FROM "LIVING HELL" TO "NEW NORMAL": ILLUMINATING SELF-IDENTITY,

STIGMA NEGOTIATION, AND MUTUAL SUPPORT AMONG

FEMALE FORMER SEX WORKERS

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Women in the sex industry struggle with emotional turmoil, drug and alcohol addiction, poverty, and spiritual disillusionment. Their lived experiences as stigmatized individuals engender feelings of powerlessness, which inhibits their attempts to leave the sex industry. This study illuminates how personal narratives develop throughout the process of shedding stigmatized identities and how mutual support functions as a tool in life transformation. Social identity theory and feminist standpoint theory are used as theoretical frameworks of this research, with each theory adding nuanced understanding to life transformations of female former sex workers. Results indicate that women in the sex industry share common narratives that reveal experiences of a "Living Hell", transitional language, and ultimate alignment with traditional norms. Implications of SIT and FST reveal the role of feminist organizations as possible patriarchal entities and adherence to stereotypical masculine ideology as an anchoring factor in continued sex work.

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CHAPTER 1

PLIGHT OF FEMALE SEX WORKERS

My memories of childhood are mostly painful ones. My father was an alcoholic

and I lived in constant fear of losing everything; my family and my home. Needless to

say, I had a very unstable life....

By the time I reached fourteen, I had totally rebelled. I hated my life so much; I

just had to get away. I ended up pregnant.... This alienated me from my family even

more.

I ended up working four jobs in an effort to support my son and myself. I could

not keep up the pace for long though. I lost everything I owned and ended up in a

homeless shelter. That's when I decided to work in a topless club....

After a couple of years, I didn't think dancing was so great anymore. I had to

drink every day to deal with my job. I tried to drown all the pain with alcohol and drugs.

I went through numerous relationships (abusive)....

I had become everything that I did not want to be. I was addicted to drugs and

alcohol, was prostituting and dealing drugs. I felt like an absolute failure. I thought

that it would be best for my family if I were dead. I wrote my goodbye letters and took

an overdose hoping to end all of the pain; however, I did not succeed. I eventually

recovered and went back to the only thing that I knew…dancing. (Life Transformations

[LT], 1998, Leanne's Story, ¶ 1-8)

The preceding personal narrative written by a former topless dancer illuminates the

common experiences of women in a variety of sexually oriented businesses. Her current plight

consists not only of a complexity of familial, financial, and emotional components related to

dancing, but also includes the interplay of psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions with respect to internalized stigma. This woman's life serves as a profound exemplar of many women struggling with the emotional and cognitive dissonance inherent in negative self-identity (Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Hill, 2004). Most women in the sex industry struggle with substance abuse issues, financial insecurity, childhood experiences of sexual abuse, and intimate partner abuse (Dalla, 2001; Flowers, 1998). Additionally, they suffer overwhelming feelings of guilt, shame, rage, and fear (Ronai, 1992), often passing their negative and maladjusted perceptions to their children (C. Pool, personal communication, April 25, 2007). Therefore, in response to and congruence with Leanne's story, through this study I seek not only to give voice to marginalized women working in the sex industry, but to understand how personal narratives develop through the process of leaving this type of work, shedding stigmatized identities, and transforming lives through mutual support within the framework of the religious experience.

<div align="center">Sex Industry: Impact on Women and Society</div>

Women's undesired participation in and dependence on sexually oriented businesses have negative repercussions not only for women and their families, but also for the greater United States population. Women who work in the sex industry do not live separate from society, but as integral, salient figures in the community. They are mothers, daughters, and neighbors, whose presence profoundly influences society as a whole (Dalla, 2006; Kuo, 2002; Wheelan, 2001). Dalla (2001), in her study of interpersonal support networks of streetwalking prostitutes, explains that situational differences within the structure of society, not character flaws or personal inadequacies, lead many women into sex work. She writes,

Any one of us could be out there, doing exactly what these women are doing, had we been born into the situations they were born into. At our cores, you and I are no different from them. (p. 1084)

Women in the sex industry struggle with poverty, and the impact of their adverse emotional, physical, spiritual, and social lives resonate throughout the American social system (Dalla, 2006; Miller, Meyers, & Hiller-Sturmhöfel, 1999; Rose, 1985). Additionally, the mere presence of adult entertainment businesses deleteriously impinges upon the neighborhoods in which they exist, most notably with respect to increased criminal activity (Bergthold, 2000). Employees of such businesses, particularly the women, are often viewed negatively as the agents of these industries. Irrespective of current estimates of participants in and financial support for sex work, the sex industry continues to expand significantly each year (Coalition Against Trafficking in Women [CATW], n.d.; Flowers, 2001; Harder, 2001; Potterat, Woodhouse, Muth, & Muth, 1990), and the industry's exacerbation of sex-related crimes and damaging personal effects on women remain indisputable (CATW, n.d.; Dalla, 2001; Flowers, 2001; Health Link Worldwide, 1997; Hudson, n.d.; Overall, 1992; Pheterson, 1990; Ratner, 1993).

Many women who work in the sex industry simultaneously battle the stress of silent and inward impugnment of societal disdain for their roles and internalized stigma (Bell, Sloan, & Strickling, 1998; Macy, 1996); however, these women continue their sex work in an effort to provide financially for themselves and their children (Blow, 2002; CATW, n.d.; Ronai, 1992). The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women reports that 92 percent of women who prostitute themselves do not want to do so. Lack of "basic human services" like housing, job training, physical and mental health care, and treatment for substance abuse compel these women to continue selling their bodies (CATW, n.d., ¶ 1). Leaving the sex industry in the hopes of

assimilating into more socially acceptable work, however, becomes an overwhelming task for female sex workers. Insurmountable shame, guilt, and fear impede women's endeavors to address practical needs like job training, education, and child care (Blow, 2002). Although sex work seems to engender negative psychological effects, women who leave the industry must also relinquish a sense of control and power over men (Bell et al., 1998; Ronai, 1992), thus making the transition even more difficult. One female sex worker says,

> I'm addicted to making money.... [We prostitutes] are hurting inside, you know what
>
> I'm saying? It's something [we] have to do. But [we] don't like it. (Dalla, 2006, p. 95)

Communication Practices and Analysis of Personal Narratives

Women attempting to leave sexually oriented businesses thus face a paradox. On one hand, they desire to exit these occupations; however, because of the negative societal perception of sex work, the illusion of having power over men, and the financial dependence associated with their jobs, female sex workers may feel like outsiders as they attempt to gain entry into traditional professions. For these reasons, it is important to understand the challenges inherent in women attempting to leave the sex industry. Many of the challenges of leaving sexually oriented businesses are communicative in nature. For example, women attempting to leave sex-related occupations must deal with the stigma associated with their former professions. Stigma, or the "structuring of social relations that produces definitions of other" (Harter, Berquist, Titsworth, Novak, & Brokaw, 2005), is a communicative process carried out by labels, non-inclusive communication, and in-group/out-group designations. Furthermore, social groups, a critical component for individuals attempting to change their lives (Ammon, Kaskutas, & Bond, 2006; Mäkelä, Arminen, Bloomfield, Eisenbach-Stangl, Helmersson Bergmark, Kurube et al., 1996) are created and facilitated through communication. For these reasons, a communication focus

may be appropriate for understanding the process by which women exit sexually-oriented businesses.

Personal narratives were used in this study to elicit open-ended responses to questions regarding life transformation via the spiritual experience and mutual support. Personal narratives reveal underlying issues, fraught with psychological and social complexities, and how those issues are communicated (Gubrium, 2006; Richardson, 2005; Witten, 1993; Wood, 2001). In recovery program language, narratives are based on "what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now" (Wilson, 1939/2001, p. 58). Narratives serve as an effective means of understanding self-identity (Ronai & Cross, 1998), professional identity (Bowe, 2000; Weick, 1993), and group identity (Humphreys, 2000). Capturing an accurate reflection of emotions through personal narratives (Goffman, 1963; Jung, 1961/1963; Ronai, 1992) proves to be a valuable tool in evaluating self-identification processes and strategies (Ronai & Cross, 1998) while bringing to light basic personal values and assumptions that shape behavior (Bell et al., 1998; Wood, 2001). Borrowing from Rixecker (1994), Allen suggests bringing together both reason and emotion in creating knowledge, noting that "Knowledge is not value free" (1996, p. 258). The interplay of emotion and reason, therefore, can best be understood through personal narratives.

Mankind cannot be understood through scientific terms, but only through the telling of personal stories (Jung, 1961/1963). Narratives show how individuals create meaning and make sense of themselves through which stories they choose to tell and how they tell them (Fisher, 1987). Narratives are social constructions, maintained and reproduced within specific communities (Berger, 1996; Humphreys, 2000; Shotter, 1993). Personal narratives show alignment processes with community narratives (Humphreys, 2000). Finally, and perhaps most

importantly for this study, "narratives are most urgently sought when experience does not make sense" (Wood, 2001, p. 242). In the case of female former sex workers, therefore, narratives can reveal rationalization for continued sex work, realignment with social groups outside the sex industry, restructuration of self-identities, and how the process from stigmatized to destigmatized construction of self-identity develops.

<p style="text-align:center">Theoretical Framework: Social Identity Theory</p>

One way to view the problem of female sex workers endeavoring to leave the sex industry and shed stigmatized self-identities is through social identity theory. Social identity theory serves as the theoretical lens through which this study perceives women's transitions from stigmatized roles as sex workers to lives of personal fulfillment via mutual help and the religious experience. Social identity theory (SIT) maintains that people are categorized by social constructs (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Groups of similarly categorized individuals form and members seek positive self-esteem through identification with their in-groups that are held in high, or relatively high, status. A social group is defined as "a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership in it" (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Social identity theory serves as one measure in understanding the process of transitioning from stigmatization to positive self-identification in mutual help groups. Women are gendered to need relationships, as their self-identity is one of interdependent self-construal (Eldridge & Christensen, 2002). This interdependent self-construal gives profound power to the meaning

women find in their relationships; therefore, mutual support, both from social in-groups and familial in-groups, for women attempting to leave lifestyles that manifest spiritual, emotional, and physical sicknesses proves to be a powerful tool (Mäkelä et al., 1996; McCrady, & Epstein, 2006).

Female sex workers who are struggling to leave the sex industry seek to disentangle themselves from stigmatized self-identities in a variety of manners (Miller, 2004; Ronai, 1992), thus creating a subjectivity distinct from that of other social groups. Female sex workers, like all individuals with stigmatized self-identities, carry their stigma into all areas of their lives (Quinn, 2004). These women therefore constantly manipulate social situations in order to ensure keeping their stigmatized role hidden from those who might negatively judge them. They know the dominant ideology of males, but experience life from the social position of a marginalized group of women. The social strategies these women employ to ameliorate negative self-identities based on stigma profoundly affects "truth" as their realities present it (Allen, 1996; Wood, 2005). Female sex workers, therefore, provide a unique perspective in more fully understanding of the construction of stigmatized self-identities and how these self-identities are socially negotiated.

<center>Theoretical Framework: Feminist Standpoint Theory</center>

Feminist standpoint theory holds that knowledge emerges from specific social positions and that power relations within society shape that knowledge (Allen, 1996; McCorkel & Myers, 2003; O'Brien Hallstein, 1999; Wood, 2005). Since knowledge is thus socially constructed, bringing to light women's experiences and perceptions as they transition out of the sex industry proves invaluable in obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of social reality. Feminist standpoint claims that women's perceptions illuminate social knowledge that is otherwise obscured (Allen, 1996). Gendered ideologies function as dominant power structures within the

<center>7</center>

sex industry and society as a whole (Allen, 1996; Dalla, 2006; Kuo, 2002; Wood, 2001).

Because of women's social subordination, their subjective knowledge differs from men's social

understanding (Allen, 1996; Bergvall, 1999; Hardin, 1991; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, &

Thomson, 1996; McCorkel & Myers, 2003; Peterson, 2004; Uchida, 1992; Wood, 2005).

Women function as "outsiders- within" (Wood, 2005) in that they live in subordinated roles but

have been socialized within the framework that lauds the dominant, stereotypical masculine

ideology (Allen, 1996; Naber, 2006; Wood, 2005). Female former sex workers' unique social

position engenders knowledge construction that is qualitatively different than that of other social

groups; therefore, these women's personal narratives can reveal social aspects that are otherwise

imperceptible.

Study Purpose and Contributions

The purpose of this study is to understand, from a communication perspective, women's

attempts to leave sexually oriented businesses. Specifically, this study provides deeper

understanding of how personal narratives develop in the process of alignment with social groups

held in higher esteem, how the religious experience shapes perceptions of self-identity, and how

women's retelling of their personal journeys through the destigmatization process allows them to

transform their lives. Practitioners in a multiplicity of fields and specializations, including

addictions recovery specialists, stigma researchers, pastoral counselors and other therapists, and

health care experts, can benefit from the findings of this work. Understanding the role of mutual

support for women in shedding stigmatized identities additionally serves as rationale for this

study, especially in situations in which stigma inhibits identification of, and thus treatment for,

stigmatized maladies. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) further state that "we can learn a great deal

about the social construction of meaning from the experience of dirty workers" (p. 413), those

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whose jobs are perceived as disgusting or degrading (Hughes, 1951). Finally, inclusion of

women's perspectives of the social construction of reality illuminates facets of the social order

that are imperceptible, or are obscured, from other vantage points (Allen, 1996).

Illuminating the interplay of narrative development, the religious experience, and mutual

support and their influence on women's ability to leave sexually oriented businesses serve as the

crux of this study. Focused attention on communication of the destigmatization process and a

highlighting of the lack of organizations that offer comprehensive services specific to women in

order to leave the sex industry establish part of the rationale for this research (Dalla, 2006;

L. Shackelford, personal communication, August 14, 2007). With the rampant drug and alcohol

abuse threaded throughout the sex industry, many female sex workers need to address substance

addiction issues in addition to child care, legal issues, and emotional and psychological aid

(LT, n.d.). Before the mid-1970s lack of federal financial support for women's treatment

services coupled with local and state unwillingness to allocate funds fostered an environment of

fear among health care organizations, women in need of treatment service, and the public

(Finkelstein, 1994). Current programs, however, that now receive funding from agencies like the

National Institute for Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism still lack innovative models of treatment

and have little to no resources allocated for women with children (Finkelstein, 1994). Increases

of female membership in cost-free recovery programs indicate the urgency of support for

women as the United States continues to experience the feminization of poverty (Finklestein,

1994; Mäkelä et al., 1996).

A marked paucity of research exists regarding female sex workers' transition from the

sex industry to more socially acceptable forms of work. A thorough search through Ebscohost

using search terms "sex work," "sex industry," "female sex workers," "topless dancing," "prostitution," and "stripteasing" yields few results of studies conducted in the United States. Further, no studies were found by this author with respect to leaving sex work. The studies found from these search terms focused mostly on the sex trade overseas, processes of rationalization for continuing in the sex industry, the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases in the sex industry, and violence against sex workers. A combination of the aforementioned terms with terms like "leave," "quit," "exit," "transition," "change," and "recovery" yielded zero results. Communication studies inquiry into this area of life transformation, therefore, proves imperative and long overdue.

In order to understand the process of leaving sexually oriented businesses, I focus on one program that supports women in their endeavors to do so. Life Transformations (LT)[1], a nonprofit organization in a major city in the state of Texas, helps meet women's needs for education and acquisition of career skills, child care, spiritual growth, emotional support, and psychological care throughout the process of transforming their lives (LT, n.d.). Organizations that do this type of work are extremely rare in the United States, with LT serving as one of only a few such organizations in the country (L. Shackelford, personal communication, August 14, 2007). Personal experiences of women in the LT program serve as the central focus of this study, thus giving a clear, consistent voice to women in this marginalized group of individuals that is so underrepresented in scholarly literature and is misrepresented in the media (e.g., Jacobs, 1998; Pool, 2004).

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[1] The organization's name has been changed in order to protect further the anonymity of its clientele.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The research entailed in this paper explored issues of stigma reduction as they pertain to female sex workers. Specifically, this study focused on the role of the female sex worker's personal narrative and used complete thought expressions as units of analysis. These expressions are examined within the context of the process of life transformation through mutual support and religious experience. To explain the current context in which this can occur, an overview of the sex industry, antecedent variables for female sex workers, and a thorough understanding of stigma is detailed. Additionally, the influencing force of aspects of patriarchal society in exacerbating stigma against female sex workers and the theoretical framework of social identity theory further supports this idea. Finally, the religious experience and mutual support are addressed. The sharing of personal narratives with other in-group members in a Christian-based setting creates a unique context in which overarching religious tones shape the destigmatization process.

Contextual Overview of the Sex Industry

Sex Industry: Definition and Scope

Strict categorization and separation of different sex work venues typically prove inappropriate, as issues of substance abuse and poverty blur sex industry lines (Ratner, 1993). Women who work primarily in strip clubs, for example, may also provide other sexual services, often in exchange for drugs or alcohol. Success in a particular industry often leads to opportunities to make more money through involvement in other types of sex work (Erickson &Tewksbury, 2000; L. Shackelford, personal communication, August 14, 2007). Additionally,

estimating the number of women selling sexual favors poses a particular challenge because of different types of prostitution and reliance on arrest records (Flowers, 2001; HLW, 1997; Wheelan, 2001). Prostitution often functions in subtle ways, with women sporadically engaging in such interactions for housing or support for active drug addiction (Dalla, 2006). Framing the sex industry, therefore, in terms of specific, patterned behavior falls short of a systemic perception of this social dimension.

