Creating Trust among the Distrustful: A Phenomenological Examination of Supportive Services for Former Sex Workers

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Creating Trust among the Distrustful: A Phenomenological Examination of Supportive Services for Former Sex Workers

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A phenomenological exploration was conducted into the lived experiences of 13 voluntary sex workers receiving supportive services in a major city in the southwestern United States. The study explored how participants viewed the services they received after exiting the sex industry, as well as experiences of coercion throughout their lives. Data analysis revealed, unexpectedly, that constructs of trust emerged. Respondents provided insight into how trust is learned throughout their lives and how coercion is often used by those around them to inspire trust before and during life in the sex industry. Participants also articulated how trust can be relearned, replacing coercion, while receiving supportive services after exiting the industry. Results from this study reveal processes by which sex workers learn to trust others by connecting through common experiences shared with other sex workers, modeling staff demonstrations of trust with other staff and clients, and being held accountable by others to their desires. The author offers implications for future research and practice areas.

KEYWORDS prostitution, qualitative, rapport, social services

Trust is integral in human interpersonal relationships (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005; Lewicki & Wiethoff, 2000); in many professional social service occupations, trust and trustworthiness are ethical tenets. Trust and the loss of trust are also, arguably, among the primary contributors to coercion, vulnerability, instability, isolation, exploitation, and other social dysfunctions (Gambetta,
Just as important as the ability to trust is the feeling of being trusted (Gambetta, 2000). Once lost, trust is typically difficult to regain (Gambetta, 2000), and, therefore, social service agencies must seek innovative avenues to gain rapport and create trusted relationships with clients whose ability to trust has been compromised.

This study focuses on themes that emerged from a qualitative study of former sex workers’ experiences receiving supportive services. The idea of trust among sex workers for the purposes of this analysis is focused on trust as an emotion, not as a behavior, as the construct is typically studied (Pyett & Warr, 1997). It should be noted that the idea of trust among sex workers is often intertwined with studies on the sexual health of sex workers (e.g., condom use [Gangoli, 2002], HIV/AIDS testing [Pyett & Warr, 1997], and social capital [Campbell & Mzaidume, 2001; Lazarus, Chettiar, Deering, Nabess, & Shannon, 2011]). These studies, although important, do not add to knowledge about sex workers’ trust of social services. Moreover, these studies do not seek to understand sex workers’ conception of trust, specifically.

An apparent dearth of literature exists exploring trust and trust building among sex workers; thus, other studies related to trust building and the emotion of trust are explored in this review. Meaghan (2008) and Gangoli (2002) suggested that sex workers have developed a distrust of those in “authority” (i.e., social services, doctors) because of historical oppression and stigmatization of sex workers as disease promoters and threats to moral fabrics of society. In an ethnographic study of female sex workers in Peru, Nencel (2005) suggested that “distrust reigns” among sex workers interacting with those they perceive as outsiders (p. 346).

Sex workers’ historical experiences appear to be exacerbated by a lifetime of learned distrust for those who assumed caretaking or protective roles for them (Preble & Aguirre, 2013). Unfortunately, scant literature specifically examining these experiences exists. As such, we must examine other studies that might help us better understand the phenomenon. According to Dunn and Schweitzer (2005), a number of studies examining trust indicate that the trustee infers from previous life experiences that the trusted possesses characteristics of ability, integrity, and benevolence. Often, in the experience of sex workers, these characteristics have been used to abuse or violate (Preble & Aguirre, 2013), or sex workers have never learned to trust, have experienced little or limited benevolence in others, and have never contemplated another’s trustworthiness, perhaps because of historical oppression and stigmatization by helping professionals (Campbell & Mzaidume, 2001; Gangoli, 2002; Nencel, 2005; Pyett & Warr, 1997). As such, sex workers have not experienced the ability to “rely on their perceptions of the trustee characteristics to gauge trustworthiness” (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005, p. 736).

With little understanding about how sex workers learn or relearn feelings of trust with others, and historical oppression of this population, not much is known about how to rekindle sex workers’ trust. Agencies working
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with voluntarily exiting sex workers offer a unique setting through which to examine the challenge of providing services to a notoriously distrustful and vulnerable population. This study uses phenomenological methods to explore the lived experiences of 13 former sex workers receiving supportive services from an agency in a large metropolitan city in the southwestern United States. Although questions regarding trust were not specifically asked, themes of trust and mistrust were interwoven throughout participant responses. This article explores the nuances of these themes as related to the events leading to the loss or damage of trust, and how trust was rekindled or learned, in some cases, among these participants.

