massage	Lingerie Modeling (in a sex shop)	20	4	single
Grahm	21	Caucasian (Eastern European)	4th year college student (private college)	2	Exotic dancing, Pro-dominatrix	same	15	0	open (complicated)
Jasmine	31	1/8 Native American & European	Dropped out in 7th grade	10	Craig's List	Street work, Escort work (agency)	5	2	single (by choice)
Lady Purfection	23	Creole & Black & Native mix	High School, some c. college	2	Exotic Dancing, Escort, Craig's List	same	50	0	engaged
Merry Mag	52	White (but she doesn't believe in race)	Dropped out of 8th grade-took some college c. classes	39	Street work	High end sex work, nude modeling at 13, brothel	5	2	single (has what she calls a husband in prison)
Mouse	21	Caucasian	2nd year in college (private college)	7 months	Exotic dancing, Erotic Modeling Photography	same	30	0	single (by choice)
Rizzo	18	White	G.E.D, some c. college credits	2	Craig's List, Street work	same	30	0	single
Rogue	30	Indian	Dropped out of H.S after 11th grade	9	Street work, Craig's List	Exotic dancing	20	4	Married (happily)
Sarah	37	European-American	High School, some college	11	Street work	same	40	0	single

which caused consequential mental health issues branching into drug addiction, home-lessness, and lack of self-esteem. Despite the hardships that many of the participants faced, they exhibited a great deal of strength, resilience, and pride as women working in the sex industry.

Judgment and stigma

All the participants, regardless of the type of sex work they engaged in, experienced societal judgment, stigma, and discrimination based on their identity as a sex worker. Lady Purfection, a dancer/escort for two years who labeled herself an entertainer, felt judged and stigmatized for her work. She shared,

> Look, this is my job, respect it. Without respect, what do you got? As long as I'm not damaging anyone else's lives or putting anyone else at harm, I don't think that the government or the police or whoever has the right to just ... disrespect people.

Lady Purfection was unable to find other work due to an arrest and charge. She continued to share, "they won't give me a job because of my charge ... nobody's fucking hiring me, and I put in numerous applications ... I lost count after fifty." Her parole officer's negative judgment has required her to keep secret her sex work, making it difficult to establish a permanent position at any strip clubs.

Jasmine, a street worker, was shamed by "constantly being shut out of everything for who I am ... nobody wants you around ... I'm just supposed to roll over and die ... it's inconvenient for society to have me around (tense laughter)." She took a photograph of a sign (Figure 1) that expressed these emotions. Jasmine went on to complain that

> they think most of us are garbage ... we're cattle ... we're dispensable ... and it sucks! People looking at you in disgust ... treating you like you don't exist ... sometimes I just break down and cry ... they want us to get jobs and become part of society but all they make us do is feel worthless.

Figure 1.

In her photograph, Jasmine presented the ways she is constantly shut out of everything.

Grahm, a third-year college undergraduate and exotic dancer, stressed the fact that she had to maintain her anonymity due to the social stigma associated with her work. There were real risks to coming out to her family, friends, and colleagues. Grahm noted "there is this stereotype about sex workers as, like the Barbara Walters thing (a nationally televised documentation of sex workers' lives), like, sex workers as wounded … and, hurt, and vulnerable … clueless, desperate, in need of protection." Society, and especially the media, perpetuate the idea that sex work is inherently shameful. Bee, a dancer and bartender, with an 18-year-old son, confessed, "I was ashamed; I was ashamed of my situation. Probably also ashamed about the domestic violence as well."

Alex, a dancer who aspired to attend college, took a photograph of a wooden fence (Figure 2) to express her need to not feel fenced in and stereotyped because of her work and she shared how name calling shamed her.

Alex expressed,

> It's like, sometimes working in this industry you feel fenced in … there's a certain stereotype … The one thing that people love you for is the one thing people inevitably throw in your face and despise you for. If a guy takes an interest in you, and then all of a sudden you think, oh, it's very complimentary but then he's like, "oh, why don't you just go suck up to some guy and get your money the way you–" or they call you "big whore," so you know, you feel fenced-in in that way- there's no way around it or out of it.