For the purpose of this study, parametric definition of the sex industry includes an understanding of both interpersonal and macro-level contexts of communication. The United Nations World Population Fund defines sex work as "the exchange of money or goods for sexual services, either regularly or occasionally. . . where the sex worker may or may not consciously define such activity as income-generating" (United Nations Population Fund, n.d.). Other scholars note the requisite "emotional apathy" (Flowers, 1998, p. 6) or "emotional indifference" (Clinard, 1968, p. 249) of such transactions. According to Health Link Worldwide, sexually oriented businesses include prostitution, pornography, topless dancing, and stripping (HLW, 2002).

Overall statistics that describe the sex industry in the United States provide further insight into the pervasive, system-wide nature of sex work. Although U.S. governmental agencies report roughly 65,000 arrests for prostitution, which is cited as a "victimless crime" (U. S. Census Bureau, 1996; U.S. Department of Justice, 2004), current estimates indicate that somewhere around one to two million women work as prostitutes (Flowers, 1998). The pornography industry claims a 7 to 10 billion-dollar market (Flowers, 1994; Harder, 2001), whereas regular box office revenue for 2004 was 9.53 billion dollars (National Association of

Theatre Owners, 2007). American topless dance clubs and strip clubs comprise a billion dollar

industry (Hudson, n.d.).

<div style="text-align:center">Women in the Sex Industry: An Overview of the Population</div>

Women working in the sex industry share common antecedent variables to their

becoming involved in sex work. These variables include familial dimensions of drug and

alcohol addiction, domestic violence, parental abandonment, and child abuse (Dalla, 2001;

Flowers, 1998). In addition to antecedent variables, current interpersonal dynamics for sex-

working women's heterosexual relationships are often marked by drug abuse (Dalla, 2001;

Inciardi, 1993), violence (Bourgois & Dunlap, 1993; Flowers, 2001), and distrust and disdain of

men (Dalla, 2001; Maxwell, 2000; Ronai, 1992). Most profound, however, of all these

commonalities among female sex workers is the likelihood of intergenerational transference, or

the likelihood that these women's children will continue lifestyles of poverty, substance abuse,

shame, crime, and violence (C. Pool, personal communication, April 25, 2007).

Women working in the sex industry vehemently deny the aforementioned notion of

"emotional indifference" as a characteristic of sex work (Dalla, 2001; Macy, 1996; Pool &

Leanne, 2004; Ronai, 1992; Ronai & Cross, 1998). The negativity generated through their

sex work shapes the messages conveyed to their families (C. Pool, personal communication,

April 25, 2007). Carol Rambo Ronai, a graduate student and topless dancer, writes,

> Approaching the stage, I become furious. . . but I swallow it. Why do these assholes act
>
> this way? Why can't they treat me like a person? Why must they turn me into a thing?
>
> Why do I care so much about it? Why can't I simply be above it? (1992, p. 116-117)

Ronai (1992) later describes carrying her rage towards men in the club home and directing it at

her husband. Sara Maxwell (2000), a woman working as a stripper, concurs with the

transference of her distrust of men in general to her intimate partner. Life Transformations, in

its endeavors to guide women away from this negativity, concerns itself as well with the impact

this type of thinking has on female sex workers' children. Boys raised by mothers who hate men

face unique challenges to the construction of self-identity (L. Shackelford, personal

communication, August 14, 2007). One LT staff member reported a program member's

achievement in her ability to begin calling men "men" and not "the bastards" (Life

Transformations, personal communication, October 8, 2007).

Reflecting upon a Women's Council conference entitled "Women at the Margins: What

are the Barriers to Re-Entry?", the retired executive director of Life Transformations, reports,

> I see living proof of . . . these statistics every day: an adolescent girl is abused, leaves
>
> home, gets pregnant, drops out of school. She tries to find work, but can't make ends
>
> meet on minimum wage. She turns to dancing in men's clubs or worse. For a short time,
>
> she pays her bills. Drug and alcohol addiction follow; her own child may then join the
>
> ranks of those whose mothers have been in jail. The vicious cycle is just that. (Pool,
>
> 2002)

The following section of this paper describes common key antecedent and concurrent variables

for women working in sexually oriented businesses. These variables include substance addiction

(Dalla, 2006; Ratner, 1993), various forms of abuse (Dalla, 2006), teen pregnancy (Dalla, 2006),

poverty (CATW, n.d.), and lowered levels of education and job training (Bell et al., 1998; LT,

n.d.).

Alcoholism and Drug Addiction

Alcohol and drugs shape the social environment for sex workers in such a way as to normalize deviant behavior (Ratner, 1993), thus exacerbating nocent effects of continued socialization within the sex industry. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 17.6 million individuals in the United States suffer the effects of alcohol abuse and dependence (NIAAA, 2004). Females comprise one third of the alcoholic population in the United States (Sandmaier, 1980), and alcohol and drug abuse play ubiquitous roles in sex work (Plant, Plant, Peck, & Setters, 1989). Alcohol abusers and dependents experience more poverty and have more unwanted or unexpected pregnancies. This often leads to seeking work in the sex industry, as required skills are low and income can be greater (Blow, 2002; Dalla, 2001; Monroe, 2005). Problem drinkers more frequently endure domestic violence, including physical and mental abuse, incest, and child abuse, and female sex workers routinely report being victims of child abuse (Dalla, 2001). Alcohol and drug abuse often establish women's foundation for and dependence on sex work. Substance abuse serves as a coping mechanism for continued sex work, numbing the emotional trauma women experience (LT, 1998).

Sexual, Physical, and Emotional Abuse

Another common antecedent variable for women in the sex industry is that of abuse. Like substance addiction, sexual, physical, and emotional abuse inextricably link to other similar patterns in female sex workers' personal histories (Dalla, 2006). From issues of maltreatment as children to current experiences of domestic violence, many female sex workers share the detrimental effects of abuse (Dalla, 2001). Female victims of abuse become vulnerable to depression, suicidal thoughts, eating disorders, and substance abuse. Sexually abused girls are much more likely to get pregnant as teenagers (Harris, 1999). Abuse of women and girls

contributes to females' self-stigmatization, shame, and reification of the belief that they are inferior to men. The ubiquitous nature of child abuse predisposes millions of women to emotional states that preclude entering the sex industry and should be considered from this perspective. One female sex worker explains,

> I think that basically in my heart, I had this feeling from the abuse that if they [men] wanted me they were going to have to pay for it. *They are gonna have to earn me.* (Dalla, 2006, p. 85)

Teen Pregnancy, Lack of Education, and Poverty

Familial patterns of teen pregnancy, low education levels, and concurrent poverty serve as additional antecedent variables amongst female sex workers (Dalla, 2001; Monroe, 2005; LT, 2007). The aforementioned sexual abuse leads to teenage runaways, with adolescent girls more than doubling that of boys in this population of homeless adolescents (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2002). These girls become socially "invisible" and further stigmatized (Harter et al., 2005). In the United States, six of seven adolescent births occur within the population of girls living in poverty. Family welfare and low parental education levels also link to higher rates of runaways (Donohoe, 2003; DHHS, 2002), and many young girls stagnate in their "invisibility" (Harter et al., 2005), low education level, and poverty (Literacy Instruction for Texas, 2007), suffering guilt and shame at not being able to meet the financial demands of being single mothers (Finklestein, 1994; Kaplan, Siefert, Ranjit, Raghunathan, Young, & Tran, 2005). Turning to sex work, with its lack of education and training requirements and its allure of high pay often appears to be the only option for many women (Dalla, 2001; Flowers, 2001; Wheelan, 2001).

Stigma

In this section I describe dimensions of stigma that will be investigated in this study. First, communication of stigma reflects the subtle interplay of complexities inherent to the context of the sex industry and the women who work in it. Internalizing stigmatized roles, individuals suffer the physical, emotional, and psychological ill effects this type of stress can cause (Goffman, 1963), and female sex workers often struggle with self-identities based on internalized self-stigmatization (Miller, 2004; Ronai, 1992). Second, female sex workers carry a "concealable stigma" (Quinn, 2004), in that it might not be readily perceptible to others (Goffman, 1963). Concealable stigmas foster stress in the impellent drive for secrecy, and they engender internal anxiety about their revelation on the part of the stigmatized person (Quinn, 2004). Finally, female sex workers find themselves doubly stigmatized, in that they function as a low prestige subgroup within the overall subordinated in-group of women (Bell, 1994). Thus, the stigma experienced by female sex workers weighs heavier and functions in more complex means than do simple, visible stigmas.

Conceptualization of Stigma

Goffman defines stigma as "the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance" (1963, Preface, ¶ 1). Society perceives stigmatized persons not as human beings, but as a sum of the social categorizers with which they are "othered" (Goffman, 1963; Johnson, Bottorff, Browne, Sukhdev, Hilton, & Clarke, 2004; Wheelan, 2001). Stereotypes, the result of this narrow perception of others, find their impetus not only in the behaviors of higher status groups but in the beliefs and behaviors of stigmatized groups (Goffman, 1963; Harter et al., 2005; Sinclair & Huntsinger, 2004). Opposing goals of social groups, however, do exist in situations of intergroup contact (Pettigrew, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). While high status

groups seek to maintain positive self-identities through superiority, low status groups seek positive self-identities through upward mobility (Shelton et al., 2004). Communication strategies that both groups employ depend not only on these goals, but also on the context in which communication occurs.

Internalized Stigma

Women working in the sex industry "are individuals whose personal lives and values reflect those of the larger society" (Wheelan, 2001, p. 180). These stigmatized women tend to hold the same beliefs about their identity as does the overall American culture. The psychological ramification of shame, therefore, powerfully interweaves itself in female sex workers' self-identities (Sinclair & Huntsinger, 2004), shaping personal ideologies and communication behaviors. As one woman working in pornography states,

> Let's face it, in society's view you're basically someone who broke the worst taboo. You are a ruined woman who is used and unworthy. . . . Like, a man must look at me and see damaged goods, (Macy, 1996, p. 61)

Internalization of stigma by sex workers also carries the profundity of childhood socialization with respect to cultural expectations. Female sex workers take on stigmatized identities after childhood, when feminine ideology of chastity, modesty, and purity are imparted (Ehrlich, 2006; Holland et al., 1996; Impett & Peplau, 2006; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Mast, 2000; Oakley, 1972). Societal negotiation, therefore, of a newly stigmatized self-identity brings with it a further embedded sense of shame (Goffman, 1963). Additionally, this internalization of stigma creates extreme anxiety, the physical effects of which manifest themselves as responses to panic-driven blights of rage, shame, fear, and despair (Ronai, 1992).

Concealable Stigma

Female sex workers carry a stigma that is not readily visible outside the context of the sex industry. Goffman terms this type of stigma as "discreditable" (1963, p. 4) in that it maintains the power to negatively affect an individual, but only in such a situation in which the stigma is revealed. A concealed stigma includes an extra potential for anxiety, therefore, for the individual it defines (Goffman, 1959). Fear of exposure, the burden of secrecy, and the decision to reveal the stigma taint female sex workers' relationships with those outside the sex industry (Quinn, 2004). Constant vigilance to be sure their work identity has not been exposed and worry over the loss of creditability and control after disclosing this dimension of identity riddle female sex workers' daily existence (Quinn, 2004). Regarding concealable stigma, Ronai writes that for most erotic dancers, their work is a "dark, hidden secret" and they prefer not to expose it (1992, p. 105). Many female sex workers, in an effort to save themselves from potential shame of others discovering their situation in the sex industry, withdraw from social interaction altogether (Crocker & Garcia, 2004).

Double Stigmatization of Female Sex Workers

Goffman (1963) contends that negative effects of stigma can be exacerbated when individuals take on a stigmatized condition later in life, after socialization processes have already been established regarding treatment of and beliefs about that stigma. Women working in sexually oriented businesses are socialized in the same culture as other American women, having learned socially acceptable roles for women and the social consequences for deviating from these expectations (Mast, 2000). Within the already marginalized voice of women (Allen, 1996), female sex workers are further stigmatized for not holding to the stereotypical feminine ideology of sexuality. Bell describes the double stigmatization of female sex workers in her statement

that, "Modernity through a process of othering has produced 'the prostitute' as the other of the other: the other within the categorical other, 'woman'" (1994, p. 2). From the perspective of social identity theory, female sex workers are marginalized even within an already lower prestige in-group of women in general. Ronai exemplifies the overlap of double stigmatization and internalized stigma experienced by female sex workers when she writes, "I am the type of woman who would take this kind of job, so I am getting what I deserve. It all becomes my fault" (1992, p. 112). The social situation of female sex workers, thus, provides a unique perspective in further understanding of the construction of individuals' self-identities within the framework of stigmatized roles.

RQ1: How do female former sex workers' personal narratives reveal coping strategies regarding the stigma of their past?

Feminist Standpoint Theory: Epistemological Frame for Stigma

Knowledge arises from specific social positions. Power relations within society structuralize knowledge (O'Brien Hallstein, 1999). These two points form the basis of feminist standpoint theories (Allen, 1996; McCorkel & Myers, 2003; Wood, 2005). Giving voice, therefore, to women endeavoring to leave the sex industry proves imperative in gaining a more holistic perception of social reality. Society uses both sex, which is biologically determined, and gender, a social construction, to aid in structuralizing itself (Bordo, 1993; Oakley, 1972; Uchida, 1992), and acceptable social behavior finds its roots in gendered ideology (Bergvall, 1999; Kaufman, 1994; Uchida, 1992). Knowledge, then, is socially constructed. It is constituted of a multiplicity of lived experiences, shaped by and communicated through power relations based on gender and hierarchies created by gendered ideologies. Feminist standpoint contends that women's narratives "can reveal aspects of the social order that otherwise are difficult to see"

(Allen, 1996, p. 259). In the following section I explain feminist standpoint theory and then apply feminist standpoint tenets to the social construction of gendered ideologies as macro-level power structures in the viability of the sex industry (Allen, 1996; Dalla, 2006; Kuo, 2002; Wood, 2001).

The Feminist Standpoint: Theoretical Basis and Implications

Feminist standpoint theorists bring to light fundamental assumptions about the social construction of knowledge, noting specifically that, "Knowledge is socially located and arises in social positions that are structured by power relations" (O'Brien Hallstein, 1999, p. 35). Within the context of patriarchal society, women are subordinated; therefore, women's experiences, subjectivity, and knowledge construction qualitatively differ from that of men (Allen, 1996; Bergvall, 1999; Harding, 1991; Holland et al., 1996; McCorkel & Myers, 2003; Peterson, 2004; Uchida, 1992; Wood, 2005). Because of social power differences between men and women, women construct knowledge as framed by their subordinated roles as well as by the dominant male perspective (Allen, 1996; Naber, 2006; Wood, 2005). Feminist standpoint theory thus contends that women construct knowledge from the standpoint of the "outsider-within" (Wood, 2005). Women construct knowledge based on their experiences as a marginalized group, but additionally are privy to the experiences and knowledge construction of men as the dominant social group (Wood, 2005).

Implications of feminist standpoint theory with respect to female former sex workers encompass several salient points in this study. First, these women present a valuable perspective to be used in the construction of knowledge, as they are a marginalized group within the already subordinated group of women (Bell, 1994; Ronai, 1992). Knowledge construction on the basis

of power structures, therefore, means that female former sex workers can offer nuances to truth

perceptions not otherwise perceptible. Second, the role of stigma in sex workers' self-

identification creates social situations in which women seek to align themselves with other

higher prestige groups or to use social creativity strategies so as not to self-identify with other

sex workers (Ronai & Cross, 1998). Stigma, then, has the potential to alter knowledge

construction for sex workers in that they may not align themselves with their marginalized, less

powerful groups. Feminist standpoint theory facilitates understanding of the power structures

that shape female former sex workers' lives in addition to women's processes of constructing

self-identities as shaped by the sex industry and patriarchal society.

Power Structures as Macro-Communicative and Behavioral Influencers

Dominant ideology contends that the only legitimate knowledge is based on scientific

thought (Jung, 1961/1963) with its reliance on objectivity and separation of scientist and point of

study (Wood, 2005). When combined with Western partiality for reason and logic, to the

detriment of knowledge constructed through emotions (Allen, 1996; Clair, 1993), society as a

whole is left with only partial knowledge construction (Allen, 1996; McCorkel & Myers, 2003;

O'Brien Hallstein, 1999; Wood, 2005). Macro-level practices inherent in patriarchal societies

that serve as reifications of the current social standing of men and women significantly impact

micro-level discursive practices, and vice versa (Clair, 1993). Women internalize gendered

ideologies and know, even at a visceral level, appropriate behavior and communication practices

(Holland et al., 1996; Impett & Peplau, 2006; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Uchida, 1992).

Women in the sex industry reflect the cognitive and emotional dissonance as a result of

living in patriarchal society, knowing the dominant ideology and experiencing life from the

perspective of a low prestige group within the already subordinated group of women in general (Bell, 1994). I contend in this study that these women employ social identity theory strategies in the process of socially constructing self-identities. These communicative strategies acknowledge the dominant ideology, often using social creativity tactics to ameliorate negative societal perceptions of their involvement in sex work. Additionally, female sex workers use narratives that reflect women's adherence to and alignment with dominant societal values as justifications for continuing to work in the sex industry, such as caring for children and putting their families' needs before their own (Dalla, 2006; C. Pool, personal communication, April 25, 2006; Ronai, 1992). Macro-level ideologies, or communicative power structures, therefore significantly influence both behavioral and communicative practices of these women and are reified on the micro-level in personal relationships (Clair, 1993). Power structures, inherent in stigma, act as profound influencing factors in the lives of female sex workers and the overall construction of knowledge in society.