TRUST AND CREATING TRUST

Emotional Trust

Although studies related to exploring sex workers’ trust have not come forth, there are several studies that offer understanding about general trust and trust building to which this article refers. This section also explores the few studies that discuss sex workers’ concepts of trust, although the purpose of these studies was not to explore trust, specifically.

According to Lewicki and Wiethoff (2000), there are two types of trust: identification-based trust (IBT) and calculus-based trust (CBT). Typically, interpersonal relationships develop and operate within the IBT realm in which the parties develop an understanding of each other's expectations and the ability to judge each other's desires over time. The power balance between individuals is relatively equal.

Professional relationships, conversely, tend to function at the CBT level, in which trust is framed within a reward–punishment system, rendering the power balance between individuals unequal. Additionally, Lewicki and Wiethoff (2000) distinguished trust and distrust as distinctive constructs. Trust implies that “one has positive expectations regarding the other’s actions, thereby implying a belief in another person” (Lewicki & Wiethoff, 2000, p. 1). Trust suggests that the parties have both agency and efficacy in their relationships and the ability to depend on a mutually expected positive outcome. Distrust suggests that there will be a negative outcome and “implies fear of the other” (Lewicki & Wiethoff, 2000, p. 1). Likewise, Gambetta (2000) suggested that one must understand another’s motive and believe in the effectiveness of these motives—or trust in others and believe that they are trusted by others. Because of the historically negative trust experiences with those in positions of authority and perceived outsiders among sex workers, trust has not been learned as an equal or mutual experience, nor experienced without fear of the other (Gangoli 2002; Meaghan, 2008; Nencel, 2005).

Lewicki and Wiethoff (2000) theorized that trust could be best understood through a neurological perspective. Dimoka (2010) examined the
neurological underpinnings of trust, finding that, in addition to stimulating the caudate nucleus and the putamen regions of the brain that are associated with reward prediction, benevolence also rouses these two areas of the brain. Moreover, the activation of the orbitofrontal cortex—when faced with uncertainty in social encounters—engages the anterior paracingulate cortex (associated with being able to relate mental states of being with behavior and actions) and helps us gauge expectations of future gains (which stimulates the caudate nucleus and putamen regions). Such studies imply that trust is cognitive; trust is felt and gauged in the brain.

By contrast, Dimoka (2010) found that distrust is associated with the amygdala, a region associated with more emotional responses by the brain, such as fight or flight. Distrust also illuminated the insular cortex, which is associated with fear and the anticipation of loss. Lewicki and Wiethoff’s (2000) social theory of trust might correspond with these regions of the brain, suggesting that trust is a highly cognitive and emotionally based response to interpersonal interactions. IBT forms of trust could reside in the paracingulate cortex, caudate nucleus, and putamen regions of the brain, which help us correctly predict outcomes with emotional and behavioral accuracy. Perhaps CBT forms of trust reside in the amygdala and the insular cortex regions, both of which are associated with stress responses and are overlapped in caudate nucleus and putamen regions, suggesting support for the observations made by Gangoli (2002), Meaghan (2008), and Nencel (2005) that sex workers have difficulty trusting others.

Restoring and Creating Trust

Buchan, Croson, and Solnick (2007) examined the ambiguous conception of the relationship between trust and gender ($n = 377$ pairs of people) in which participants were instructed to play a game simulating trust between genders. The findings from Buchan et al. (2007) suggest that men were more trusting (however, this researcher argues that this result might be more accurately summarized as risk-taking; see Cook & Emerson, 1978), and women were more trustworthy. Buchan et al. (2007) suggested that men viewed acts of trust as having utility; however, women viewed these acts as communal behavior, especially when their partners demonstrated trust toward the women.

Although Buchan et al. (2007) identified trust as communal behavior among women, this is not always the case. In a study examining the implementation of a peer-support program to promote condom use among sex workers ($n = 15$) in a South African gold mine, Campbell and Mzaidume (2001) found that sex workers could not envision a community support system based on reciprocal trust. Rather, to ensure that the community of sex workers practiced safe sex, the sex workers suggested the use of surveillance or punishment. Campbell and Mzaidume hypothesized that for people
whose lives have been dominated by poverty, violence, and low levels of efficacy, the use or the threat of punishment is key to maintaining a sense of community. When considering the works of Lewicki and Wiethoff (2000) and Dimoka (2010), it seems logical that sex workers’ ideas of how to ensure the conformity of accepted behaviors (e.g., condom use among sex workers) within their community would revolve around punishment, fear, and loss.