Merry Mag, a sex worker since age 13 and currently 52, explained "and after so many people looking down on you, you get this point of shame … people are like scared of hos … they lock their doors and everything." Rogue, who engaged in sex work without her husband's knowledge was the only participant who truly wanted to leave the work. "I have to lie to my husband. I hate what I'm doing. I absolutely hate it!" Mouse, an exotic dancer and erotic photography model expressed a need to be

Figure 2.

respected and admired for her work, to be "recognized as a human being with a life." Grahm took a series of photographs to challenge assumptions and ideas about sex workers as a homogenous group (Figure 3).

When discussing her photo, Grahm expressed,

> I had my friend wear a paper bag on her head . . . to express how sex workers are talked about as a subject group, and not given a face, and talked about historically as a social problem - not as something that people are engaged in - an abstract phenomenon that has nothing to do with the people that actually do the work.

Much of the shame experienced by the participants was connected to the social stigma surrounding sex work, and the assumptions and moral judgments made about women's sexuality.

Institutional exclusion

The participants experienced institutional exclusion through the lack of public facilities, access to affordable housing and food insecurity. "It's basic human dignity!" Lady Purfection, along with Rogue and Rizzo, complained that there were not enough public toilets available to serve the homeless and sex worker population. Lady Purfection took a photograph (Figure 4) expressing, "I mean, just because people are homeless or sex workers living on the street, or whatever the case may be, doesn't mean that they don't want to use the restroom in some place that's clean and sanitary."

She continued to explain,

> There's not a lot of public restrooms . . . everyone has the right to use a clean bathroom, and everyone has the right to be respected . . . it doesn't matter if they are homeless or if they are drunk or if they are drug addicts cause everybody has some type of vice.

Rogue agreed, stating with frustration,

Figure 3.

Figure 4.

> When you live on the streets, finding a bathroom is like finding a needle in the haystacks . . . so those of us that are homeless have to squat in the bush. And I don't necessarily like doing that. I really don't.

Rizzo took a photograph of a water fountain (Figure 5) to demonstrate the lack of sanitary services.

She also lamented the lack of drinking water in public spaces, "there are some fountains that are still on, even when they shut down other ones . . . you just have to know where they are . . . you need water . . . without water you can die of dehydration."

Figure 5.

Lady Purfection wanted a home but preconceived ideas about sex workers made access to housing difficult. She felt she had limited housing options due to the instability of her income

> I need housing . . . if you're a person that works for the government you need to not judge me just on what I do . . . when (you) don't know nothing about me . . . I'm living in a hotel . . . damn near three hundred dollars a week . . . but I can't get a place; it's hard to get a place for me.

Bee, a dancer, and bartender for ten years with an eighteen-year-old son, was homeless three times throughout her life. When the opportunity for housing through Section 8 presented itself, the voucher was unusable. "I spent eight hours in line . . . and then I got it and could not use it . . . nobody would take it because it has a stigma." The stigma that those who are eligible for Section 8 status are "drunk, drug addict, drug dealer, loser people" made it difficult to find landlords who would accept the status.

Sarah, an outspoken activist endeavoring to end police violence against sex workers had worked the streets for eleven years. She took a photograph of a hotel (Figure 6) and expressed,

> the need for women to have shelter where they are not being abused and taken advantage of and treated like dogs (in a loud voice) . . . because these guys that run these motels . . . take advantage of us . . . that happened to me three times where they took my rent and then kicked me out for no reason.

Sarah loudly claims she had "been waiting almost four years" for Section 8. "I've got to get out of where I am because it's gonna kill me." Similarly, Alex took a photograph of her need for a home (Figure 7) where she wouldn't fear eviction.

She shared, "The house with the gate in the front, with lots of leaves- the great looking house- that is to represent home . . . I just want to be somewhere where no one asks me to leave."

Rogue suffered from homelessness and the consequences of it.

> When you look homeless, they don't want you in there . . . they look at your fingernails . . . I've seen them do it to me. If you've got dirt in your fingernails, whether it's a lot or a little, where your fingers look bad, well . . .

Figure 6.

Figure 7.

Figure 8.

The shame of not having a home can ultimately lead to difficulty functioning in the world. Jasmine, a sex worker for ten years, engaging in both street work and escort services, took a photograph of the camp she has set up under a bridge (Figure 8). She shared, "That is the need for a home, a place to rest my head, you know, relax, just for that one time at night when I can have time to myself … and a place where I can just spread out everything in my pack … "

She went on to explain that being homeless has left her feeling,

just too dumb, you know, to finish the school or, you know, when you've been homeless half your fucking life, and all you know is, you know, scrounging on the streets and living like a fucking animal basically, you don't, it, it scares the shit out of you to think about, you know, about getting an apartment and a job, and, you know, living like what the 'normals' do.