Patriarchal Context: Effects of the Gendering Process

Many feminist scholars argue that in a society that normalizes women, prostitution would not exist (Overall, 1992). Examination of the larger cultural system, therefore, in which sexually oriented businesses thrive is a tantamount imperative to understanding why women continue to work in the sex industry (Allen, 1996; Dalla, 2006; Wood, 2001). Comprehension of why women become sex workers, why they continue to work as such sometimes long after they would like, and what prompts them finally to leave the industry, leads to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding the basic assumptions about gender that subtly yet fundamentally influence daily life in the United States (Kuo, 2002).

Performance of Gender

Female sex workers perform stereotypical femininity in that their worth is found in their appearance and subservience to men. The line between personal values and gender performance must constantly be navigated while at work, particularly in gentlemen's clubs (Crocker & Garcia, 2004; Ronai, 1992). Goffman confirms that,

> . . . performers tend to give the impression, or tend not to contradict the impression, that the role they are playing at the time is their most important role and that the attributes claimed by or imputed to them are their most essential and characteristic attributes. (1959, p. 136)

Therefore, by performing subordinated roles, female sex workers' empowerment and cognitive processes are affected such that confusion arises between personal and societal definitions of self-identity (Dalla, 2001; Ronai, 1992). The hierarchy of patriarchal society dictates that men and stereotypical masculinity are superior to women and stereotypical femininity (Bergvall, 1999; Hambleton, 1998; Kuo, 2002). Within the already subordinated group of women, however, resides the further subordinated, marginalized group of female sex workers (Bell, 1994; Ronai & Cross, 1998). The overwhelming bulk of research done on sexually oriented businesses like strip clubs and topless clubs, for example, reifies this hierarchy in that research targets female sex workers, not the men who frequent those clubs (Erickson & Tewksbury, 2000). Encouragement of scrutiny of female sex workers thus becomes the assumption in explaining the vitality of the sex industry. Female sex workers are further stigmatized through this assumption in research and in society in general.

Sexual Morality and the Double Standard

Whereas society frequently commends males' heterosexual experiences, it deems female sexual desire as wicked, out of control, and whorish (Hambleton, 1998; Holland et al., 1996). Cultural norms dictate that women should want sex for the purpose of love, while men are lauded for wanting sex only for pleasure (Holland, 1996; Oakley, 1972). Society dictates that women's sexuality should be controlled (Hambleton, 1998) as they move from the home of their parents to that of their husbands (Hessinger, 1998; Oakley, 1972). In this social climate, women's cognizance of the virgin/whore complex in addition to societal expectations of abstention from sexual lust, creates an oppressive environment in which women's reputations shape their sexual experiences (Holland et al., 1996).

In Jackson and Cram's (2003) reporting of young women's talk regarding first sexual experiences, boys are labeled "studs" and girls are "sluts". The same first sexual encounter that is framed as an accomplishment for males is framed as a loss for females. One young girl iterated societal expectations to which both boys and girls feel compelled to adhere. She said, "If you sleep around, you're a slag, if a bloke sleeps around he's lucky" (Holland et al., 1996, p. 242). Female sex workers perform the stigmatized conception of sexuality, whether through entertainment or actual engagement in sexual activity; therefore, they embody what society deems cause for disdain. Stigma becomes part of an everyday enacted experience for female sex workers.

Gendered Assignment of Power Base

American culture portrays ideological femininity through women's acquiescence to the superiority of men. It is this through this obeisance that women find power (Holland et al.,1996; Kimmel, 1994). Women's connection to power is through powerful males, and in order to attract powerful males women must strive for feminine perfection of beauty, thinness, and sex appeal (Chapman, 2006; Danielsson & Johansson, 2005; Holland et al., 1996). Women become a "kind of currency that men use to improve their ranking on the masculine social scale" (Kimmel, 1994, p. 129). This notion holds profoundly true in the sex industry. Millett contends that prostitution is the act of buying power, not sex, and that act is structuralized by a patriarchal society (as cited in Kuo, 2001). In this worldview of acquisition, the amassment of riches and status parallels the acquisition of sexually attractive women as evidence of personal value (Kimmel, 1994; Holland et al., 1996).

Emotions other than those of an aggressive nature are feminized (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000), and thus are seen as weak and inferior (Uchida, 1992). Whereas society expects men to exhibit anger, pride, and defiance, women are allowed guilt and shame (Mäkelä et. al., 1996). The selfsame societal expectations that women exhibit feminine ideals of cooperation, sharing, nurturing, friendliness, and self-expression (Uchida, 1992) ensure her social inferiority. The combination of gendering processes that stigmatize sex for women and create emotional expressions based on interdependent construal of self-identity establishes a foundation for emotional dissonance and internalized stigma (Shelton et al., 2004). Ronai typifies the struggle for power through acquisition of stereotypically masculine qualities when she writes,

All men are using all women. Well fuck you all, because I've found a new love baby—power, control, and money. Use me and I can find a way to use you, manipulating the very thing you are using me for. (1992, p. 120)

Of particular note, then, is how stigma shapes the social construction of self-identities of marginalized women within a patriarchal society.

RQ2: How do female former sex workers' personal narratives reveal negotiation of positive self-identities within the context of a patriarchal society?

Social Identity Theory: Explanatory Device for Stigma

Social identity theory (SIT) frames individual behavior as motivated by positive self-identification with one's respective social group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). These groups are categorized by social constructs and set within a hierarchy of prestige. SIT developed from intergroup contact theory [ICT](Pettigrew, 1998), which seeks to explain social groups' behavior on the basis of four dimensions of intergroup contact. These conditions include situational status of groups, shared goals, intergroup cooperation, and institutional support (Allport, 1954). Whereas ICT focuses on individual motivations and tolerances, however, SIT posits a group-centered perspective for behavior.

Based on the social identity premise, it is assumed that individuals strive for positive social identity, and that positive social identity is largely shaped by being a member of a high status, or relatively high status, group when compared to others. If individuals feel their social identity is not conducive to positive self-esteem, they may try to exit their current group and align with a more favorably perceived group. If social change dictates that leaving one's current group is impossible, these individuals may then try to better the perception of their current group (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social identity theory situates the study of

females leaving the sex industry within the framework of societal dynamics that have the potential to ameliorate stigmatized self-identities.

Sex Industry as a Social In-group

Social in-groups provide emotional and psychological protection for their members, but research is inconclusive in determining whether or not individuals choose to self-identify with stigmatized in-groups (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Crandall, 1994). Individuals perceive some social categorizers to be temporary situations that can be escaped through hard work, so self-identification with these low prestige in-groups would be disadvantageous for personal self-esteem (Crandall, 1994; Ronai & Cross, 1998); however, it may be that female sex workers do not self-identify with any in-group, thus leaving them vulnerable to social isolation (Crocker & Garcia, 2004). Many females in sexually oriented businesses report that their sex work serves as a short-term solution to financial problems (Dalla, 2001; Ronai, 1992; Ronai & Cross, 1998); therefore, alignment with in-groups based on sex work proves unnecessary (Bell, Sloan, & Strickling, 1998; Ronai & Cross, 1998). One woman says, "You know, I bet none of us feel like we are 'really' dancers, at least I don't. I'm just doing this for my kids" (Ronai, 1992, p. 108). It appears, then, that many female sex workers, because of stigma, do not align themselves with in-groups within the sex industry, nor do they feel they can align with in-groups outside the sex industry because of internalized and concealable stigma. These women become completely socially isolated.

Self-Identity Strategies within SIT

"Social creativity" refers to individual group members' endeavors to find positive self-identification through their in-groups of relatively low social prestige by "redefining or altering the elements of the comparative situation, by employing new dimensions for comparison,

positively framing attributes assigned to the in-group, or by comparing in-groups to groups of lower prestige" (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 19-20). In the case of female sex workers, several specific strategies related to seeking positive self-identification while remaining in the stigmatized in-group of the sex industry are employed. Some women highlight gender roles as a basis for reframing positive self-identity (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), maintaining that sex work allowed them to wield power over men and that men are "suckers" for participating in the commodification of sex (Bell et al., 1998, p. 362). One sex worker proclaims, "I can fuck a man for money. That's business. But it wouldn't be right to do that with a woman. Women are the people I love" (Wheelan, 2001, p. 113). Another social creativity strategy, comparing one's in-group to another group of lower esteem, is evidenced in female sex workers contending that other types of sex work is demeaning and beneath them to do (Ronai & Cross, 1998). For example, topless dancers may show disdain for strippers, and strippers for prostitutes, each former group claiming that the latter is "sleazy" and does not have standards set with respect to limiting more deviant behavior. Other women create new bases for social comparison of existing social groups based on gender. For example, Ronai writes, "These men [club patrons] have proven to me that they are not people but objects that deserve to get burned or even animals that must be treated roughly to be controlled" (1992, p. 120). Regardless of strategy, many female sex workers continue to seek positive self-identities through alignment with in-groups of higher relative prestige.

"Social mobility" indicates the ability of an individual to change his or her social group because the societal construct is perceived to be more flexible or malleable (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 9). When individuals feel they are not benefiting socially from being a member of a certain in-group and they believe the overall social construct to be conducive to realigning with a

more positively viewed in-group, they do so. Women in the sex industry create social networks that support their lifestyles. Changing women's current social in-groups to support the new life plays an important role in women's recovery, if for no other reason than to help female sex workers (Miller et al., 1999; Molina, Pelham, Marshal, Gnagy, & Donovan, 2006) self-identify with more positively perceived social in-groups who have disassociated themselves from the stigmatized behavior (Goffman, 1963).

Social groups that positively reinforce an individual's current lifestyle must be replaced with social groups that have different expectations (Beigel & Ghertner, 1977; Dalla, 2001; Institute of Medicine, 1980; McCrady, & Epstein, 2006; Miller et al., 1999). Female sex workers who join mutual help groups like Life Transformations to help them leave the sex industry immediately gain in-groups that support their goals. Women tend to fare well from such changing of social in-groups, especially in recovery programs. In Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, women generally keep in close contact with other members (Mäkelä et al., 1996) and have higher rates of recovery (Ammon, Kaskutas, & Bond, 2006). By becoming members of in-groups that are held in higher esteem, describing themselves in positive terms, women align their self-identities with the positive identifiers of the group. These women thus reap the benefits of mutual support based on trust, belonging, understanding, and self-enhancement (Swim & Thomas, 2004) from women with similar moral careers, or experiences in stigmatized-identity lifestyles (Goffman, 1963).

RQ3: How do female former sex workers employ SIT strategies to align with positive self-identities?

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

In order to understand how former sex workers dissociate from stigmatized self-identities during the process of transforming their lives, I focused on members of a nonprofit organization in a major city in Texas, called Life Transformations. LT is a Christian organization, housed in a Church of Christ, that helps women leave sexually oriented businesses. Focus group meetings took place on site at the church. In the following sections I describe LT, its membership, and its processes.

Participants

Life Transformations: Organization Overview

Life Transformations supports women in their endeavors to leave sexually oriented businesses, including prostitution and exotic dancing. This nonprofit organization also guides women through the process of creating new lives for themselves and their children by offering practical assistance like educational opportunities, financial resources, and help with job procurement. These services are combined with counseling services and spiritual support (LT, n.d.). The program director of LT reports that after an initial interview, prospective members must complete a three-week trial period that includes Wednesday night meeting attendance, disclosure of personal financial information, and treatment for drug and alcohol abuse. Treatment most often includes joining appropriate 12-step programs. LT touts an 80 percent success rate (L. Shackelford, personal communication, August 14, 2007). Finances limit the number of women LT can help, but the organization supports roughly 30 members each year, with 10 to 12 women actively participating and receiving support at a given time (Blow, 2002).

Leaders of Life Transformations espouse that its mutual support in a Christian

environment serves as the crux of the program. Many women in the program have no one else to turn to for support in their new lives, so other members become extremely important in recovery. This public face of LT purports mutual support among its women to be a basic mainstay of the program.

The feeling of being part of a family positively impacts women's sense of self-worth (Pool, 2004). LT literature, as well as long time members, suggests that women learn that they are not alone in the program. As other members share their "experience, strength, and hope with each another that they may solve their common problem" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2007), the program likens itself unto the Christian notion of friendship that "two are better than one. . . for if they fall, one will lift up [her] companion" (Ecc. 4:9-10, NKJV). LT highlights this scripture in its brochure (LT, 2007). The protégée advocate, a mentor assigned to each member, serves as a structuralizing dynamic within the organization, guiding women through practicalities and logistics as they transition into new lifestyles. This guidance includes direction for educational and training endeavors that facilitate lifelong careers outside the sex industry. Protégée advocates additionally help members reshape personal ideologies to align with a spiritual way of life by offering Christian guidance and professional experience regarding this type of life transformation.

Life Transformations: Participant Overview

The documented population of LT consists of 39 active members. Thirty-one members are White, seven are African American, and one is Hispanic. Eighty-three percent of the women report a current substance abuse problem. Ages range from 19 to 50, with a mean age of 33. Fourteen women do not have children. Of the 25 women who do have children, 11 have one child, 12 have two to three children, and two women have four or more children. All of the

women, save two, have full custody of all their children (L. Shackelford, personal communication, August 22, 2007).

Twenty LT members participated in the focus groups. Each focus group was comprised of four to six members, with five participating in the first group, four in the second, five in the third, and six in the last. Fifteen focus group participants were White, four were African American and one was Hispanic. They had a mean age of 35.5 years, with a range in age of 20 to 51. Focus group interviews lasted approximately one hour, with the first meeting at 52 minutes, the second at 74 minutes, the third at 52 minutes, and the fourth at 50 minutes. Each group answered all questions from the appendix.

The documented population of Life Transformations, however, appears to be changing. Although several women noted working as exotic dancers, the majority of newer members self-identified in the focus groups not as dancers, but as drug-addicted prostitutes. All but two of the women interviewed identified themselves as drug addicts and/or alcoholics. Addiction to crack cocaine and alcohol dominated responses throughout the first three groups, whereas the fourth focus group of long-term members remained consistent with the public image of LT. Namely, the fourth group of women had spent two or more years in the program and primarily self-identified as dancers (L. Shackelford, personal communication, August 14, 2007).

Interview Protocol

Focus group interviews of LT members were used to develop a data set useful for answering the research questions. The interview protocol is provided in the appendix. Focus groups were especially effective for this sample for several reasons. Group discussion facilitates individuals' ability to recall pertinent information and stories related to the conversation at hand

(Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Sharing of common experiences through interviews helps members consensually derive language appropriate for describing their unique situations. This is particularly important for stigmatized women, or individuals who may feel they may be to blame for their situations (Clair, 1993). Also, allowing marginalized individuals to create their own language to with which to tell their personal narratives keeps researchers from obscuring the truth of these narratives with artificial or contrived wording (Reinharz, 1992). Poststructuralist feminism contends that "language is where self and organization are socially constructed; language is the site of power struggles; individuals become subjects and agents of dominant ideologies; language gives both meaning and power to transform society" (Buzzanell, 1994; Weedon, 1987). Perhaps most important for these women, however, is the fact that sharing common experiences strengthens in-group cohesion and the sense of belonging.

Personal narratives serve as the most authentic sources of data for this study; therefore, I examined them for common themes, categorizing complete thought expressions found within them. Personal narratives are "stories" or "communications about personal experiences" (Browning, 1992, p. 285). In seeking to collect data from stigmatized women, eliciting personal narratives in focus groups is not only effective but ethical as well, as participants' come to understand that they are not alone in their experiences and feelings (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006). Personal narratives convey emotions (Blee, 1998), are social in nature, and reveal personal struggles in sensemaking (Wood, 2001).

Group affiliation questions were asked so that in-group alignment, or individuals' sense of inclusion as members of LT, could be assessed. Questions regarding self-identity strategies as related to social identity theory were asked as well in order to illuminate the change processes of

social mobility, social creativity, and in-group identification. Data collection occurred on-site in

a private conference room. Discussions were audio taped and transcribed with the permission of

LT staff and members per Institutional Review Board requirements as well as specific releases

through LT.

The initial goal for data collection was to have four focus groups, segmented by

participants' length of time in the program. Focus group one would consist of participants who

had been in the program 0-1 month(s), followed by focus group two (1-3 months), focus group

three (3-6 months), and focus group four (6-18 months). However, because of scheduling issues,

the first three focus groups consisted of participants who had been in the program for less than

six months; focus group four included participants who had been in the program for a minimum

of two years.

Analysis

Focus group interviews were transcribed by the author, producing 115 double-spaced

pages of data. Data were then analyzed line by line using a thematic approach (Boje, 2001), and

then framed by social identity theory, as SIT aligned with the process of changing self-identity.

Specifically, transcriptions were read in their entirety by the author and another communication

scholar to get a feel for the data. The transcripts were independently read a second time by both

coders. For this reading, potential categories related to the research questions were hand-written

on the transcripts. Next, the two coders met, discussed each category, and came to agreement on

whether and how coded data answered each research question. As categories emerged, they

were labeled, condensed, and finalized, with participants' words serving as the basis of the label

for each theme (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Each unit of conversation, or complete expression of

thought, fell into a discrete category and was not used to support more than one theme.

Responses were analyzed to understand the role of mutual support, the religious experience, and the destigmatization process. Focus was on the life transformation process and personal experiences. Additional inquiry sought to shed light on the complex nature of change for former sex workers in a patriarchal society. Overall, common themes among responses were compiled, analyzed, and discussed within the theoretical framework of social identity theory. For RQ1 and RQ2, I used a thematic analysis, and I evaluated RQ3 based on SIT strategies.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Functions and Structures of Personal Narratives

The analysis of focus group transcriptions revealed ten themes that answered the three

research questions. These themes also illuminated the developmental process of life

transformation, as themes focused on former stigmatized lives dominated responses in the

"newcomer" groups and themes focused on present and future self-identities dominated the

"experienced" group. In support of RQ1, four themes emerged: shared "Living Hell" narrative,

addiction to the Life, financial necessity, and isolation. In support of RQ2, two themes emerged:

commodification of men and acceptance of a new patriarchy. In support of RQ3, four themes

emerged: recovery program language, "God talk," transitional language, and identifying with

traditional values. In this section, I describe each theme, explain its relevance to the

research question, note the frequency of responses, and briefly discuss how the robustness of

each theme with respect to "newcomer" and "experienced" groups exemplifies the

communicative progression of personal narratives throughout the life transformation process.