Similarly, Lazarus et al. (2011), in their study of the effects of safe, nonexploitative housing involving 73 female sex workers, found that the perception of power dynamics heavily influenced women’s perceptions of the level of comfort and self-efficacy they felt while working. This can be interpreted to mean that sex workers’ perceptions of power influenced their ability to develop feelings of trust with other sex workers, clients, and social services. Lazarus et al. described that women living in environments where they perceived power structures to be more equal started to develop peer support systems and began working together in groups. In other words, they started to learn how to trust.

Also, Pyett and Warr (1997) found in interviews with 24 female sex workers that women tended to define relationships as trustworthy if both partners underwent and received results of HIV screenings together as proof that neither partner engaged in unprotected sex at work. Hence, intimate relationships, from which IBT stems, are perhaps defined differently for sex workers than for others. Moreover, Pyett and Warr (1997) urge for more research on how “female sex workers manage their emotional needs and sexual health in private relationships” (p. 6).

METHODS

Phenomenological design for data collection was used in this study to explore the lived experiences of women exiting the sex industry to gain an understanding of the essence of the participants’ lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Based on the recommendations of Moustakas (1994), the study began with two overarching questions giving context to the study and providing a reference point when designing other questions: to evaluate a supportive services agency from which study participants were receiving services, and to explore participants’ experiences with coercion in the sex industry. To examine findings from the evaluative portion of this study see, Preble and Aguirre (2013).

Themes regarding trust building and restoration surprisingly emerged from both portions of the general study. The two overarching questions framing the evaluative portion of the study were as follows: To what extent do agency clients feel that the services rendered are effective? And which services need to be improved and how? The overarching questions guiding the principal investigator’s (PI) exploration into a deeper understanding of
sex workers’ definitions of, and experiences with, coercion in their commercial sex work were as following: To what extent did participants experience coercion in the sex industry? How do participants define coercion?

While analyzing questions about coercion, the PI, at first, feared that a Type III error had occurred in the research process (i.e., asking the wrong question). In reflecting about the questions and data, the PI referred to what Moustakas (1994) described as epoche, the practice of setting aside one’s biases revealing what is experienced by someone else. In other words, the researcher consciously brackets, or sets aside, her personal experiences so as to avoid projecting these experiences into the lived experiences of those she studies. These concepts must be understood within the context of the population being studied. Unexpectedly, themes surrounding what the PI describes as trust emerged from responses to questions about participants’ experiences with coercion in the sex industry and receiving supportive services from the agency. As Gambetta (2000) suggested, trust and the loss of trust contribute to coercion and other social dysfunctions; therefore, one must understand trust to fully understand coercion.

The Agency

This agency, a faith-based, Christian organization located in the southwestern United States, only serves women, female teens, and their children (male and female). The agency provides comprehensive client services targeted to ease the transition out of sex work and empower women toward a sustainable future outside the sex industry. This agency is the only comprehensive agency that serves nonexploited sex workers in the geographic area. The inclusive services consist of financial literacy courses, life skills training, computer literacy programming, therapeutic counseling for women and their children, case management, and community outreach helping the public better understand the phenomenon of sex work and how to become involved in assisting women to get out of the industry. In weekly fellowship and life skills meetings, the Wednesday Night Fellowship Meetings, the agency offers opportunities for participants to reconnect with other clients, case workers, and volunteers they might not have seen since the previous meeting. To maintain confidentiality of the research participants, the service agency is referred to as “the agency.”

Participants

The ethnic and racial backgrounds of the study participants were majority White (69.2%, n = 9) and 30.7% African American (n = 4). There were no Asian American or Hispanic American participants. After institutional review board approval, selection and contact with participants was initiated. For
each participant, the PI obtained informed consent for the interview and access to their intake paperwork. Senior agency staff generated a list of active clients \((n = 44)\), excluding 10 with limited time at the agency (less than 3 months). The remaining 34 eligible clients were divided into three groups: beginners \((n = 7)\), middle \((n = 16)\), and graduates \((n = 10)\). Beginners had been with the program for 3 months to 1 year; middle participants had been with the agency more than 1 year but had not yet graduated; and graduates had received the agency’s graduate designation, having completed all agency requirements.