Jasmine was unable in her mind to "live like 'normals' do," due to her extended homelessness.

Rogue took a photograph of food (Figure 9) and expressed that "the only time I ever, we eat, really good, is the beginning of the month, because we get food stamps . . . sometimes it's two to four days before I eat . . . everyone has to eat."

Similarly, Bee shared that she "was on food stamps . . . that was my child support . . . I never got money." Rizzo, an eighteen-year-old heroin addict, lamented the fact that "feeds are at night . . . it's really hard to get food cause sometimes I'm meeting clients and stuff so a lot of times I don't eat because I have to support my habit and I usually don't have enough money to eat." "Feeds" are social/private/religious meal shares for the poverty stricken. If an individual misses the meal shares, they can go without food for long periods. Oftentimes, individuals who are addicted to drugs are compelled to feed their addiction before their bodies.

Work-related disrespect, violence, and harassment

Poor working conditions, such as filthy stages, can cause disease. Grahm took a photograph of cleaning supplies positioned on the edge of a dance stage (Figure 10) and explained,

the girls had gotten staph infections . . . we got these Clorox bleach wipes and scrubbed the stages . . . we showed them all to the manager . . . I was cutting myself on broken glass on the stage! So right after that, I went up to them [management] and I'm like "I'm bleeding, I need a Band-Aid" and they didn't have a Band-Aid! They told me that I should keep working my shift with a bandana tied around my leg-so I quit.

Figure 9.

Figure 10.

According to Grahm "the management of strip clubs was not responsible for working conditions in the way that other employers are."

Many of the participants shared stories of trauma and abuse by clients, which led to feelings of shame. Bee was raped multiple times "on the streets . . . and you know you can't go to the police, and if you don't have a pimp there's no one there to help you so the women, we relied on each other for safety and security." Merry Mag took a photograph (Figure 11) and recalled her traumatic experience.
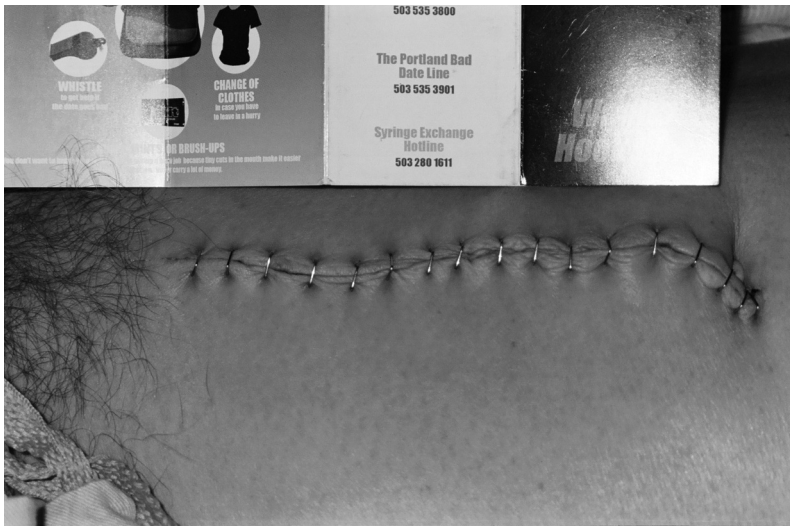
Figure 11.

> This one time, I almost got murdered by this man [client] and I thought that I was gonna die. I had two broken ribs by him ... I ended up in the hospital ... there is such a stigma against us, especially street workers. He was going to kill me ... because I was a whore, and his mother was a whore, and he was angry. The photo also has the syringe exchange hotline number on here which is another group of people who care about people like us. You know, as kids we don't say "well, when I grow up I wanna be a ho and a junkie," and so that's what this picture means to me.

Merry Mag presented this physical metaphor for the external pain of violence, while her story held the internal scar of her trauma. She also presented a self-portrait positioning herself in front of a newspaper depicting her hand-written words "tortured and murdered ho's" (Figure 12) to represent the violence against sex workers by clients. She shared:

> These pictures represent to me a lot of heartache ... I think about these women all the time. How they were tortured and murdered ... there was a murderer out on the streets that had been killing prostitutes ... there wasn't much written about us ... in the papers ... it was all hush-hush. It wasn't mainstream media news because we were just hos. This is a tribute to them in honor of their memory and of my pain.