All participants' names have been changed in order to protect their identities.

Research Question 1

RQ1 asked, "How do female former sex workers' personal narratives reveal coping

strategies regarding the stigma of their past?" Thematic analysis revealed four emergent themes:

shared living hell narrative, addiction to the Life, financial necessity, and isolation. Each of

these will be discussed in detail in the following section, but the overall narrative strategies

found for RQ1 highlight participants seeking positive self-identities through connection with

other women's similar experiences and disconnecting themselves from their stigmatized

behavior. The final strategy in this category, however, perhaps depicts the last, and most painful, stage of alignment with stigmatized self-identity: isolation. Because this study sample is of women who are endeavoring to leave the sex industry, the isolation stage served as an impetus for change. For women continuing to work in the sex industry, isolation may serve a different social function and have varying social implications.

Shared "Living Hell" narrative. The first theme within RQ1 is a shared living hell narrative. The living hell narrative encompassed all areas of former sex workers' lives, including the nightmare of drug and alcohol addiction, paranoia related to life on the street, fear that others would take what little a woman had materially, and the overall desperation of "hitting bottom" and living there. By establishing connection with these shared experiences, participants aligned themselves with the community narrative (Humphreys, 2000; Kelly-Romano, 2006).

The community narrative is a result of individual group members' personal stories aligned with the group's ideology. In the case of LT, members learn to mold the retelling of their life histories to conform to Christian ideology. Additionally, because most of these women are also members of 12-step groups, their personal stories align with the ideology of Alcoholics Anonymous. (The book of Alcoholics Anonymous serves as the basic text for 12-step groups in general, regardless of addiction type.) It should be noted here as well that AA stems from an Evangelical Christian organization called the Oxford Group (Kurtz, 1982); therefore, Christian ideology primarily dictates both the worldview of LT and that of 12-step groups overall.

This communicative connection serves as an anchor that, later in the development of the personal narrative, demarcates the stigmatized past life and the new, more socially ideal life. The community narrative further strengthens the bond among these women as well (Kelly-Romano, 2006). Throughout all of the focus groups, participants nodded in agreement when

listening to others retell their personal living hell experiences. Participants also gave

affirmations verbally, both through positive responses and by finishing sentences together.

Positive responses included things like patting one another on the back while they were sharing,

verbally agreeing with and acknowledging common experiences, and demonstrating empathy

through facial expressions. These positive responses for the retelling of the living hell narrative

indicate the importance of its inclusion in the communicative norms of Life Transformations.

Adherence to this norm reifies acceptance as a member of this group. In this manner,

participants strategically constructed personal narratives to cope with the stigma of their past.

Twenty-four responses were coded under this theme. With respect to this desperation of

continuing to prostitute herself in order to support her drug habit, Cindy, a young woman in her

20s, said,

> I remember there were times when I was out there and a guy would offer me like five or
>
> 10 dollars for a blowjob or sex, whatever it was, and I remember doing it and just hating
>
> myself…. I absolutely hated myself. I wanted to kill myself.

Another woman, Rochelle, has been struggling with changing her life for almost 20 years.

Regarding living at her "bottom," she said,

> I was sleepin' in an abandoned car. My t-shirt was drippin' wet. I hung the t-shirt on the
>
> antenna of the abandoned car. I had 50 cents in my pocket. . . .I nearly died. . . . My
>
> kidneys were failing. Umm, I had the shakes so bad, my hair was drippin' wet when I
>
> take my last drink.

Samantha concurred, describing herself during her drug addiction and prostitution. She said,

But I figured I was so bad, you know, coz all these things kept happening to me. Went to

jail, lost my kids, livin' under a bridge, eatin' out of dumpsters, turning tricks under the

bridge, you know, not bathin' for weeks at a time.

The horror of drug addiction took its toll on these women, leaving them in dangerous states of

dehydration that turned their skin black, kept them up for days at a time, and consistently left

them in tears.

Despite the deleterious physical effects, it was the emotional pain that affected

participants more profoundly. The combination of sex work, drug and alcohol addiction, and

extreme poverty created an environment in which women competed for scarce resources in order

to satisfy baser-level needs. These women believed in and experienced scarcity. They felt they

had to fight other women for tricks and fight tricks for money. Interestingly, these women now

laugh about how they had to battle for survival. Lynette and Rochelle turned what began as a

painful reminiscence of life in prostitution into a convivial moment. Lynette began, "Same one

in the script (another prostitute who would cry with her and say, "We'll get our sober way of life

back") stab you in the back. Take everything you got…. Even your trick." Rochelle responded,

Oh yeah! You turn your back and they're winkin' at him! You know, there was a girl

that beat me up one day…and every car that would roll by would scream at him, "She's

got AIDS! Don't pick her up!"

Lynette laughed and replied, "Umm hmm (yes)! We did that. Umm hmm, you don't want her

coz she got it. She got bugs on her body. You want *me*." Lynette's laughter at the cruelty

implicit in life on the street reveals another aspect of how these women bond through shared

experience of living hell. The fact that these women can laugh together about their past shows

their connection with each other and their mutual acceptance of those experiences as part of their former lives.

Of particular interest in with respect to the shared living hell narrative is the fact that only the newcomers supported this idea. The experienced women never addressed the living hell. The development of the personal narrative over time is apparent in this instance, and its implications will be explained further in the discussion section.

Addiction to "The Life." The second theme that supported RQ1 was that of addiction to the Life. Women described their powerlessness to fight a way of life that felt too great to overcome. Although drugs and alcohol played roles in addiction to the Life, they were only part of "the whole thing." It was the lifestyle that served as the addictive agent. Women viewed the Life as a repugnant attractor.

Georgia, a soft-spoken woman, expressed the notion of having no choice but to live her life of addiction and sex work until someone showed her a different path. This idea was reiterated in every focus group. Drugs and alcohol became "numbing agents" that made continuation in the Life possible. Other women rationalized continuation in the Life, both for themselves and for the men involved. An additional component of this theme centered on the psychological separation of self and culpability of behavior. A person seemed to cease being herself and was instead an "addict." Also, the allure of escape, excitement, danger, and defiance of traditional society kept women addicted to the Life. Forty-two responses spoke to the idea of being addicted to the Life, with a consistent amount of responses coming from each focus group. This consistency seems to indicate a uniform perception of powerlessness in the life of sex workers that becomes a common element in personal narratives. It may be as well that the

community narrative (Humphreys, 2000) calls for an understanding of the "lack of power" (Wilson 1939/2001, p. 45).

Regarding the notion that these women had no way out of the Life until they were shown by Life Transformations, Jenny, a woman in her early 40s who has been out of sex work for two years, said,

> I needed something to direct me. (long pause) When I found Life Transformations, I found some mentors…. I didn't know about morals or values a couple of years ago. You know, and I'm like, "What is a moral? What is a value?" So I went against all these things, but what was happening was just when I medicated myself I was doing things that was not me.

Other women talked about the men involved in their sex work, noting *men's* powerlessness in the addiction to the Life. These women felt they and the men who paid for them were trapped in a dynamic that overpowered all of their desires to be free from it. Rochelle said that these men have a "pornography illness," explaining,

> The men in the streets, the men that stop, 99 point nine percent of them are married. It's true…. They told me they loved their wives and would never—…. A lot of 'em were lawyers that go to church on Sunday and have three kids, and one in (a city in the Southwest) was a teacher (at a major university)…. But what I know today about them is they're as sick as I am.

Mona, another woman in her forties, agreed. She said, "They would often talk about their personal life—why they were there." She reported that one man told her, as he was on the bed waiting for her, that he did not want to be there. She said,

And you know, I feel bad for him, coz he was like serious, "I don't wanna be here. I love my wife…[but] she won't give me none, and I'm a man." And I said, "Lemme tell you somethin', as far as I'm concerned, you're doing the right thing coz you're coming to a woman. You ain't going to a child, you ain't doin' an animal…. So don't beat yourself up, coz you could be doin' worse. You could be doin' another man."

Along the same lines of finding strategies to deal with past stigma, other women communicatively negotiated means of separating the true "self" from the "addict" and the true "self" from traditional constraints. Dana supported another woman, Laura, in her endeavor to explain why she had not sought to reconnect with her young son sooner than she did. Dana told Laura, "You were still in your addiction…. I mean, you were numb for so long, and the drugs were dictating how you thought and what you did." Daphne, a former sex worker in her 40s, supported the idea that her self-identity was based on defying constraints placed on her by society. "I was always the shit," she said. "Look at me, I can work 30 minutes to make that money that you have to work two weeks to make." Distancing the true "self" from stigmatized behavior functions as a communicative strategy for stigma reduction (Howard, 2006). Also, by reframing stigmatized behavior as a cunning means for financial gain, these women are aligning themselves with dominant ideology of money as a measure of power. This idea will be further explored in the discussion.

Financial necessity. Some women reported financial necessity as their reason for continued sex work. As a coping mechanism for dealing with stigmatized roles, this notion supports RQ1 as well. Specifically, these women come to grips with their past by claiming financial necessity as a rationale for past behavior. By doing this, they reframe stigmatized sex

work within the acceptable, and even laudable, dominant ideology of achieving financial success.

Twenty-two responses fell into this theme, with more than half coming from the experienced members. For newcomers, financial necessity paralleled the need to fund drug and alcohol habits. For experienced members, financial necessity needed no translation; however, the notion of the "sleaze exemplar" does come into play (Ronai & Cross, 1998). In capitalist society, money equals power. For female former sex workers, the inclusion of the sleaze narrative serves as an exemplar of the belief in money as power. However, by rejecting certain types of sex work, the participants in this study communicatively maintain control over the basis of power in the sex industry: money. Ronai and Cross (1998) explain,

> Sleaze is a deviance exemplar that serves to constitute a form of narrative resistance
> which helps map a dancer's claim to a location in social space (p. 109).

Several women in the experienced group stated that they would not lower themselves to engage in certain acts they perceived as beneath them, regardless of monetary gain.

With respect to supporting their drug habits, newcomers cited several instances of financial insecurity and the stress it brought. Maria, a former sex worker and alcoholic in her 40s, said, "Well, before I had a good job. I worked too many jobs and the pressure got to me so much I went to drugs and alcohol and then I was working on the streets." Typifying the illogical nature of sex work and the humor with which many of these women view their former behavior, Cindy laughed and replied, "Yeah! But it's for like five dollars of dope!" Danielle concurred, saying, "But uh, I stay around that corner in my addiction just…and when I run outta money, or run outta dope, you know, I return to the corner and prostitution."

For the experienced members of Life Transformations, the narrative differs a bit. These women's stories focus on being single mothers as a reason for sex work. These women primarily self-identified as dancers, working to pay bills and take care of their children. Penelope said that she started dancing when she left the father of her child. She said, "I was 17 and I was pregnant…. I told my mom, "It's temporary. Only till I get back on my feet." Soon thereafter Penelope got her mother, cousin, and aunt into working in topless dance clubs as well. Another young woman, Susan, supported the notion that financial insecurity catalyzed her work in the sex industry. She reported,

> I got married too young. That's what spinned me into dancing, was an irresponsible husband that wouldn't keep a job, and bills were due, babies were comin'. You know, everything was there and they needed paid now.

Whether to support an overpowering drug habit or to support themselves and their children, these women perceived their sex work as a financial necessity, thus communicatively situating themselves in circumstances beyond their control. The sleaze exemplar structuralized the financial aspect of sex work for some women, categorizing certain acts as financially satisfactory or not. Drug addiction probably muted newcomers' ability to think through the emotional, social, and psychological repercussions of further sexual behavior for money.

Isolation. The final theme associated with RQ1 centered on isolation. Isolation includes both complete aloneness and limitation to those with whom women worked or used drugs. Both situations, however, revealed profound loneliness and a lack of depth in relationships. In many cases, sex work demanded isolation in order to avoid negative social reactions and to maintain the façade of normalcy. Engaging in sex work creates a circumstance that fosters a "concealable stigma" (Goffman, 1963). Many of these women felt that they had to keep their shameful

behavior hidden. Fear, paranoia, and the drive for secrecy diminished their self-confidence and kept them isolated. Forty-four responses emerged for the theme of isolation, with only four coming from the experienced group. Perhaps as the narrative becomes more cohesive, women's focus shifts from a past perspective to a present and future orientation. This will be investigated further in the discussion section.

Isolation established environments of extreme fear for these women, and the corroding thread (Wilson, 1939/2001) of this way of experiencing reality wove itself through every focus group discussion. When asked if they had people to confide in, one focus group in particular answered a resounding "no." Samantha said, "You're by yourself. [You're with] smokers." Melanie said, "You learn very early in the dope days that you have no friends." Amazingly, these women still find ways to inject humor into their narratives. For example, when asked if she had people to share with, Lynette made a face like the question was preposterous and then laughed. Mona explained the reason she isolated herself. She said,

And you don't wanna be answerin' all those questions people got for you. "Where do you work? What do you do?" You keep lyin' and lyin' and lyin'. That was me. I didn't wanna be lyin' and lyin' and lyin', so I just don't talk to you.

Rochelle conveyed the unbearable pain of living an existence based on isolation and exclusion. She talked about her sister as the "hero," coming to save her. She reported her sister saying to her, "We're grown, Rochelle. You have to—the crisis happened in life, and you have to be able to handle 'em all." Rochelle took a long pause at this and tears filled her eyes. The need to be accepted and to feel worthy of being a part of her family engendered isolation in Rochelle, as it did in many participants in this study. Isolation results from stigmatization and is a construct that is structuralized by "normal," or not stigmatized, people (Falk, 2001). In the instance of

female former sex workers, normal people pass judgment not only on these women's past behavior, but on their inability to instantly conform to societal expectations.

Research Question 2

RQ2 asked, "How do female former sex workers' personal narratives reveal negotiation of positive self-identities within the context of a patriarchal society?" Thematic analysis revealed two emergent themes: commodification of men and acceptance of a new patriarchy. In general, the themes for RQ2 support the notion that female former sex workers, as doubly stigmatized individuals, negotiate power in unique ways within patriarchal society. On one hand, these women, typical of sex workers overall, communicatively position themselves as having power over men. On the other hand, this sample of former sex workers is unique. The participants in this study are not only former sex workers, but they have socially positioned themselves in such a way as to continue the same dynamic of powerlessness. In order to successfully align with 12-step groups and the Christian church, they must "turn [their] will and their lives over to the care of God" (Wilson, 1939/2001, p. 59); hence, acceptance of a new patriarchy ensues. Each of these themes will be discussed in the following section.

Commodification of men. In response to RQ2, thematic analysis was also used and found that two major themes emerged. The first theme that explained how women negotiated positive self-identities within a patriarchal society was the commodification of men. This theme explains the strategy that sex workers used to establish a sense of power over the socially dominant group of men. Additionally, this strategy depersonalized the act of sex work, thus creating an emotional distance from men and further rationalization for continuation in the industry.

In their endeavors to negotiate positive self-identities within a patriarchal society, female sex workers in this study reflected several instances of commodifying men. With respect to her

male clients, Rochelle said, "They're all strangers. There were so many different tricks, that they're all strangers: faceless, nameless people." Cindy supported this idea with her own worries that when she is working now as a waitress in restaurants, she doesn't know if maybe some of the men working in the kitchen are former clients. She said, "And every time there's, like, a cook, I'm like, 'Oh my God, he looks so familiar!'"

When asked how they felt about men today, other women in the "newcomer" groups called them "bastards" and "tricks." Lynette said, "They make me *sick,*" and other newcomers agreed.

Samantha: Gimme your damn money and get the hell out.

Sonya: Hel-LO!

Mona: Let's go!

Sonya: It was always about the money with me. Always.

Mimi: An-an-any of 'em wan-wanna carry on, and you done got more money in your pocket.

Mona: Yeah, you do it, but you sacrifice your own body. You have to.

Newcomers' talk about men reflected the reciprocal disgust for each other. Katie, a young woman in her early 20s, and Rochelle, spoke to this issue. They said,

Katie: Like, older business men, and I'm just like, "What is so wrong with your life that you have to come out here and do this?" I mean, I just look at 'em like (gives a disgusted look).

Rochelle: And they would make *us* feel cheap. I've actually had a trick that would say somethin' about, "You ole whore." And I wanna go, "You're pickin' *me* up. You're payin' *me*.

Katie: You know it's almost like a vicious—I mean, I would talk crap to 'em, and it's

like, "Well, sh—you know. You're the trick."

The need for intimacy perhaps gets thwarted in this environment, as women want to satisfy this

need while continuing the commodification of men at the same time. Cindy explained, "I was

such a taker. And so now I still try to get validation. I still want the self worth and that

validation of 'I am somebody because you want me' type of thing real bad." Rochelle told the

groups she was celibate. She said, "You know, though, I don't want [sex]—I don't even miss—

yeah, I do." Our conversation continued,

Lynette: Don't lie! (laughing)

Rochelle: But you know what I mean? I don't miss the dat[ing]—I don't miss…(pause)

Jennifer: The act?

Rochelle: No, I miss the act plenty. And I miss *him*.