In total, 12 participants—4 per group—and 1 pilot participant for a total of 13 participants were selected for the general study, representing 38% of the eligible client population (Table 1 presents demographics). Represented in this study are all 13 participants who were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. Senior staff explained the study to the 13 potential participants and asked if they would like to speak to the PI; if agreement was secured to participate in the study, the PI made contact. Five of the originally selected participants had to be replaced within their respective categorical groups because of scheduling conflicts or, in one case, declining to participate after initially indicating the desire to do so.

Procedures

The PI conducted all individual and focus group interviews in person. A focus group was used for the member-check interview in which the initial findings were presented to the participants for their feedback. Research findings were based on the transcription of interviews, and the results of the focus group member check (second) interview. Typically, interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours and were conducted in private or semiprivate Bible study rooms chosen by the participant and located where the Wednesday Night Fellowship meetings were held (a church).

Data Analysis

Complementing the phenomenological collection of data, grounded theory techniques were used, providing a more structured data analysis by which to gain phenomenological understanding of experiences. Moreover, the grounded theory approach provided triangulation of theory as suggested by Patton (1999) to ensure qualitative research credibility. A semistructured interview guide was developed and used to guide the interviews. Probing was used to extract more information and clarify the participants’ intended messages. The researcher, along with her faculty advisor, used constant comparison to ensure that themes were accurately extracted and the intended messages of the participants was preserved.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant pseudonym (in alphabetical order)</th>
<th>Sex work type</th>
<th>Years in the industry</th>
<th>Category group</th>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Childhood abuse history</th>
<th>Substance use history</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>Prostitution</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>Beginner</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Sexual, physical, neglect</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>Exotic dancer/prostitution</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Sexual, domestic violence (adult)</td>
<td>Alcohol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>Exotic dancer</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Neglect</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janie</td>
<td>Exotic dancer</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Neglect</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>Prostitution</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>Beginner</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Domestic violence (adult)</td>
<td>Cocaine, meth, tobacco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristie</td>
<td>Prostitution</td>
<td>Approx. 10</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>Alcohol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>Exotic dancer</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Sexual, neglect; thrown out of home at 15</td>
<td>Marijuana, acid, speed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacy</td>
<td>Erotic massage/prostitution</td>
<td>Approx. 10</td>
<td>Beginner</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Marijuana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mabel</td>
<td>Prostitution</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Sexual, thrown out of home at 13</td>
<td>General drug use as youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>Prostitution</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Beginner</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Crack, cocaine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niki</td>
<td>Exotic dancer</td>
<td>Approx. 15</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>General drug use, alcohol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Exotic dancer</td>
<td>Approx. 10</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>Alcohol, some drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>Exotic dancer/prostitution</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No (parents were dealers)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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The PI conducted all of the interviews and completed the data analysis using NVivo 10 software. The PI initially used open coding techniques to identify emerging themes from each interview. Once the interviews were coded, a list of the codes was generated using NVivo to identify broader themes for which axial coding techniques were employed to develop the overarching themes from the data. Once axial codes were organized, the PI collaborated with her faculty advisor to triangulate their findings, discussing differences in interpretation. Then, themes were presented to the participants to verify that the researcher’s interpretation of their responses was accurate and appropriately reflected their experiences.

Researchers’ Credibility

With more than 7 years of social work practice with refugee and human trafficking populations, the PI has a deep understanding of the perspectives of the human trafficking population. As a safeguard against potential biases of the researcher, one of her faculty advisors reviewed her analysis for an additional level of triangulation. This advisor is adept at qualitative phenomenological program evaluations with interest in the impact of trauma in relation to suicidality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This analysis lays a foundation on which further understanding of perceptions and cultivation of trust can be built. Three overarching themes emerged: history with betrayal, “the life sucks you up,” and learning to trust. The themes are presented with exemplar participant quotes to illustrate the meaning of each topic. This section is organized to follow a progression of how trust is learned, how this understanding of trust affected the sex work of the participants, and, finally, how they began to relearn trust once they began receiving supportive services. This progression is important, as it informs client engagement in service provision, and development of more targeted outreach and interventions. In addition, the organization might help us understand why participants, when asked about experiences of coercion and receiving supportive services, would answer with constructs of trust.