Merry Mag and other sex workers were offered no support during the murders and ensuing investigations. She went on,

> When I look at this image of this tape over my mouth it's like I couldn't talk about it. I mean, I had to just go out there and turn tricks after finding out that my friends had just died in order to stop the pain or to stop myself from committing suicide or murdering myself.

Sarah, a street worker for eleven years, also knew one of the sex workers murdered and found herself

> close to being one of the bodies down ... because he was taking me to Forest Park ... we were going to do a date in Forest Park and that was him ... and the detective told me that (I) fit the victim mold ... One of the girls, Lila, whose body was found was a very, very close friend of mine.

Figure 12.

Sarah took a photograph (Figure 13) and expressed,

> I found this memorial with sage, a vase, flowers, a crystal, and a candle … I lit the candle … I don't EVER want people to forget those women. To the prostitutes- the main public, they're like, 'oh, they deserved it! They were asking for it.' These women were mothers, children of mothers, daughters, sisters, parents, granddaughters- they deserve some respect, and they deserve to be remembered.

Violence was a recurring theme in the lives of the participants. Rizzo, aged eighteen, "watched my mom get beat by all her boyfriends . . . as I was growing up . . . so I ran away, and I was homeless since I was thirteen." Rizzo had a client "grab me in ways I didn't like . . . and made me wish I had a knife . . . maybe girls could get cans of mace or something donated." There were no resources for self-protection and many sex workers felt they deserved mistreatment.

Sarah found working conditions on the street dangerous because of police presence and harassment. She described her fear of violence by the police and accompanied her story with the image of an angel statue to symbolize protection (Figure 14).

Sarah described,

> . . . when I'm out there walking around I don't feel safe at all . . . cause I think the police are going to roll up on me, well, I got kidnapped one time by the police . . . they took me somewhere, it wasn't even a station, held me there for two hours, told me I was under arrest . . . and, they had me handcuffed and they were like, 'don't get your AIDS diseases tears on our desk' . . . calling me, 'fucking bitch . . . nasty whore' . . . And then they go, 'well, we're not going to arrest you cause you'll be out the next day doing the same thing.'

Some street workers reported they feel safer getting into a client's car than walking the street with a police presence.

Addiction, mental health, and motherhood

The shame of addiction was expressed by Rogue. "I ain't proud of it, but I am a junkie . . . my kids don't even know, I hide that from them." Rizzo shared "I'm a heroin addict . . . I always have to worry about getting enough money to support my habit . . . if I don't get clean, I can't do anything . . . I need to find a real job." Sarah had been a drug addict for twenty years and was on methadone. She took a photograph (Figure 15) and shared,

> That just represents addiction- crack, I got pills, heroin, syringes-and again the need to stay well. I was in the hospital 13 times all because of drug use! You know, I've ruined my health. I am disabled because of it and people think we choose that . . . I want people to understand that we're people- not animals. We didn't choose to live a life of addiction, we need help.

Jasmine explained that,
> heroin addiction takes up every, every aspect of your life . . . time is spent trying to hustle

> to get that money to get that fix . . . or I'll get sick. UGH! I HATE IT! I can't believe I fucking, I was so stupid to do this shit to myself.

This part of paragraph needs to be attached to above line, "heroin addiction...trying to hustle.

Every participant who was addicted desired to "get clean," had been "fighting" addiction, and knew they were self-medicating. Sarah shared that "the first time I did heroin . . . I felt completely at peace for the first time in my life." However, "the peace doesn't last, it turns into a nightmare after a while." Sarah determined that due to mental health problems she and many other sex workers "need to have the ability to see somebody, a physician or a psychiatrist, to get the medications they need . . . for their mental health issues . . . because it can change their whole life."

Figure 13.

Jasmine struggled with "hating myself, you know, sometimes I just want to die . . . when you've been a fuck-up your entire life, when you've screwed up literally, everything you've ever really tried to do." According to Crystal, life can be "very lonely working in the sex industry, you never know who's going to be judging you or what . . . where to turn, where to go to for help . . . You don't want people to hate you." Merry Meg shared a photo of an E. T. doll holding an old childhood photograph of herself (Figure 16).