Cindy concurred, saying,

I do feel lonely. I want a closeness with somebody. I mean I want a closeness. I want it

with my husband, but I can't get it, you know…. I was such a taker. And so now I still

try to get validation. I still want that self worth and that validation of "I am somebody

because you want me" type of thing real bad.

Participants thus expressed their need to commodify men while at the same time needing

intimacy from them.

A salient point in the commodification of men, however, stems from reciprocal

commodification between men and women, and the fact that female prostitutes, as previously

mentioned, fought each other for tricks instead of banding together with other prostitutes to rise

from their socially subordinated position. Female sex workers, therefore, in an attempt to resist

dominant social power, ended up oppressing other women in their same circumstances (Clair, 1994). This issue will be further explored in the discussion section.

The commodification of men theme included twenty-six responses, with only three coming from the experienced group. The experienced group spoke of the commodification in past tense, with little to no current alignment with this theme. In fact, Georgia defined the overall tone of the transition of group's feelings as shaped by past experiences to current perspectives. She said,

> You, you've been used by so many men so many times that you become the user. You just turn the table from where you were in that position. They're all comin' in tryin' to take from you, and you get a mindset that it's not about that. It's about business, so you start to take back. And when you do, you forget how to give, coz you've been takin' for so long.

This transition of perspective leads to the next theme for RQ2 that also deals with social position and self-identity within a patriarchal context.

Acceptance of a new patriarchy. The second theme for RQ2, acceptance of a new patriarchy, denotes the process of changing personal beliefs to align with Christian ideology and the requirements of Life Transformations. Participants referred to Christian tenets of God as "Father" and "Son" looking out for "His children." Christianity was seen as both a positive and a negative dynamic by the participants. Regardless of valuation, women in this study talk about yielding their will to God and to direction by the program. All the responses in this category came from the newcomer group, with some women being clear on this issue and others exemplifying transition through the process.

Although this category contains fewer responses, the statements highlight tension inherent in this transition. Eighteen responses were included in this theme, with none of those coming from the experienced group. Some statements were emphatic and clear, while others reflected the transitional process of turning their lives over to God and Life Transformations. Perhaps the need to reach for the polar opposite in order to realign one's life from that of prostitution and drug addiction to that of a more traditional existence is the reason for the lack of support for this theme from the experienced group. Or perhaps this struggle is complete for these women, so they do not feel compelled to include it in their personal narratives. Whatever the reason, this will be further examined in the discussion.

Of the clear statements made by participants in the acceptance of a new patriarchy, several most aptly explained the overall tone of surety. Leslie said,

And then, of course, it's God's work too, that biblical part. You're not gonna get anywhere in life. You know, we're so weak, but we're so strong. You know, does that make sense? Our strength is only gonna come from God above.

Her statements conform to the acceptance of Christian ideology. Mona talked about her process as well, saying,

I used to not ever read the Bible. I started reading the Bible, you know, learning—all I want to do now is be obedient to Him, which is very hard because it's not just about praying and you change. For me it's been the whole process, and not knowin' it was gonna be so tough, until I get I don't know where, because I haven't felt the anointing, you know.

Responses also included statements like "He's really gonna get you" and "The only one that's gonna love you is God." Past perceptions of God included "hellfire and brimstone," and feeling like God was "vengeful" and "judged" these women.

Other participants talked about the need for guidance from Life Transformations. In fact, LT perhaps became a sort of father figure for some of the women. At the least, the organization reinforces the conceptualization of God as "father". At a Wednesday night meeting in March of 2007, the women were given their "Father's Love Letter." The introduction of this letter said,

> The words you are about to experience are true. They will change your life if you let them. For they are form the heart of God. He loves you. And He is the Father you have been looking for all your life. This is His love letter to you. (Father Heart Communications, 2006)

This letter from God includes statements like, "I am not distant and angry, but am the complete expressions of love….I am the perfect Father….[and] You are my treasured possession." The letter is signed, "Love, your dad." Life Transformations perhaps additionally fulfills the role of father in that it provides financial support, creates structure, and provides discipline for its members.

Because of the families in which many of these women, and sex workers in general (Dalla, 2001; Flowers, 1998), were raised, there existed a lack of mentors, role models, and teachers upon whom the participants would rely. Jenny previously mentioned not having direction before Life Transformations, and Georgia talked about having been on her own since she was 15. Women in both the newcomer and experienced groups discussed the need for help in learning how to live healthy lives. Leslie said,

I think I needed more direction. Maybe I could get a little backbone, you know? That's

me, but everybody's different. My sponsor said, "You need to go to Life

Transformations. They're awesome. They can direct you in anything that you need."

Acceptance into the program itself is based on the willingness, in part, to give over all personal

financial information, take an HIV test, attend Wednesday night meetings that include Bible

study, and be completely open and honest with protégée advocates about their personal lives.

Although giving oneself over to a program like Life Transformations and the Christian ideology

it purports may be a positive step, it is still another form of giving over control of one's will;

therefore, the same dynamic of powerlessness perhaps still exists for these women.

Research Question 3

RQ3 asked, "How do female former sex workers employ SIT strategies to align with

positive self-identities?" Thematic analysis as framed by social identity theory revealed four

emergent themes: recovery program language, "God talk," transitional language, and

identification with traditional values. The themes for this research question were pulled together

based on their application to social identity strategies, including intergroup comparison, social

identity, social creativity, and social mobility (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The specific strategies for

each theme will be discussed in detail, and implications will be addressed in the discussion

section. Overall, the themes for RQ3 reveal communicative alignment, or the process of

alignment, with the in-group of Life Transformations, Christian ideology, and traditional norms.

Recovery program language. The first theme regarded use of 12-step program language,

including typical speech used in meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous

as well as phrases taken from the book of Alcoholics Anonymous. Communicative alignment

with recovery program language creates a commonality among LT members, strengthening

in-group cohesion (Humphreys, 2000; Kelly-Romano, 2006). Members of the same in-group demonstrate commonalities in their use of language, including private slang and shared histories. Additionally, individual communicative alignment with program language indicates personal desire to be socially identified as a member of an in-group of recovering addicts and alcoholics who are held in higher social esteem than active users and drinkers (Orbe, Seymour, & Kang, 1998). Thus, SIT strategies of in-group alignment and social mobility are employed by participants in this study.

Twenty-six responses comprise this category, with only one coming from the experienced group. This makes sense given that the experienced group is characteristically different than the newcomer group. The experienced group members did not self-identify to the same degree as the newcomer group regarding drug and alcohol addiction as an impetus for continued sex work. Newcomers frequently focused on the pain and desperation of chemical dependency. This type of story is know in AA as a "drunk-a-log" (Humphreys, 2000). Drunk-a-logs and program rhetoric often guided newcomer narratives in this study. For example, Mona included in her personal narrative a series of events that led to her losing her car and then hitting "rock bottom." Rochelle talked about the "down and dirty stuff" she did while she was using. She recounted multiple instances of conning drunk men into cars in order to rob them. She said,

"Come on baby, come on baby. Do you want this pussy? Come on baby. I'm for sale, but there's a price on me." Get him into the car. Someone comes up out of the back seat with a crowbar around their neck. Take 'em down the road, and "Mother fucker, you come out of your pockets with everything you got, or you're not comin' out of this car."

Later she moved into program rhetoric when discussing her sponsor and working on her fourth and fifth steps. Specifically, she said, "I also have a real sponsor that's really really rushin' me

through the work this time. (long pause) I'm…those consequences are not gonna keep me sober. They're not gonna keep me sober."

Step work served as a major line of thinking in participants' discourse. Lynette talked about making amends, which is the ninth step of AA. Cindy and Daphne talked about being "crazy," which centers on the second step of the program. Leslie mentioned having to make a decision to get sober, which is "step one." The steps of AA and NA hold qualities like honesty, hope, willingness, brotherly love, and humility, to name a few, as the ideals towards which program members should work (Wilson, 1939/2001). By aligning themselves with the steps, therefore, these women align themselves with these qualities and the program that functions as a higher prestige group than that of active addicts.

Participants also included other AA rhetoric in their narratives. Several women referred to "running the show." In the book of Alcoholics Anonymous, step three is "made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, *as we understood Him*" (Wilson, 1939/2001, p. 59). The book goes on to explain step three, saying,

Most people try to live by self-propulsion. Each person is like an actor who wants to run the whole show…. If his arrangements would only stay put, if only people would do as he wished, the show would be great. (p. 60)

Cindy, in alignment with this passage, said,

And I'm still trying to run the show and do all that stuff…. It's kinda like, how can I be so, like even, you know, in my sobriety, you know, just takin' the action and turnin' that part over and just being willing to do what's suggested.

Rochelle echoed this idea, saying that the reason she relapsed was because she had taken control of her life again, leaving God out of the picture. She had taken credit for God's work, saying,

"*I* was in the driver's seat. *I* had a job." Still other women reflected AA rhetoric with comments like "take one day at a time," "do the footwork," "change people, places, and things," and "I was sick and tired of being sick and tired." These women consistently and unmistakably incorporated recovery program language into their personal narratives, which, as previously mentioned, reveals the salience of in-group alignment in AA and the more prestigious qualities with which that program is socially identified. Women who self-identify with recovery programs show use of social mobility by aligning themselves with more socially favorable in-groups than those of active drug users and sex workers.

"God talk". The second theme that emerged for RQ3 was that of "God talk." "God talk" includes narratives that describe instances of God speaking to participants, both directly through His voice and indirectly through symbols and other types of intuitive messages. "God talk" also includes miracles. This theme supports RQ3 in that it serves as a communicative medium women use to self-identify as part of the new in-group of former sex workers and former drug addicts and alcoholics. Social mobility is established through self-identification with the in-group of women who have new lives, free from sex work and addiction. "God talk" denotes connection to a higher power throughout women's lives, including during the time before women entered LT; therefore, another type of in-group is created.

Some participants always perceived themselves as God's children. They believed they were always loved, despite their lack of acceptance of that love. Herein lies the difference between this theme and the previously discussed theme of "acceptance of a new patriarchy" in RQ2. RQ2 dealt with relinquishment of power and obeisance to patriarchal Christianity, whereas "God talk" for RQ3 focuses on shared experience of being saved by God, of miracles

being performed to save their lives. It is precisely this experience that these women use to demonstrate communicatively their belonging to the LT in-group.

Seventeen responses comprised this category. None of these came from the experienced group; however, given that there were also no responses from the experienced group in the "acceptance of a new patriarchy" theme, this could make sense. If the transformation process requires a reaching for the structuralizing dynamic of Christianity in order to socially disentangle from the in-group norms of sex work and drug abuse, the development of personal narratives would reflect that process. As previously mentioned, therefore, it could be that the experienced group has already gone through this transitional phase and does not feel it to be a salient part of their present lives. Individuals include in their personal narratives that which is relevant at present (Rappaport, 1993), and it may be that other unresolved elements of self-identity are more pressing for experienced members of LT.

For newcomers, however, "God talk" proved especially meaningful. Rochelle recounted the night when God saved her life by talking directly to her. She said,

> I get goose bumps, *still* get goose bumps when I think about it, coz this is—God spoke, I believe God spoke to me that night. I heard a voice…. I heard, and I was the only one in that room, "If you do not get up out of this room, if you don't come right now to the hospital, you're gonna die in here."

Mona suggested she heard God's message through a drawing He inspired her to create in church one day. She said,

> I had a thought to pull out this pencil and paper and draw, but I don't draw. Well, the thing was, I felt the Lord tell me…. So I was staring into this plaque and I was drawing, OK, when I looked down it was all kindsa anatomy, body positions, OK, and I'm

like…to me that was a message…. I mean, so visible, and you could see God's hand was

like this, you know, and His feet, you know when you see His feet in those sandals.

Mona intuited that her drawings were messages to end her relationship with her boyfriend at the

time. Other women spoke about the "miracle" of being alive and free from addiction and sex

work.

Most responses in this category related to being God's children, of always having God's

unconditional love. Mimi said, "I always talked to the Lord. I always talked to the Lord cause I

know He's gonna carry me through what I had to go through." Sonya iterated this same belief,

saying, "I always believed in Jesus Christ. I just wasn't applying it to my life." Danielle agreed,

"I was different. I had—I knew. Always God was tryin' to teach me somethin', coz I kept

relapsin', kept relapsin'." These women and others reported feeling "God's hand," and they

knew that "God had a plan" for them. Sharing this belief with others serves as a source of

security and comfort, and as women hear others express the same sentiment, the new in-group is

strengthened.

Transitional language. The third theme under RQ3 centers on transitional language.

Transitional language includes various expressions of negotiating participants' novel social

norms and expectations (Howard, 2006). The participants in this study are changing external

manifestations of internal thought processes through realignment with more desirable in-groups.

This experience is rife with tension that is apparent through the communicative patterns these

women exhibit.   A transition from in-group negative self-stereotyping in which individuals self-

identify with the negative aspects of their social categorization (Hummert, Gartska, Ryan

Bonneson; Ryan et al., 1994; van Laar & Levin, 2004, p. 6) to self-identification with the women

of Life Transformations is largely shaped by communication. Female former sex workers have

to reframe former self-identity strategies, like social creativity, that helped them remain in the sex industry. An exemplar of this thinking is Daphne's previously mentioned contention that, "I can work 30 minutes to make that money that you have to work two weeks to make." In order to remain part of the new in-group and its way of life, women have to let go of former strategies for achieving positive self-identities and replace them with new strategies.

Most of the participants in LT are members of AA and thus are in the process of internalizing the community narrative of AA. The AA community narrative structuralizes itself as "what it was like," "what happened," and "what we are like now" (Humphreys, 2000). In the living hell shared narrative, newcomers exemplified the "what it was like" part of the LT/AA community narrative. "Transitional language" captures the passage from the former life to the new way of life. Thirty-nine responses fell into this category, which suggests their importance in the development of personal narratives for female former sex workers in this study.

Responses for this theme were additionally consistent across newcomer and experienced group members; however, expression of the transitions with which members were struggling may have differed. Newcomers focused on negotiating an understanding of God and disentangling from former beliefs and behavior in order to realign with new lives. Cindy spoke to this transition, saying,

> And I actually didn't have a belief in Jesus Christ when I came [to LT]. I didn't really believe in God, and I'm still really on the fence as far as, I mean, I have a connection but I'm not sure what my concept is, and I really like the fact that I'm getting direction through Life Transformations.

Regarding faith and a belief in God when she was using, Rochelle said,

I shut it down. If I'm in a room and church songs come on and I'm hittin' a pipe or I'm

comin' in from a trick and somebody's got the TV on in an apartment and it's the Sunday

mornin' church service. Turn that TV off. I don't wanna look at it, I don't wanna—and

then sometimes, I'll be with a certain group of girls, like I say, that same group. Say

we're all tired, and we're sittin' somewhere together. Somebody will mention, "You

know, I've been clean before." "Yeah, me too."

Perhaps the hardest part for women wanting out of the sex industry is the long process of

changing internally. Mona said,

I just want change [she snaps her fingers].… And that is not an easy thing to do. I'm

finding it very hard, to transform from the inside out. Transform the inside of you,

because I've been, I've had all these habits and addictions all my life.… And now to

transform myself, the way God wants us to be, it's totally all Greek to me.

Experienced members engaged in more of a reflective view of their transitions into new

ways of life rather than focusing on moving out of the sex industry. They exemplified the power

of the in-group to help women stagnating in transitional language to move fully into healthier

lives. Jenny, sitting farther back from the group circle, expressed difficulty with the transition.

She said softly,

What I'm trying to find is Jenny. I'm trying to find who Jenny is. I don't know who

Jenny is.… And then I'm so much like that little girl, you know? And so there's still a

long road to travel.

When Jenny began to say that she did not feel right about attending AA meeting, she said,

And me in and out of the program—I'm not in the program right now because I still

smoke pot, so I don't go to meetings because I feel like a hypocrite. You know?

Several women jumped on this comment, one of them saying, "You can still go. It's one day at a time. It's a day to day to day—one day at a time! Keep comin' back!" And then Amanda immediately set a time for the two women to attend an AA meeting together. This interaction clearly showed how the LT in-group can effect positive changes for individual women still in transition even within the new way of life.

Identification with traditional values. The fourth theme in support of RQ3 was identification with traditional values. In this category, participant responses demonstrated individual alignment with the LT in-group, traditional social norms, and Christian ideology. Jung posits that just as individuals cause their own harm, they can create their own healing in seeking to be like Christ (1961/1963). In an environment that brings together women who share common "moral careers" (Goffman, 1963, p. 32-40), or similar experiences regarding stigma, mutual support can be facilitated. The Bible supports social identity theory in its advice to, "Be with wise men and become wise. Be with evil men and become evil" (Prov. 13:20, The Living Bible). As understood in chaos theory, communication becomes the strange attractor (Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2002), or organizing dynamic, within the church, facilitating sensemaking and group cohesion. A new in-group of former sex workers is created, and the mainstay of a new way of life is established.

Thirty-four responses centered on the theme of alignment with traditional values. Interestingly, the number of responses was consistent for newcomers and experienced members, but the amount of elaboration on each point by experienced members was twice that of newcomers. The community narrative, therefore, seemed to be the same. The emphasis, understanding, and salience of alignment with the new in-group is more marked for experienced members, just as the living hell narrative was more marked for newcomers. This shows the

developmental process of personal narrative construction, in that elaboration of "what it used to be like" is greater for newcomers and "what it's like now" is greater for experienced members.

Newcomers expressed relatively less cogent thoughts about alignment with the LT in-group, traditional social norms, and Christian ideology. Regarding alignment with LT, Cindy said, "And people here at Life Transformations don't judge you. They look at you and they look in your eyes and they believe you and it makes you stronger." Regarding alignment with traditional social norms like caring for loved ones, Rochelle said of her relationship with her mother,

> It's on a totally different level today. Our relationship is based strictly on, I'm there for my mother coz I love her. It's not, "Where's the new car?" It's not, "Where's the money? Bail me out of jail." It's not…Today it's…I'm there because my mother's living and breathing today and because she's been my best friend unconditionally.

Newcomers expressed alignment with Christian ideology clearly, strongly, and directly. When asked, "How do you feel about Christianity?", the responses were:

> Mimi: Good faith today. Umm yes.
>
> Leslie: Yeah, great faith today.
>
> Daphne: So glad I got it.
>
> Leslie: I'm a Christian. I believe in God. He's my Higher Power.
>
> Danielle: I love it.
>
> Leslie: I think that's what's guiding me to keep going.
>
> Danielle: Yeah. Even in my addiction.

Another newcomer, Stephanie, expressed the Protestant work ethic (Crandall, 1994; Puhl & Brownell, 2003). She said,

We need to work our way out of our situation so that way we will always remember that I

don't wanna go back. You know, this is hard. I struggled to get where I'm at today, and

is it worth it to me just leaving this, as opposed to praying and saying, "God take it all

away and fix it?" Then we worked for nothing.

Experienced members also expressed alignment with the LT in-group and traditional

social norms. Of note is the fact that Christian ideology was not directly expressed, rather an

understanding of God through mutual support emerged. For example, Susan said,

I think God put me in that place [the club] to find--you know, I just think things are

comin' sometimes coincidental in a sense, because if I hadn't gone there, I wouldn't be

where I'm at today. I wouldn't be in the position I'm at today, if I didn't have people

that came through—you know, I say through God's skin. Through people networking

that got me here to start with.

Penelope illuminated self-identity through LT, saying,

I told him [her husband] the other day, too, coz we kinda got in an argument [smiling].

He's like, "Well, you don't act like you need me." And I was like, "Hold up. Let's go

back four years ago, because I told you four years ago I did not need you." You know? I

says, "I know where to go for my comfort." He gives me great comfort, don't get me

wrong, but--he knows where my main comfort is. It's my mother, and it's this group.

Alignment with traditional social norms came through alignment with Life Transformations.

Amanda supported Penelope's contention that "it's still inspiring to come here." When asked

why, she said,

To see the women that come and stay, and the changes they make, and just how happy

they are after accomplishing the little things that we take for granted every day. Oh my

gosh, just—getting their own apartment. Leavin' their, just—I guess they're not small,

but it's what I've had, and they're just experiencin' that. And the joy they have is just

like, oh my gosh, I remember when. It's powerful stuff.

From what the experienced women say, these female former sex workers come to appreciate

achieving the normalcy of everyday life. The responses included as support for the theme of

identification with conventional values, including the LT program, traditional social norms, and

Christian ideology, communicatively entrench these participants in their new life. They

communicatively entrench themselves in a new "normal". They say that their lives have purpose

when they participate in helping other female sex workers make the same transition out of the

living hell and into an environment of mutual help, gratitude, and honest work.

Summary of Results

In sum, the results of this study indicate that female former sex workers employ a

multitude of communicative strategies in order to combat stigma, gain a sense of power, and

realign themselves with the new in-group of LT. For RQ1, themes of the living hell narrative,

addiction to the Life, and financial necessity emerged. For RQ2, themes of commodification of

men and acceptance of a new patriarchy emerged. For RQ3, themes of shared recovery program

language, "God talk," transitional language, and identification with traditional values emerged.

These themes reveal participants' social position and their cognizance of power relations as well

as the communicative strategies used to self-identify with in-groups of higher prestige. The

discussion section further explicates how these themes function through the lens of feminist

standpoint theory and social identity theory and how stigma influences the significance of these

themes and theoretical perspectives.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to understand how female former sex workers' personal

narratives developed throughout the process of leaving the sex industry, how these women let go

of stigmatized self-identities, and how these women transformed their lives. Giving voice to this

marginalized population also served as an impetus in pursuing this study. Religious experience

and mutual support framed the transformation process while providing fertile ground for research

based on feminist standpoint theory and social identity theory. Results of this study indicate that

participants employ multiple strategies for shedding stigmatized identities and aligning

themselves with new, higher-prestige in-groups. These strategies included establishment of a

community narrative, self-identification as addicts and/or alcoholics, and negotiation of self-

identities within patriarchal contexts. Personal narratives served as the basis of analysis and

were found to be manipulated by participants, shaped by the new in-group of Life

Transformations and 12-step programs, and focused on current life experiences.

This section explicates implications of feminist standpoint theory and social identity

theory as related to the life transformation made by female former sex workers in a Christian-

based, mutual support program. Feminist standpoint implications include intersectionality

(Wood, 2005), and I suggest restructuralization of intersectionality to include drug abuse.

Aspects of patriarchal society engendering addiction to the Life will be detailed in this section,

and issues of isolation, power relations, resistance, and the role of LT as a paternal figure will

also be explained. Implications for social identity theory will include intergroup relations, the

living hell imperative, shared language, and transitional language. Issues of stigma will thread

throughout the entire discussion section, creating a basis for implications from both theories.

Practical implications, followed by limitations and directions for future research conclude this section.

<div align="center">Implications of Feminist Standpoint Theory</div>

Feminist standpoint theory brings to light the (mis)perceptions society holds of female sex workers while also making clear the reality in which participants construct knowledge. Regarding stigmatized individuals, Miller stated that, "Trying to cope with everything may leave stigmatized people unable to cope with anything" (2004, p. 40). Women in this study deal with the same stress as the rest of society, but they also have the added negative, overarching dynamic of stigma. Functioning as "outsiders-within" (Wood, 2005), their unique positions in society facilitate a more holistic understanding of reality. Understanding female former sex workers' relationships to other social groups also reveals how communication is shaped by power. Feminist standpoint theory illuminates a number of implications derived from the present study; each will be discussed next.

Intersectionality

Within the feminist standpoint theoretical frame, there exists the acknowledged need for research that differentiates standpoints as shaped by gender, socioeconomic status, sexual preference, race-ethnicity, and other critical social categories (Wood, 2005). Furthermore, feminist scholars endorse scholarship which examines the influence of key identities simultaneously (Essed, 1991; Houston, 2002; Meyers, 2004). The combination of in-group alignment in various marginalized groups creates socially disparate perceptions and experiences of reality. The intersectionality, or alignment with two or more of these groups, further changes the social position of an individual; thus, his or her standpoint is altered. Women in the present study possess standpoints that include the intersection of gender, class, and stigma (sexual

work/drug addiction). They are able to speak to being marginalized to degrees greater than most women. Indeed, drug and alcohol addicted women typically engage in sex work that is more severely stigmatized. These women therefore become the "other" (sleaze exemplar) within the subordinated group of "other" (sex worker) within the overall subordinated group of women in general. They have even less social power than other female sex workers because of the stigma attributed to their behavior.

Based upon the results of this study, drug addiction should be included as a facet of intersectionality. Drug-addicted sex workers have qualitatively different experiences, and thus construction of knowledge, than do non-addicted sex workers. This difference is apparent in the different narratives strategies employed by newcomers and experiences members of LT. As previously discussed, the population of LT is changing. Newcomers tend to self-identify to a much greater extent with addiction to drugs and alcohol, engaging in behavior that experienced members would not. Ronai and Cross's (1998) "sleaze exemplar" surfaced in experienced members' contending that they refused to engage in certain types of sex work, making it clear that they had moral standards clearly defined for their sex work. Newcomers, on the contrary, openly discussed having sex with multiple partners for money; therefore, these women struggled with the exacerbated psychological, emotional, and social repercussions of addiction coupled with sex work. Their standpoint changed as a result not only of internal negativity, but of their harsher stigmatization. Implications for understanding former female sex workers experiences through the lens of intersectionality will be further discussed in the future research section.

Patriarchy

Feminist standpoint theory argues that power relations structuralize society, and in a patriarchal culture like the United States, the dominant ideology of stereotypical masculinity is

privileged (Buzzanell, 1994). Individuals in marginalized groups tend to understand better both their own standpoint as well as the standpoint of the dominant group (Wood, 2005). In this study, participants revealed their knowledge of both standpoints and how alignment with dominant ideology is held in high esteem by general society. This section will explain how female former sex workers internalize stereotypical masculinity in an effort to destigmatize themselves and to survive in the Life. Specifically, female former sex workers reported that their endeavors to survive physically, emotionally, and psychologically in the sex industry included various communicative strategies. Analysis of participants' narratives regarding these strategies revealed a reliance on stereotypically masculine characteristics, including acquisition of money, individualistic competition, and lack of self-disclosure. This reliance on hegemonic ideology will be explained in this section.

Addiction to the Life. The truly unbelievable element of most female sex workers' situation is that many claim that they are "addicted" to this life. They feel they cannot leave the sex industry, that they are dependent on the money, the alternative lifestyle, the acceptance of drug and alcohol abuse, and the inflation of their egos. Addiction to the Life is characterized by easy money (Dalla, 2001; Flowers, 2001), power over men (Ronai & Cross, 1998), fear, and ego (LT, Lynda's Story, 2000; Ronai, 1992). Steve Blow, local news columnist for the Morning News, reports one woman's views on the addictive nature of sex work:

> Oh, it seems great at first. You get all this money to party all the time. It seems fabulous. . . . .[later] There were many nights I sat in the dressing room crying, and others crying with me, all of us wishing we could do something else but not knowing how. (2002, p. B1)

Despite, or many times even because of, the deplorable circumstances in which many female sex workers live, these women struggle to let go of their way of life. Basic (mis)perceptions facilitate (dys)functional [21] tools for survival, and these women's in-groups communicatively reify these constructs. These (mis)perceptions and (dys)functional tools operate within the context of a base-level reality that privileges the same stereotypical masculine qualities that overall mainstream society does as well. As "outsiders-within" (Wood, 2005), women in this study revealed their understanding of dominant ideology and their subordinated position in society. Because of their subordinated position in society, participants are able to privy to information that other groups are not (Harding, 1991). Privileged groups focus on drug and alcohol addiction as a discrete issue, perceiving that overcoming that physical addiction as the only problem to be solved. According to these women's standpoints, however, there is another (even more powerful) addiction, to the "life." This study and FST reveal the allure of the Life above and beyond the allure of drugs and alcohol.

Belief in scarcity. A primary (mis)perception centers on prostitutes' belief in scarcity. These women feel they have to fight other women for tricks and fight tricks for money. They believe in "lack." Many of these women internalize a worldview of lack as children due to abandonment, poverty, and abuse. Later in life these women form relationships based on the ability for others to provide basic necessities: money, food, clothing, and shelter. Their participation in prostitution and drug use is revealed by their surrounding themselves with women who have similar life experiences, (mis)perceptions, and (dys)functional tools. This in-

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[2] The term "[dys]functional" was introduced by D. Dougherty in the following study:

Dougherty, D. S. (2001). Sexual harassment as [dys]functional process: A feminist standpoint

analysis. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 29*, 372-402.

group of prostitutes upholds the belief in scarcity, seeking to live a familiar reality (Dalla, 2006).

Circumstances dictate that obtaining money and instant gratification serve as the only logical

means to end scarcity. Although it is a painful dynamic, it is familiar and makes sense. The

discursive practice of female sex workers seeking to subordinate one another is explained by the

"sleaze exemplar" (Ronai & Cross, 1998). Subordination strategies of other female sex workers

will also be further explained in the "commodification of men" discussion later in the feminist

standpoint theory section.

The (dys)functional tools facilitated in this environment are deviousness, manipulation,

and cunning. In healthy relationships, however, these qualities are detrimental to personal

relationships (Kelley, 1979; Lugones & Spelman, 1987), bringing guilt, paranoia, and

depression. These women must therefore put down the tools that have kept them alive in order

to transition into more "normal" lives. The irony is that masculine hegemony supports the belief

in scarcity (Lugones & Spelman, 1987). American culture is rife with examples of corporations

geting caught, time after time, in unethical and immoral behavior in order to beat the competition

(e.g., Sims, 2000). This condition permeates U.S. culture, leading those who ascribe to a belief

in scarcity to stop at no means to fight for (perceived) scarce resources.

Stereotypical masculinity also demands limited self-disclosure (Peplau, Hill, & Rubin,

1993), partly due to the belief in scarcity. If a woman discloses a weakness, it can be used

against her later. Another former sex worker explains, "The fact of the matter is that when they

(heterosexual male partners) get mad, there's no hope for us. And there's no tellin' what's gonna

come out of their mouth to hurt you." In order to combat losing a partner, to maintain emotional

security, and to ensure physical safety, these women adopt the traditionally male characteristic of

limited self-disclosure.

Power relations. The second (mis)perception focuses on obtaining power, a major

element of feminist standpoint theory (Wood, 2005). The desire for power dictates "win the

game," not "quit the game." Circumstances must be overcome, not shunned. This is especially

salient for female sex workers who, as a subordinated group, experience an extra determination

to gain power. Female sex workers serve as a lower-prestige group within the already

subordinated group of women (Bell, 1994). Sex workers thus feel the need for power more

strongly. In the world of the sex industry, just as in the world of capitalism in general, money is

power. Men become "suckers" (Ronai, 1992) to be used as pawns in the game of "beating the

system" and of taking power over men. Women learn to take all they can in order to survive.

The (mis)perception of having to "beat the system" facilitates the (dys)functional survival

tools of arrogance, conniving, and cheating in order to buck the system that seems to hold female

sex workers in positions of powerlessness. In healthy lives outside this skewed reality, cheating

and arrogance damage relationships. These "tools" damage women's relationships so that

obtaining and maintaining a traditional job seems impossible. Stereotypical masculinity,

however, holds cleverness and "winning" as the end game, setting aside value judgments of the

means to achieving the goal. In other words, the end justifies the means. For female sex

workers, though, the means become an addictive cycle.

Belief in self-reliance. The third (mis)perception stems from the belief that each woman

is alone in the world, and that self-reliance is the only path to success. Because of the unhealthy

families in which most prostitutes grow up, self-reliance becomes an early tool for survival

(Dalla, 2006). Prostitutes' social groups communicatively reify the belief in the stereotypically

masculine characteristic of autonomy and hold it in the highest esteem. Socializing in groups

with other drug addicts and poverty-stricken people creates an environment in which individuals

fight to satisfy baser-level needs. Inherent in this self-reliant drive to provide for oneself is social isolation. One former prostitute explains, "We've lived in enough, you know, hurt, so we got that wall, and it's like… it's hard to let that wall down to let anybody (in)." Other female ex workers strengthen the resolve to fortify that wall. This happens when they share among themselves, as previously mentioned, personal stories detailing the emotional and physical dangers of letting down their guard.

(Dys)functional tools for survival on the street parallel mainstream stereotypical masculinity. Women believe that characteristics of bravery, independence, confidence, dominance, and assurance (Bem, 1974) will free them from their lives steeped in scarcity and powerlessness. Feminized attributes like cooperation, sharing, nurturing, friendliness, and self-expression (Bem, 1974) may earn women social favor in mainstream society, but female sex workers perceive those traits as a vulnerability, a way they may get killed on the street. Female displays of aggression threaten femininity in mainstream society (Kimmel, 1994), but aggressive displays may save a woman's life on the street. Female sex workers who learn to take a stereotypically masculine, task-oriented perspective, as opposed to a stereotypically feminine, relational perspective (Bem, 1974), have a better chance of surviving, or at least protecting themselves emotionally and psychologically, on the streets.

Isolation. Patriarchal society isolates women (Buzzanell, 1994; Wood, 2005), and the sex industry serves as the epitomic patriarchal environment. The sex industry is homosocial and ultra-masculine in nature (Erickson & Tewksbury, 2000). It therefore engenders a heightened existence of masculine hegemony, doggedly demarcating the male dominant group and the female sex worker subordinated group. Stigma determines who is accepted, or acceptable, and who is not (Falk, 2001). Isolation, as produced by a patriarchal context, socially locates women

in such a position as to be shut off from dominant epistemologies. Macro-level social and political arenas shape experiences for women, separating women from discourses that could otherwise emancipate them (Wood, 2005).

Patriarchy functioned as an isolating mechanism in this study for female former sex workers in a variety of ways. First, secrecy played a major part in participants' narratives, at least for newcomers. Goffman (1959) contends that individuals strive for "information control," l trying to keep "destructive information" from the audience (p. 141). Newcomers in this study expressed the need for keeping their sex work secret, at least from some "audiences" in their lives. Isolation resulted, therefore, from stigma. Also, participants experienced isolation as a result of alignment with stereotypical masculine qualities. These qualities included task- rather than relational-orientation, lack of self-disclosure, individualistic competition, autonomy/separateness (Buzzanell, 1994), and the drive to achieve power and earn money. On one hand, acquiring these qualities would seem to reduce stigma, because they are aligned with success as defined by dominant ideology; however, for the women in this study, striving to acquire these qualities lead to isolation. As previously mentioned, women are socially located so as to be separated from full inclusion into dominant epistemology.

Resistance. Feminist standpoint theory illuminates acts of resistance (Allen, 1996; Trethewey, 1997; Wood, 2005). This study revealed that female former sex workers employed several resistance strategies both during their sex-related occupations and through the process of leaving the sex industry. The most apparent strategy was that of "commodification of men." Participants resisted the worldview that (former) sex workers were "cheap" and "ole whore[s]". Instead, participants turned the tables on that perception, saying that men are "nothin' but a

trick." This resistance strategy directly confronts stigma. It frames men as the stigmatized, and female sex workers as women trying to survive financially.