> I love this picture of me as a child and I haven't always been a ho. I had dreams of a partner, someone to love me unconditionally but I guess that was just a fairy tale for a woman like me. I do service work to stop the pain and loneliness. Pray to Allah. I'm about 7 (yrs. old) there with ET and I loved ET. I had dreams as a kid, and it wasn't this . . .

Merry Mag internalized the social stigma and shame of street workers who are considered unworthy of being loved and simultaneously expressed her aspiration for a better life, a companion, and love. She struggled with her need to not shame her religion (Muslim) due to her sex work. Merry Mag expressed, "I believe my whole life is a spiritual experience; even turning tricks is very spiritual to me because it is very intimate." Sarah discusses her history of mental health issues since childhood.

Figure 14.

> I was a hard child to raise because, you know, ADD (attention deficit disorder) and I had PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) . . . I was sexually abused, so I acted out and she (mother) couldn't handle so she just beat me . . . until I had blood.

Sarah, on sharing her diagnoses comments, "and I'm gonna tell you, I'm gonna guarantee ya, most girls out there have PTSD." She went on to explain, "a lot of the drug use is simply, um, my way of self-medicating."

Struggles with mental health often intersected with motherhood and shame. Crystal, a mother of four children, two boys and two girls, shared feelings of loneliness, guilt, and sorrow that she was not living with her children.

> They're in foster care . . . one of them has been adopted, so that's final . . . I'm wanting to

> improve my life and be more stable so I can take care of them . . . and tell them how sorry I am for the mistakes I might have made along the way, and for not being able to stop their dad's violence against me and them.
> *The line above this quote needs to be included with the quote, "They're in...I'm wanting to"*

Merry Mag suffered with her social collapse,

Figure 15.

Figure 16.

from community leader to street junkie ho ... I cry so much over this because I tried so hard to give them a good life ... all of a sudden, they were grown and I couldn't bear the loneliness in that house I worked so hard to get, I ended up hating that house ... it really brings me a lot of pain.

Merry Mag fought her loneliness and pain by engaging in service work. Jasmine's children were in the care of family members and her shame was expressed in her feelings of failure as a mother. "I failed trying to be a mother, I just, I just, sometimes I feel really bad." Failing at motherhood carried social shame on top of personal shame.

Figure 17.

Strength, empowerment, and resilience

Lady Purfection had a client take a picture of her dancing in the club (Figure 17) and shared,

> Dancing is- it's my decision. I don't think that I disrespect myself. I don't think that I disrespect my body. It's self-expression. There's so much art and there's so many different venues for art and some people don't understand and they think 'oh, they're just selling their self . . .

She continues,

> For me, I just like to express myself and let everyone know; look, I'm attractive but there's more than what you see. And I think sometimes when I'm dancing, I show that because people ask me all the time, 'what do you do outside of work?" And I just say 'well, I take pictures, I write, I'm trying to go back to school. I do a lot.' And so that all ties in with my compassion for my work.

Rizzo photographed a book entitled, *Now Discover Your Strengths* to express her self-confidence and her aspiration to discover more of her personal assets and abilities.

> I mean sure, I'm a good prostitute (laughing), but I'm sure I can do other things, too. So, it's just an aspiration for me to discover my strengths and things that I can do besides the stuff that I do now . . . and become a stronger person.

Mouse used a self-portrait (Figure 18) to represent her stripping as an art form.

> I put these photos together because no matter what kind of sex work you do, it is a kind of art. When I think of stripping, I really do try to treat it like an art. I mean, everything from the movements that you do while you are dancing, to the image that you project . . .

Lady Purfection also presented the idea of her work in the sex industry as art. She photographed a piece of found art depicting a female silhouette (Figure 19).

Figure 18.

Figure 19.

> Basically, I'm in the sex industry because it's fun. It's an experience you won't ever get anywhere else unless you partake in it. I love what I do, I love art and it's a form of art to me, entertaining. One day I hope to be famous for my art ... This picture of a dancer on the wall ... it's just drawn with a sharpie ... this picture symbolizes that women are sexy ... it represents compassion because of the way that she's angled and the way that it's drawn.

She paralleled her experiences as an exotic dancer with what she saw represented in the drawing.

Like Mouse, Lady Purfection presented a series of photographs of herself dancing on stage to express her perspective of sex work as art.

Mouse presented a portrait of herself in front of a mirror representing a need to keep her identity separate from her stripper character (Figure 20).

> You can see me making my face up in the mirror ... that side of my face I had make up on, and that side of my face I didn't ... I wanted it to show that there were two sides ... the character that I play, and then there is the real side of me ... I think of them as being divided ... It's my job, it's how I make money, but it's not who I am ... that is not my personality ... It's a character that I play to make money and it's like theater.

Lady Purfection photographed herself in the passenger seat of a car (Figure 21) to express a personal aspiration to always be confident.

> I wear stunners-I call them sucker reflectors cause I just like to think that people can't see me. When I take pictures of myself- it's inspiration for myself because I can look at myself and say, this is what I'm doing, this is how I'm living my life and if they don't like it, oh well ... society.

Jasmine photographed herself physically exposed (Figure 22) to express her aspiration to be comfortable with her own body.

> I just wanted to be like a primal naked self, you know, like this is me, and I am confronting you with myself, there's no armor, nothing. That's like an aspiration to be able to show myself without shame ... I'm very self-conscious of people seeing me naked ... so maybe it's a future aspiration to be able to be comfortable with my own body for once.

Like Lady Purfection, Jasmine wanted to confront her audience with herself and be accepted for who she is. Jasmine articulated her insecurity while simultaneously radiating confidence in her self-portrait of exposure, while Lady Purfection represented her confidence by remaining hidden behind sunglasses. The photographs taken by Lady Purfection addressed her need for respect, as she explained that she couldn't specifically photograph that key

Figure 20.

Figure 21.

concept. "How do you take a picture of respect? The need for respect from people on the outside looking in?" Lady Purfection's needs for personal and societal respect were echoed by all the women who participated in this study in different ways, through various stories and images. Regardless of the sort of work the participants were engaged in or their level of privilege, all the women expressed a need to be respected as sex workers and as human beings. These photographs illustrate the diverse ways in which the participants reclaimed their agency, power, and identity as women working in the sex industry. The act of photographing themselves became an opportunity for re-storying their narratives, for letting go of shame and reclaiming pride.

Discussion

This study presents an in-depth exploration of eleven participants' emotional and social experiences induced by the stigma and shame of their life situations. Being engaged in sex work was not in and of itself shame inducing, but the personal, social, and institutional stigma of their work made it difficult to maintain their physical, emotional, and mental health. The findings reveal the highly social aspect of shame and the oppression it brings upon women engaged in sex work.

Scheff's (2003) symbolic interactionist theory of shame as "a signal of a threat to the (social) bond" was illustrated in Lady Purfection's and Jasmine's experience of being shut out of society (p. 239). Lady Purfection was unable to successfully apply for a job outside of sex work due to an arrest and charge, and Jasmine felt the threat to social bonds through the many messages around her "being constantly shut out of every-thing … It's inconvenient for society to have me around (tense laughter)." Laughter as expressed by Jasmine when discussing being "shut out" can mask overt shame and often

Figure 22.

occurs to hide the feeling (Retzinger, 1995). Grahm noted there is a stereotype that sex workers are "wounded … hurt, and vulnerable … clueless, desperate." Alex felt "fenced in … because there's a certain stereotype." Being constantly looked down upon fractures the social bond, causing Merry Mag to "get to this point of shame." Brown's (2006a) shame resilience theory (SRT) proposes that feelings of being "trapped, powerless, and isolated" are primary concerns of shamed women (p. 45). The shame experienced by the participants was related to the social stigma surrounding their sex work and the threat to their social bonds.

Institutional exclusion and a lack of basic resources further shamed the participants. Lack of access to basic public facilities resulted in a loss of "human dignity" according to Lady Purfection, Rogue, and Rizzo. Being forced to urinate in public areas, a lack of potable water, housing, and food causes an individual to feel inferior and diminished, creating "psychic distress" (Barky, 1990, p. 85). Sarah expressed "the need for women to have shelter where they're not being abused … and treated like dogs (in a loud voice)." She goes on loudly, "I've got to get out of where I am because it's going to kill me!" Sarah's use of a loud voice is an indication of the anger she feels about the treatment of sex workers attempting to procure proper housing. A strong paralinguistic clue for anger is the use of "harsh voice qualifiers" such as an increase in volume or stress on certain

words (Retzinger, 1995 p. 1110). Rogue suffered from homelessness and the consequences of it. "If you've got dirt in your fingernails, whether it's a lot or a little, where your fingers look bad, well … " A sense of shame accompanies this type of ridicule, being put down, looking foolish or different, and the feeling of intimidation and rejection is code for shame (Retzinger, 1995). Jasmine explained that being homeless has left her feeling,

> just too dumb … scrounging on the streets and living like a fucking animal basically, you don't, it, it scares the shit out of you to think about, you know, about getting an apartment and a job, and, you know, living like what the 'normals' do.