An interesting note related to the commodification of men was the fact that some participants sought to dominate other female sex workers. This notion of "beating the system," as previously discussed in the section on power relations, connects not only again to women's alignment with stereotypical masculine qualities, but reveals a worldview of commodification of people in general. "Competitive individualism" (Buzzanell, 1994, p. 344) trumped any stereotypical feminine displays of cooperation, sharing, or nurturance. Rather than help other female sex workers or reach out to share common experiences and help one another, these women instead fought other women in an endeavor to acquire more tricks. Clair (1994) terms this dynamic the "self-contained opposite of resistance and oppression" (p. 235). It is the situation in which discursive practices reflect a "hegemonic moment" in which subordinated individuals negotiate resistance strategies within the confines of an oppressive reality rather than try to exit the oppression altogether. For former female sex workers, the "resistance/\oppression" (Clair, 1994, p. 235) dynamic they used kept women in the patriarchal system that stigmatized them in the first place.

The same resistance/\oppression dynamic exists as well in participants' duplicity of desire. Participants expressed the need for intimacy, of wanting to be sexually intimate with men. As discussed in the commodification of men theme in the results, participants illuminated the need for intimacy from men, yet they commodified men in order to protect themselves psychologically and emotionally. The constant dialectical tension of closeness/separateness perpetuates their oppression, even though their strategy of commodification is intended as an act of resistance. Feminist standpoint theory illuminates how subordinated standpoints foster

oppositional stances to dominant worldviews (Wood, 2005). In the present study, one method of resistance revealed was to denigrate male customers; this act served to re-classify who was in power and who was subordinated.

LT as "father figure." Feminist standpoint theory additionally illuminates oppression (Allen, 1996). Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of Life Transformations is that it is a feminist organization functioning in a patriarchal manner and leading women to the patriarchal religion of Christianity. Most organizations act in alignment with masculine hegemony, which continues women's isolation (Buzzanell, 1994). LT, however, is a feminist organization operating on the ideology of patriarchal religion and aligning its behavior with masculine hegemony. The organization plays the role of "father figure," and all participants who spoke to this dynamic contended they needed this type of guidance in their lives. LT perhaps perpetuates the same resistance/\oppression element in overall society. It seeks to integrate women into traditional, more acceptable, norms that privilege stereotypical masculine qualities of independence, material/financial success, and autonomy through hegemonic practices. These practices include mandating attendance at weekly meetings, divulging all personal financial information, submitting to random drug testing, attending counseling sessions, and leaving all major life decisions to the discretion of protégée advocates.

The mission of LT is to "help women who want to leave sexually oriented businesses;" therefore, this feminist organization seeks to aid women who desire to leave the sex industry. It does not force anyone to join. It does not recruit. It does not mandate that women become Christian (LT, 2007). LT staff, however, seems to have an inaccurate perception of its clientele, and for this reason, feminist standpoint theory proves invaluable. This theory brings to light dominant groups' shortcomings, in that "we fail to see how our own discourse frequently

perpetuates subordination" (Buzzanell, 1994, p. 344). In an effort to support individuals in need, organizations may in fact be strengthening masculine hegemonic communication and thus reifying the very dynamic from which it self to free its clientele (Clair, 1993).

One poignant example of this "taken for granted discourse" (Clair, 1993) comes from the name of a detoxification and rehabilitation center for women mentioned by several participants in this study called the Magdalene house. Magdalene houses were originally created by the Roman Catholic Church for prostitutes and other stigmatized women, such as unwed mothers and abused girls, and basically functioned as prisons. These homes were named after Mary Magdalene, (whom the church claimed was a former prostitute) who turned to Jesus (Finnegan, 2001; Hooper, 2005). Again, although these homes today offer service to women in need, the stigma established by history remains.

Perhaps it is the state of desperation that most women come to before seeking outside help in transforming their lives that inhibits women from questioning the hand that helps them. Women reported a willingness to listen to anyone with any message who offered to help because their desperation was so overwhelming. Regarding the typical new member, the former executive director of Life Transformations, writes,

> When people get to the bottom of the barrel, they just seem to find us. . . . The woman who does the best in our program is the one who is broken, the one who doesn't want to live the life she has been living for one more day. We're most malleable to God when we're in that shape. (Henson, 2002, ¶ 8)

Acceptance of a new patriarchy, as previously mentioned in the results section, seems a small price to pay in exchange for freedom from a life of living hell, and that process is reflected in the narratives of the former sex workers in this study. However, the desperation that precipitates

women's "malleability" creates a dangerous situation in which unscrupulous organizations, like cults, could possibly take advantage of women's vulnerability. Additionally, former female sex workers, within the context of Christianity, can accept forgiveness through a patriarchal ideology of God, which shapes the internalization of forgiveness and the communication of the experience.

Implications of Social Identity Theory

Feminist standpoint theory effectively describes the stigma female former sex workers endure, but it is social identity theory that reveals *how* women shed stigmatized identities. SIT, therefore, serves as a complete framework for understanding the destigmatization process, and thus addresses all three research questions for this study. I used complete thought expressions culled from personal narratives as units of analysis in this study, as these expressions allow stigmatized individuals the opportunity to authentically describe their experiences (Reinharz, 1992) and reflect the social process of self-identification with as little dependence on organizational rhetoric (from support agencies) as possible (Blee, 1998). Most important, however, is the fact that narrative (re)creation is an inherently social process (Wood, 2001). Narratives are profoundly influenced and shaped by other people, and therefore serve as the most effective means for illuminating the *process* of destigmatization through social mobility, or the changing of in-groups with the intent to improve self-identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

This study related to the understanding of social identity theory in various ways. Social mobility, social creativity, in-group (re)alignment, and self-identity processes were all identified in this research. In combining SIT with stigma, however, it became clear that SIT showed the development of personal narratives in social mobility and social creativity strategies. This

section details intergroup functions, the living hell imperative, shared language, and transitional language as support for and further understanding of social identity theory.

In-group and Out-group Functions in Stigmatization

Examining the role that traditional society, or in this case the out-group to the sex industry, plays in the social subordination of female sex workers establishes a more holistic contextual understanding viewed through the theoretical framework of social identity theory. Communication between members of the dominant group becomes grounds for misunderstanding, especially when in conflict situations, because of members' proclivity to rely on generalization of other out-group (the sex industry) characteristics, or stereotypes. In their study of topless dancers and stripteasers' narratives, Ronai and Cross write that "identity is a contextual matter rather than a stagnant caricature which blankets all stripteasers regardless of their situations" (1998, p. 115). Rather than perceiving other people as individuals and behaving in accordance with those individualized perceptions, SIT maintains that individuals tend to entrench themselves in their beliefs about out-group members. Thus stereotypes, intolerance, and bias ensue (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Feminist standpoint shows that female sex workers, former or not, are socially isolated in patriarchal society, both from inclusion in traditional society and belonging with an in-group of other sex workers. Falk (2001) notes the salience of how the dominant, or normal, group in society determines individuals' acceptability. If an individual believes she is inferior, she most likely finds it easier not to be reminded of her stigma every day through socializing in the environment that dictates her inferiority. Instead of immersing herself within the culture that subordinates her, a stigmatized individual often retreats form mainstream society. By the same token, self-identification with female sex workers as an in-group can be a socially dangerous

decision because individuals in this group, as a result of the ego and fear inherent in this social climate, distance themselves from sex work self-identification in part through demeaning other sex workers (Ronai & Cross, 1998). Self-identification with the in-group of sex workers can also negatively reflect on individuals as the dominant in-group generalizes stigmatized behavior of each sex worker to other sex worker in-group members (van Laar & Levin, 2004, p. 5). For example, when one member of the sex worker in-group engages in the "sleaze exemplar," this behavior is generalized to all sex workers, thus exacerbating the negative stereotype of female sex workers in general.

"Living Hell" Imperative

Structuralization of the community narrative in LT serves as the communicative mainstay of the in-group for the organization. This narrative is comprised of "what it was like, what happened, and what it's like now" (Humphreys, 2001; Wilson, 1939/2001, p. 58). In order to have a "new life" members of LT have to have an "old life," one that proves her rightful belonging in this new group. The communication of the living hell narrative fulfills the "what it used to be like" part of the community narrative. By having a personal story that comports to the shared living hell narrative, former female sex workers communicatively align with the in-group and gain the social, psychological, and emotional benefits of membership.

Only newcomers in this study focused on the living hell narrative. This finding further supports the notion of the development of personal narrative throughout the process of in-group alignment into LT. Newcomers do not yet have a "what it's like now" part of their story, so their focus is on the initial part of the community narrative (Howard, 2006). Discussions in the newcomer groups, despite the nature of the questions I asked, consistently returned to the living hell narrative. Most of this talk centered on drug and alcohol abuse and the pain of addiction. It

became apparent that by emphasizing "how bad it was," newcomers were solidifying their place in the LT in-group. Experienced members consistently focused on "what it's like now," which exemplified that as women's narratives become more cohesive over time their attention shifts from a past orientation to a present and future orientation. The establishment of the living hell narrative, however, serves as an initial rite of passage in communicatively legitimizing membership in LT.

Shared Language

Another reason for newcomers' reliance on the living hell narrative is that this reliance lends itself to the use of an established shared language of the 12-step programs in which most LT members are involved. The shared language of AA, including its tenets of Christian ideology and reliance on inclusive pronouns like "we" and "us" as opposed to directive or limiting language like "you" or "I," helps bind women in their endeavors to change. In addition, focus on the "self" as "addict" also aided women in separating the "self" from the stigmatized behavior. This strategy was apparent in Jenny's statement that when she was using drugs she was doing things that her true "self" would not do. Other participants used this as an in-group protective strategy for fellow members, reminding them that past stigmatized behavior was because they were functioning as "addicts" and not as true "selves."

For newcomers who have yet to adopt language that reflects Christianity, AA lingo may serve as explicit proof of communicative alignment, or at least the desire to align, with LT. Common language in Alcoholics Anonymous (and Narcotics Anonymous), as previously discussed, finds its roots in Christianity. AA language, therefore, may serve as a communicative bridge between non-religious ways of changing discussion of God as a "higher power" to Christian notions of God as "Father," "Lord," and "Jesus Christ." Shared language revealed

participants' intentions of in-group alignment, and the fact that all meetings for LT take place on a Christian church subtly influences communication as well. This notion will be discussed further in the practical implications section.

Transitional Language

Social identity theory allowed the narratives in this study to be framed in such a manner as to show the *process* intentionality of social mobility. In other words, as women sought to disidentify with former social creativity strategies in order to redefine perception of membership in the Christian in-group, the process of their intentions was visible in their narratives. Christians changed from being "losers" to being perceived as a higher-prestige social group. The SIT framework therefore facilitated observing the self-identity phenomenon of breaking old social creativity cognitive processes while an individual is changing from one social in-group to another (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Transitional language, as explained in the results section, provided the lens through which social identity theory could be more clearly understood. Transitional language includes women saying, for example, on one hand they believe they "do not need him [romantic partner] anyway" and on the other hand saying they fear "he's gonna hurt me and I'm gonna lose him and I'm gonna be nothing." The process by which this tension was resolved by participants in this study was through mutual support (Howard, 2006). Women encouraged each other to positive ends when vulnerabilities and fears were shared during focus groups. Another example was Cindy's sharing that she was not sure she would feel the acceptance in church that she needed. Other women spoke up, saying, "Every church is not for you, and until you find that fit, you struggle. But when you find it, it's gonna be so easy." Cindy's transition from disdain and

distrust of the church was therefore acknowledged and was then followed by encouragement to more fully align with the group identity.

Another intriguing aspect of transitional language was the revelation of the cognitive processes inherent in social creativity strategies when a stigmatized individual moves from a low-prestige in-group to a higher-prestige in-group. Cognitive processes that former female sex workers used when they were engaged in sex work had to be broken. For example, Daphne's belief that she was "the shit" when she was a sex worker had to be undone and reconfigured to suit her acceptance of traditional work and entrance into a "normal" lifestyle. Her new cognitive process was to live, as Leslie pointed out, "one day at a time, one moment at a time, and take the Lord with you." Cindy's belief while she was drinking, drugging, and working in the sex industry was that "church was a bunch of losers with no—that needed to cling on to something because they didn't have it goin' on." She continued, "And I just put myself up there, like, 'I don't need that. That's for people who are lacking. They need that. I don't need it.'" In order to accept her new life, she had to rely on her transitional beliefs. She said, "I've found something spiritual, but I don't go to church. It'll change as I change."

The aforementioned statements all came from newcomers. The experienced members did not reveal a focus on the transitional process in the same way. Most likely, this tension has been resolved for experienced members (Howard, 2006). It may also be that transitions for experienced members center on a deeper internalization of traditional norms, like healthy romantic relationships, raising emotionally healthy children, and other intricacies of personal identity as confirmed members of mainstream society. These tensions were exhibited in participant statements that conveyed tension and uneasiness when discussing sex in their present relationships. Georgia iterated her new transitional phase regarding her son, saying that learning

how to be the kind of mother she wants to be is difficult because of her fears brought on by her past lifestyle. Regardless of phase, therefore, participants in both the newcomer and experienced groups consistently talked about transition, or personal growth, in new areas.

Transitional language therefore related to social identity theory in several ways. First, it showed the social mobility process. This study furthers understanding of SIT by explicating the process by which individual and community narratives are socially constructed and how they function in the construction of new self-identities. Second, transitional language revealed the restructuring of social creativity strategies in order to align with the higher-prestige in-group. Third, transitional language highlighted the process over time of narrative development and social mobility, or realignment with a higher-prestige in-group. With these SIT understandings in mind, the next few sections will discuss study limitations, practical implications, and directions for future research.

Limitations

When conducting research of this type, namely on understudied, stigmatized women in a nonprofit religious organization, several limitations can come into play. In this study, one obstacle did arise; however, this challenge also functioned as a strength for data collection. In order to ensure attendance, focus groups were scheduled to occur during members' dinner hour. One drawback to this was that, during the first three focus groups, several women entered our discussions late. Two women particularly enjoyed their experience in the focus group and thus attended another group's session. The casual nature of the sessions, as they were over dinner, facilitated open conversation. However, there is a chance that valuable data may not have been collected because some participants did not have a chance to respond to every question.

However, since discussions often centered on emotionally charged experiences, the easy atmosphere helped participants feel comfortable in sharing.

Collecting data on–site initially presented a challenge to data collection. Some women indicated that their language choice was influenced by being on church grounds. Typical language use on the street runs contrary to acceptable talk within the church, so this may have influenced responses, particularly for newcomers. However, after establishing fully that I was not affiliated with LT, nor was I a representative of the church, participants eased back into comfortable, more natural language.

I had more than sufficient time to ask all interview questions listed in Appendix 1. In fact, there would have been ample time to address other questions that were taken out of the original list of questions. While on one hand, fewer questions allowed for observance of normal behavior and communication patterns within the group, it would also have been beneficial to ask further questions of participants while I had the time.

Practical Implications

Practical implications arose from review of this study not as a result of reflection on the research questions, but rather as a personal desire to make these findings applicable outside the field of communication studies. The most important part of this research is that it be used to serve women, and other stigmatized populations, to better their lives and the lives of their children. The following section, then, details implications of this study, including focus group processes, the role of Christianity, best practice suggestions for focus groups, suggestions for treatment professionals, and how these implications lead to directions for future research.

Focus Groups as Context for Social Identity Processes

The first practical implication of this study relates to methods of data collection for stigmatized groups. Focus groups are not only effective means of obtaining data, but they are vital for the well being of marginalized, neglected, or isolated populations. In this study, I found that LT does not allow the social identity process to function because the organization does not provide situations for women to share amongst themselves. Additionally, from the perspective of feminist standpoint theory, these women remain communicatively isolated from one another. In other words, these female former sex workers are not given the opportunity to share with each other their experiences and feelings on a regular basis. The mandatory Wednesday night meetings include guided sessions with a therapist and a volunteer who conducts Bible study; however, these meetings are teacher centered, with women *listening* the majority of the time. In order to socially construct knowledge and to communicatively position themselves within the LT in-group, women have to be given the opportunity to establish connection. This connection begins with an understanding that they share a common history. This understanding establishes the beginning of the community narrative that is imperative in aligning with the LT in-group.

Secondly, teacher-centered instruction implies for these women that their past is stigmatized and that these women should focus on the present and future. Because women are not allowed time to share common past experiences, the teacher assumes a privileged role. Similar to parents who want to hasten the developmental process for their children in the hopes that they will excel in school, this pressure to move forward prematurely negatively impacts children. In teacher-centered classes, dominant ideology gets privileged (Stofflett, 1998). Without a vested interest in the learning process, like emotional and personal connection to religious teaching, religion becomes meaningless. During the focus groups, there were many

moments of connection that happened among participants. Some women high-fived each other.

Most women nodded and verbally agreed with others' living hell experiences. There were

multiple instances of women finishing each other's sentences together and saying at the end of

focus groups, "You know, now I know y'all a little bit. You know? I don't really *know*

everybody."   When individuals are not allowed to find connections with the material they are

learning and the others with whom they are learning, they are further isolated. For female former

sex workers, this means that the belief that past experiences are inferior to the current

experiences facilitated by LT is reified.

As a feminist organization, it is doubtful that this continued subordination of women is

intentional. This is one reason that feminist standpoint theory serves as a powerful agent in

understanding stigmatized groups. This theory illuminates situations in which certain groups are

muted. It could be that because as privileged group, LT wants its members not to focus on their

past, but to have a future orientation that is in accordance with Christian ideology. Perhaps

obtaining funding from donors is easier when the clientele are described in a less stigmatized

manner. Nonetheless, I recommend that organizations that seek to support female former sex

workers' endeavors to transform their lives create situations in which sharing of past experiences

is encouraged. Additionally, communicating to the public (potential donors) the true nature of

the women to whom financial aid will be offered needs to be addressed. By continuing to

obscure these women because of their stigma, that selfsame stigma is perpetuated.