Retzinger (1995) identifies filler words such as "you know" as "verbal hiding behaviors that indicate shame and anger" (p. 1109). Words that indicate inadequacy such as "dumb" in this context are also code words for shame (Retzinger (1995), p. 1108). Jasmine's social differentiation between "normals" who can get an apartment and a job and herself who is just "too dumb" is clearly an illustration of Scheff's (2000, 2003) threat to the social bond, where anger is a way of hiding shame, and the feeling of shame contributes to social repression. Scheff (2003) argues that "the leading role in the causation of all mental illness" can be shame induced repression (p. 251).

Work related disrespect, violence, trauma, and harassment is often expected and accepted by sex workers. According to Scheff (1988), deviation brings with it an expectation of punishment, and conformity results in reward. The strong social stigma of sex work encourages shaming behavior by social institutions such as police, housing boards, employers, and healthcare workers. Grahm reported that "the girls had gotten staph infections … cut on broken glass" but were required to continue their performance or quit their job. Being raped, as Bee recalled, "you can't go to the police … there's no one there to help you." In fact, Sarah tells of being kidnapped by police, handcuffed, taken to an unknown place, shamed, and released. The shaming of sex workers has a distinct link to politically perceived threats to the social order, the ensuing power struggles, and the enforcement of norms (Benoit et al., 2018). Patriarchal societies gender shame as a disciplining device creating oppression through social structures (Fischer, 2018).

Addiction was a source of shame across all participants. Jasmine struggled with "hating myself, you know, sometimes I just want to die … when you've been a fuck-up your entire life, when you've screwed up literally, everything you've ever really tried to do." Jasmine's projection (the use of you instead of I) is a verbal hiding behavior that indicates shame as does her use of inadequacy code words such as screwed up, fucked up, and the direct hostility of hating herself (Retzinger 1995, pp. 1108–1109). Jasmine's hating herself was a reiteration of Scheff's (2003) concern that "the leading role in the causation of all mental illness" can be shame induced repression (p. 251). Repression can be institutional or personal. Failure to thrive, failure at motherhood, and suffering from mental health disorders and trauma since childhood caused durable shame loops (Scheff, 1988, 2003). Sarah experienced PTSD and anxiety as a result of being bloodily beaten by her mother, "and I'm gonna tell you, I'm gonna guarantee ya, most girls out there have PTSD" and "a lot of the drug use is simply, um, my way of self-medicating." Jasmine's inability to care for her children due to her work life left her feeling like a failure, "I failed trying to be a mother, I just, I just, sometimes I feel really bad." Separation from significant others, isolation, and disconnection along with a feeling of inadequacy and defenselessness are code words and phrases for being in a state of shame (Retzinger 1995, 1108).

Despite the participants' emotional and social experiences of shaming, the act of photographing their experiences and sharing them with one another through the photovoice process served as a form of empowerment and resistance to shame. The women used art and visual storytelling to resist the shame they experienced by identifying it, acknowledging it, and then letting it go. Use of a camera provided a means of giving the participants authoritative voice (Bloustien & Baker, 2003) to resist the shame and stigma in their lives through the creative representations of their multiple realities and complex selves. The opportunity to represent themselves, their needs, and desires allowed for the redefining and reconceptualization of shame, stereotypes, and assumptions associated with their work in the sex industry.

Many of the participants used their photographs as a strategy to challenge fixed ideologies about sex workers and sex work, to deconstruct old dichotomies, and to re-define themselves. Viewing the participants as agents capable of investigating their own situations can feel empowering and make a project more useful to them (Feen-Calligan, et al, 2009). Their photographs depicted strength, empowerment, and resistance through their pride in sex work and their demand to be respected and treated as human beings. Lady Purfection's series of photographs of her dancing on a stage represented her need for the viewer to acknowledge the agency and choice she has in her work, as well as the boundaries she creates to resist social shame. Similarly, Mouse shared her power to separate herself from her work. "I just don't want to think of that as who I am." Rizzo, like others, emphasized that she was more than a sex worker; someone capable of having aspirations and visions for a different future. Using creative expression to separate who they are from what they do and the life circumstance they find themselves in, served to shed the shame of life as a sex worker and reclaim their pride in who they are as multi-faceted, diverse women.

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Implications for clinical practice

Deleted in error, cannot rectifyeminist, strengths-informed, arts-based approach. Feminist therapy understands that individuals can be responsive to the problems in their lives, and have the knowledge, capability, and desire to solve their problems (Brown, 2018). The practice of feminist therapy considers not only the distress of the individual but the developmental factors including "current and past issues of powerlessness and disempowerment ... social location ... biological vulnerability" as well as the individual's talents, competencies, and strengths (Brown, 2006b, p. 19). Valuing women's experiences and understanding their diverse and "unique issues within a patriarchal system" are paramount as this system often ignores and pathologizes women's life difficulties living within the patriarchy (Rader & Gilbert, 2005, p. 427). According to Rader and Gilbert (2005), feminist therapists reported employing power-sharing behaviors achieving an egalitarian relationship with clients, allowing them to be an integral part of the counseling, as experts in their own lives. Using strategies promoting the "client's autonomy and power" the therapist encourages clients to see their problems in relationship to their "social, emotional, and political environments (Brown, 1994, p. 22; Rader & Gilbert, 2005, p. 427). As seen through the testimonies in this article, sex workers encounter multiple barriers when trying to access basic needs, particularly as they fear arrest, stigma, and pathology related to their work. This fear can leave people unstably housed, without access to psychological and medical care,

and without food and basic resources to care for themselves and families. Clinicians must examine systems of power and oppression that inform the experiences of people in the sex trades. Recognizing the strengths of people working in the sex industry offers a framework for how to engage with clients. The "strengths perspective" focuses more on the capability and strength of clients than on their problems (Saleebey, 2001). An important application of the strengths perspective to sex worker's lives is how it enables us to appreciate the ways women in the sex trades are powerful, resilient, and resourceful, regardless of their point of entry or circumstances impacting their participation in the work. Clinicians can recognize the assertiveness, savvy negotiating skills, self-protection, knowledge of sexual health, intelligence, navigating systems of care, and the ability to use their learned sexuality and sexual skills to receive material gain (Abel & Wahab, 2017).

Concluding thoughts

As an arts-based research methodology, photovoice invited participants to reflect on their performances, to preserve, create, and rewrite their experiences in dynamic, local spaces (Finley, 2008). Creative, alternative forms of representing lived experiences, such as photography, acknowledge the variety of ways through which experiences are coded (Eisner, 1997). The use of creative forms to represent experiences contributes to deepening meaning, expanding awareness, and enlarging understanding of emotions, such as shame. There are numerous ways in which the world can be experienced and represented (Barone & Eisner, 1997). Photography allows meanings to take shape, engaging us with participants' experiences in new ways. The empowerment experienced by sex workers through the creative endeavor of photovoice is a byproduct of the biopsychosocial expression of their own knowledge, needs, and aspirations. Incorporating arts-based therapeutic approaches in feminist therapy with individuals in the sex industry, such as photographs taken by the participants themselves, can provide opportunities to go beyond the limitations of our usual frame of reference and beliefs so that new associations are created. Photographic images invite us to develop insights into complex emotions and experiences that would otherwise be inaccessible, encouraging us to see differently. Many human experiences are so complex and intensely emotional, that creative forms of representation can reflect their texture more powerfully than traditional academic text. Incorporating the arts in strengths-based, feminist therapy with sex workers can help individuals reflect on their abilities, identify their experiences, express emotion, and narratives, while offering insights into alternative possibilities and solutions in their lives. Achieving empowerment through feminist therapy's promotion of women's' autonomy over the debilitating shame and stigma within the biopsychosocial effects of a patriarchal society can be done, by appreciating and respecting women's experiences as they are lived.

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ORCID

Moshoula Capous-Desyllas   http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6610-553X
Dorothy M. Goulah-Pabst   http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8391-3320

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