Role of Christianity in Life Transformation Process

The third implication for this study is the role of religion in transforming female sex

workers' lives. Jung writes that the message of Christianity centrally functions in Western

society; however, it needs to adapt to the needs of contemporary experience lest it fail to foster

realization of man's search for "wholeness" (Jung, 1961/1963, p. 210; Wilson & Jung, 1963).

The Christian church can, in the acceptance of and support for women leaving sexually oriented

businesses, answer that call. Recovery literature, based on religious tenets, suggests that a

spiritual awakening, a connection with God, may be the only solution (Wilson, 1939/2001). For

female sex workers, whose shame and lack of self-worth form the basis for self-identity,

Christianity offers absolution. The Bible states that, "... God demonstrates His own love toward

us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8, New King James Version).

Women who turn to Christ can be "born again" (John 3:3, NKJV), have their sins washed away

(Rev. 1:5, NKJV), and become new beings. Women learn the biblical teaching that, "... if

anyone is in Christ [she] is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have

become new" (2 Cor. 5:17, NKJV).

The implication here is that if a woman has no "old life" it becomes difficult to create a

juxtaposed "new life." The existence of opposites strengthens and confirms the existence of both

contexts (Howard, 2006). Resistance structuralizes the existence of the very thing a person or

group is resisting. Life Transformations, in its endeavor to move women into more traditional

lives may, in fact, be inhibiting the process that social identity theory and feminist standpoint

theory argue is necessary. Therefore, LT should allow women to establish the reality of the past

in order to establish a new reality of the present and future.

Best Practice in Focus Groups with Stigmatized Individuals

The fourth implication of this study is what was revealed about best practice in

conducting focus groups with this type of sample. Rather than remain distant and neutral in

interviews with stigmatized individuals like female sex workers, researchers need to understand

that remaining separate from participants will not only hinder obtaining data, but can quite

possibly reify the feelings of shame and separation these women already feel in their lives overall (Harter et al., 2005). The profound sense of inferiority and need for acceptance threaded throughout focus groups, especially with newcomers; however, with that need existed a deep sense of fear and distrust. These women feel their stigma daily, despite having left the sex industry. One LT staff member said that they feel like "they've got the word 'prostitute' in neon lights on their foreheads." Reminding these women that they have a special knowledge that the rest of us lack encourages self-disclosure and supports positive self-esteem.

Several examples of this sense of separation arose throughout my focus groups. At the end of the first meeting, after I'd turned off the tape, Danielle turned to me and said that it was different talking to me. She said, "We be feelin' your spirit. That's why we're talking to you like this. If we didn't feel you, when you asked questions we'd just look at you like 'umm hmm.'" She pursed her lips, rolled her eyes in disgust, and crossed her arms. She quickly laughed and gave me a hug, saying, "You don't judge us." Emotional involvement, not affectation of emotional alignment, affects how these women see themselves. If emotion does play a role in knowledge construction (Allen, 1996; Blee; 1998; Pierce, 1995), then researchers who devalue connection with participants in such a way as to understand that emotional construct may be missing a vital element of investigations.

Another facet of best practice with this type of focus group is that of language use. Previous literature regarding language use in questioning of participants needs to be reevaluated for female former sex workers, most of whom are in 12-step programs. Alignment of language is imperative. For example, I originally tried to steer clear of AA rhetoric in my questions, as suggested. Instead of asking about when these women "hit bottom" and decided to seek help, I asked them to "tell me about the experiences that led you here." The focus group went silent and

several women looked at me with confusion. A long pause ensued, and then I decided to ask the question as I had planned in the first place. All women at once said, "Oh!" and began talking over one another. It takes tremendous energy to make this life transformation. The least I can do as a researcher is to align myself linguistically and emotionally with their worlds. Plus, this alignment helps structuralize the work they are doing to change their lives.

Humor is profoundly useful in talking to female former sex workers. The mistrust and fear they bring with them to the LT program is overwhelming, and humor functions as a release of this negativity. It also serves to connect individuals within the focus groups. For example, when Lynette entered our focus group, she looked at me, frowned, and called me "miss lady." It wasn't until later in the discussion when our moment of connection happened, and it happened through humor. I asked the group, "Who were your people? Who were the people that you turned to? Did you have people to confide in, to share with?" Lynette looked at me like I had no clue as to the life they had come from on the street. She rolled her eyes at "miss lady," so I said to her, "I love your face! I wish you could see your face right now!"

Lynette: (laughing) I'm sorry! I didn't mean to look at you like that!

Jennifer: Nah, I mean, it's like, "Get the hell out! What do you mean?!"

Lynette: Shit! (laughing)

Our shared use of more typical "street" language, as opposed to acceptable "church" talk also served as a medium for connection.

Finally, in focus groups for stigmatized individuals it is important to allow participants to speak in their own language (Clair, 1993; Taylor & Richardson, 2006). In this study, this notion parallels the idea that women should also be allowed to establish connection through sharing living hell narratives. Asking women to talk about their lives without allowing them to speak, at

least initially, in a language that is familiar to them is akin to asking a person to talk about her

childhood in a foreign language. Not allowing profanity and other "street" language mutes these

women. For example, when Daphne talked about how she believed she was "the shit" when she

was working in the sex industry, she immediately silenced herself, apologizing for the profanity.

Danielle said, "I wanna tell you what I feel but we're in church. So I ain't tryin' to be bothered.

I don't care (laughing)." The context in which communication occurs is crucial for focus group

data collection, as it shapes language use and the cognitive processes that follow acceptable

language.

Implications for Treatment

Feminist standpoint highlights the "critical understanding of location and experience as

part of—and shaped by—larger social and political contexts, and specifically, discourses"

(Wood, 2005, p. 62). This study, therefore, brings to light dominant discourses that may obscure

the reality of stigmatized groups. LT literature states the organization's goal to "help women

leave jobs in sexually oriented businesses" (Miller, 2007, p. 2D). This statement neglects and

further marginalizes the organization's dominant population: drug and alcohol addicted

prostitutes. Perhaps it is the change in demographic that the organization does not see, or

perhaps the organization believes it would not receive the same financial support if donors knew

they were contributing to such a stigmatized group. Whatever the reason, treatment programs

need to acknowledge all aspects of their clientele, regardless of the stigma attached to it.

Additionally, LT may be short-sighted in not directly addressing the drug and alcohol addiction

that not only perpetuated and worsened situations for these sex workers, but now serves as a

primary measure of self-identity.

Treatment for drug addiction should address addiction to the Life. Most women in this study talked not only of being addicted to drugs and alcohol, but to life in the sex industry. Laura said, "You know, and there are so many parts in your life that are so hard to change. It really is hard, coz I never knew how much the dancing industry could be so much of a, a drug." In treatment for alcoholism, social systems theory posits that the family, culture, and society of the alcoholic are also sick, and treatment should include all these dimensions of the sick person's environment in order to be effective (Beigel & Ghertner, 1977, p. 200).

Treatment for female former sex workers should also include addressing antecedent variables that link to sex work. LT does its best to address these variables as women progress through the program, but treatment specialists in other areas need to be aware of antecedent variables that connect to sex work. As alarmingly high as statistics for abuse may appear, they significantly underrepresent actual family violence crimes (Berliner & Wheeler, 1987; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.; Wood, 2001). The U.S. experiences the profound effects of abuse on a staggeringly widespread level. During 2005, six million children were reported to Child Protective Services as victims of such abuse (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2005). Three million women suffer physical abuse by heterosexual romantic partners each year and one in five American women report being raped or sexually assaulted each year (Harris, 1999). This type of violence, especially in childhood, often leads women to seek out the familiar subordinated, abuse dynamic that is prevalent in prostitution and life on the street (Dalla, 2006).

Finally, reconceptualization and perhaps redefinition of sex work should be explored. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, some scholars note that sex work is noted for its "emotional apathy" (Flowers, 1998, p. 6) or "emotional indifference" (Clinard, 1968, p. 249).

Perhaps in the instance that emotional apathy and indifference mean to say a lack of "love" or "intimacy" is inherent in sex work, this would make sense. Lack of emotion, however, is far from the reality of female sex workers. Stifling these emotions, or using drugs and alcohol as "numbing agents," more aptly suits definition of sex work.

<div align="center">Future Research</div>

This section explicates various calls for future research in this area. Because female former sex workers are a stigmatized, understudied group, the directions for study are not only opportunities for research but opportunities to be of service to the women about whom so little has been written in communication literature. Future research should address the possibility of reconceptualizing power and the need to examine rehabilitation programs that are not religious based. Additionally, further study is needed to understand different types of sex workers and different theoretical frameworks for studying female former sex workers. Chaos theory is presented as a potential theory in this area. The concluding remarks for this work follow this section, and again note participants' struggle in the life transformation process as viewed through feminist standpoint theory and social identity theory.

Reconceptualization of Power for Female Former Sex Workers

Power, as defined by spiritual and religious literature, is conceptualized differently than it is by conventional society (Wilson, 1939/2001). Communication scholars should take another look at the notion of spiritual power and its role in social identity processes and feminist standpoint theories. Power, from a stereotypically masculine perspective, is perhaps taken for granted to imply dominance or privilege from an external perspective. Joseph Campbell contended that power, from a spiritual or religious perspective, comes from evoking one's

"higher nature" through giving oneself over to "something greater" (PBS & Moyers, 1999). Social power creates a dynamic focused on external reality, but much of religious and spiritual reality is internal.

If power were reconceptualized in mainstream society to mean an internal strength, a belief in an eternal Truth, then it would stand to reason that socially dominant groups have an extra challenge in that they have to let go of the illusion of power given them by the world and search for the true power that comes from the Eternal. Leslie noted that, "You know, we're so weak, but we're so strong. You know, does that make sense? Our strength is only gonna come from God above." If giving oneself over to an agency of good, orderly direction like that which comes from LT or the Christian church is giving up one's power, what is the valuation in such a choice? The book of Alcoholics Anonymous states, "lack of power, that was our dilemma" (Wilson, 1939/2001, p. 45). Its solution to the lack of external power is to connect with the source of infinite power, or God. Moving from a life based on principles of addiction, or powerlessness, to one defined by spirituality as a pragmatic foundation for living (James, 1907/1967), perhaps better frames the acquisition of power for the participants in this study. Therefore, future research should operationalize "power" differently for studies that focus on spirituality and religion.

Rehabilitation Programs Sans Religiosity

Although the grounds for research into feminist perspectives and social identity theory were rich in this study, it would also be beneficial to understand how rehabilitation programs that do not focus on religion or spirituality fare. A new initiative, for example, by the police department of the city in which LT operates, conducts periodic sweeps of known areas for

prostitution and offers women the choice between rehabilitation or jail time (Goldstein, 2007).

What are the social, psychological, and emotional implications for programs without the

religious aspect? What happens in these programs if mutual support is not emphasized? What

happens differently for women who leave prostitution and other sex work with respect to

perception of men in general? Christian programs offer "forgiveness" from a patriarchal God.

One female sex worker explains, "Jesus Christ is the only man I can trust—the only one that

won't turn on me" (Dalla, 2001). What occurs, then, for women who do not have this

psychological, if not spiritual, dimension to their recovery? Future research should address these

questions.

Implications for Different Categories of Sex Workers

Future research should also categorize sex work, studying separate populations of the sex

industry in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the communicative implications for

different sex workers. For example, based upon results in this study it appears that LT has

different perceptions of exotic dancers versus prostitutes. Some research has begun to delve into

understanding perceptions different sex workers have of each other, and how those perceptions

function socially (Ronai & Cross, 1998), but this literature comes from fields outside

communication studies. What are the communicative implications for categorizing sex workers

and their social identity and feminist standpoint implications?

Framework of Chaos Theory in Understanding Life Transformation

Finally, future research should employ different theoretical frameworks in order to

understand the destigmatization process for this population. Specifically, chaos theory (Seeger,

Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2002) could be used, and would address the role of God/spirituality/religion

as well. Chaos theory explains crises through understanding the role of seemingly insignificant

indicators of crisis (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003), the cosmology episode (Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2002; Weick, 1993), bifurcation (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003), fractals, and strange attractors in the self-organization process (Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2002). For women in this study, a clear parallel of these organizational processes could be applied to their situations. A "sensitive dependence on initial conditions" (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p. 29) parallels antecedent variables. The cosmology episode parallels "hitting bottom." The bifurcation process is each woman's choice to continue in her current behavior or reach out for something new, and LT, or the Christian church, serves as the strange attractor in the self-reorganization process.

Chaos theory effectively explains the life transformation process in that it reconceptualizes the change from a purely social dynamic to a spiritual crisis. Stephen Covey, regarding spirituality, writes, "We are not human beings on a spiritual journey. We are spiritual beings on a human journey" (as cited in Dalla, 2006, p. 3). Carl Jung concurs with the spiritual nature of man, contending that man is "a splinter of the infinite deity" (Jung, 1961/1963, p. 4). William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/1967), writes that individuals who undergo a religious, or spiritual, experience create reality and meaning of and from the process. The religious experience serves as the medium for change, as the energy it supplies catalyzes the bifurcation process in which an individual is presented with the choice between traditional, inadequate solutions to problems or the seeking of "spiritual help" (James, 1899/1967, p. 635; Wilson, 1939/2001, p. 25).

Conclusion

Life Transformations began when one woman, shortly after beginning to attend a large Church of Christ, disclosed to some of the women in her church group that she wanted to leave

topless dancing. From that simple reaching out of one woman, LT has developed into the program it is today. The needs of women, most of whom are referred by family, friends, or other LT members, vary, but most need alcohol or drug abuse treatment (Blow, 2002; Henson, 2002), counseling, and mutual support (Pool, 2004). Today the program is serving an ever-changing population of women, but the original goal remains intact: to help women leave the sex industry.

For women endeavoring to leave sexually oriented businesses, the process of disentangling themselves from negative lifestyles and realigning with the ideology of a mutual help group parallels the experiences of women entering treatment for substance abuse (Mayer, 2006). Female sex workers become socially isolated, lonely, full of shame, fearful for their children's well being, and exhausted from trying to maintain the secrecy of their identity. When women believe they have only two choices, to go on to the "bitter end" or to "accept spiritual help"(Wilson, 1939/2001, p. 25), they become ready to align themselves with new ideologies and in-groups that support them (Henson, 2002, ¶ 8). Life Transformations, with its Christian foundation and mutual support, offers the opportunity for women to transform their lives (LT, n.d.).

This study illuminates how female former sex workers shed their stigmatized identities by using feminist standpoint theory and social identity theory as theoretical frameworks. Female sex workers communicatively entrench themselves in the Life, and therefore often need the power of social support in order to transform their lives. Organizations like Life Transformations are extremely rare in the United States, and their task is daunting. Patriarchal society lauds the (dys)functional tools women use in their lives in the sex industry because those tools parallel stereotypical masculine qualities, but at the same time society stigmatizes female

(former) sex workers. As "other" within the already marginalized group of women, female (former) sex workers sense a particular exigency in their search to escape powerlessness.

This study showed the *process* women go through when they leave the sex industry. Personal narratives were used in order to understand from the women themselves how the religious experience shapes their self-identities. This study also followed women's retelling of their personal journeys in order to highlight the destigmatization process. Feminist standpoint theory showed the social position of these women, revealed resistance and oppression, and offered bases for further study stemming from issues of power and privilege. Social identity theory revealed how women communicatively break ties with stigmatized social in-groups and realign with traditional, more socially acceptable social groups.

In *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, Thich Nhat Hanh writes,

The way you support yourself can be an expression of your deepest self, or it can be a source of suffering for you and others. Our vocation can nourish our understanding and compassion, or erode them. (1998, p. 113)

The Bible agrees with this notion of "right living" as a bringer of "lasting happiness" (Prov. 10:2, The Living Bible). Many women working in the sex industry do not want to do so (CATW, n.d.), and they suffer the negative ramifications resulting from a conflicted existence. Beginning as a convenient solution to financial insecurity, sex work can develop into an addictive dimension of reality for many women (Bell et al., 1998; LT, Lynda's Story, 2000; Wheelan, 2001). Participants' courage to face this process and allow research to cull lessons on knowledge construction from their personal experiences reflects not only their integrity but their desire to faithfully pursue their new lives.

APPENDIX

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. With whom did you mostly spend time, share, talk to, depend on, and/or confide in before LT? Now?

2. Tell me how other women in LT affect your life.

3. Tell me about a time or an instance in which you remember rationalizing dancing (telling yourself it was ok when you knew it wasn't), or whatever type of work you were doing.

4. Why did you decide to join LT? What experiences/events brought you here?

5. What role did your faith play in your life?

6. How did you feel about men (both interpersonally and in general) while you were dancing? Now?

7. Did you keep your dancing life a secret? If so, how?

8. What is it like being a woman working in the sex industry? Give me some examples.

9. When you were dancing, how did you feel in comparison to women who weren't doing that type of work? What comparisons did you make between yourself and other dancers? Other women working in different sexually oriented businesses?

10. What did you feel regarding, or what did you know about, dancing (or whatever work you ended up doing) *before* you became involved in it yourself?

11. How do you feel about Christianity?

12. What role did alcohol and/or drugs play in your story while you were still dancing? Now?

13. How does LT affect your membership in other 12-step programs you may be involved in?

14. What stories had you heard about LT before you joined? What do you tell other women who may be in need of LT's help now?

15. How does being part of LT affect your self-esteem? How did you feel about yourself/ how

would you describe yourself while you were dancing? Now?

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