History with Betrayal

Trust within family and other intimate interpersonal relationships is developed over time and because of this history, people might be able to anticipate the desires or actions of others because they know them (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005; Gambetta, 2000; Lewicki & Wiethoff, 2000). The women interviewed in this study commonly articulated issues surrounding violations
of trust, and having never learned to trust as a child. The participants learned that trust is something earned in exchange for something the other values, implying that trust is more calculus-based (CBT). Historically, the people from whom these women should have been able to seek comfort, safety, and trust (family, close friends, intimate partners, and service providers) seemed to have used these relationships to coercively obtain a desired outcome (i.e., financial support or validation of a moral value).

This theme represents three relationship types: family of origin and marriage, friends and customers, and service providers. The common experience of the women interviewed was that in each of these relationships, presented as subthemes here, the entrusted other violated this trust, many times in brutal, nonphysical ways.

**Family**

The family of origin and the family through marriage or romantic relationships both represented critical junctures for the participants to develop interpersonal trust emotions. Instead, they served as settings in which the women were tricked, abused, emotionally robbed, and taught to distrust others. Table 1 indicates the participants’ histories with physical, sexual, and substance abuse. Nine of the 13 participants reported some type of physical, sexual, or neglectful abuse during childhood.

The family of origin often encouraged the women to join the sex industry as a way of supporting the family when caretakers were unable to do so.

I started working at McDonald’s, not because I wanted to, because I wanted to save up for a car or something, but because I had to or otherwise we were not going to have electricity. . . . I made a bunch of money, helped my mom, and I made money to move out of her house. So I think the reason why I started was for the family. (Janie)

Mabel spoke of her mother not protecting her from her sexually abusive boyfriends and kicking her out of the house when she was 13 years old:

[They were] really friendly with me all the time, so that put a strain on our relationship. . . . I felt like she always knew about it but didn’t do anything. (Mabel)

Intimate partners also undermined the participants’ ability to trust and their understanding of who, what, and how to trust. As Cathy described, women felt forced to remain in the sex industry simply as a way to escape abuse they suffered from intimate partners.
I was in an abusive relationship, so [stripping] was my escape. Because my big problem was—is—I couldn’t control my relationships . . . so I mean it was pretty much the only way I could get away from all the abuse at home so, I guess to me anything was better than being at home. (Cathy)

Jane talked about a former boyfriend with whom she wanted to open a bar and restaurant, but who had taken advantage of her through the sex industry.

Well the store wasn’t making him that much money, and so I kept strip-pinin’. And it wasn’t like he was pimping me, but all the money I made went into the business. (Jane)

FRIENDS AND CUSTOMERS

For participants in this study, the role of a friend and a customer blended IBT and CBT (Lewicki & Wiethoff, 2000). This blending of trusts creates a schism within the emotional bonds participants had with others, leading to enmeshment and confusion in interpersonal relationships. For example, friends and customers were intimately trusted, like family, but were also given reward and punishment power, like an employer. Cathy often spoke of her customers as friends. For many years Cathy enjoyed platonic friendships with the clients for whom she danced until she found herself prostituting with some of her customers who she considered to be good friends.

The relationships with the customers that I had for so long, and sleeping with them at the end, some of them, and very few of them, it was just so degrading and I would never have pictured myself doing that thing, those things, with those people. And even though I valued the relationships with those people, they couldn’t have been that good of a friend if they would sleep with me, too, and give me money after that many years of knowing me. (Cathy)

Still for others, like Mabel, introduction into the sex industry was through a “friend” who had given her information to a pimp who later commercially sexually exploited her when she was just 13 years old:

I don’t know why until this day, but a friend of mine gave this guy my number, and so I was living with, um, the friend that gave this guy my number, I was living with one of her friends and her parents.

SERVICE PROVIDERS

Many of the women interviewed described past experiences with service providers who should have been models for trustworthiness, but instead
violated their trust. Moreover, these experiences demonstrated that those who should be trusted had preconceived notions about them that would ultimately render their needs unmet. These experiences reinforced the idea that they could not trust anyone. A history of betrayal in the system, and through friends and family, likely pushed these women into the sex industry because they had no other option. Mabel and Jenny referred to incidents with law enforcement officials in which they were not protected.

I never stayed [in juvenile detention]; my mom would always come and get me and drop me off wherever I was before. Um, I think I had had a couple of bad experiences with [the police]. But then they [the pimps] tell you that, you know, they kind of train you to think that the cops are the bad people. (Mabel)

So I met a police officer from Boulder, Colorado. He was one of the biggest fucking dope dealers there was. And while I was bartending, I had started doing meth because I had—to keep up, to go fast . . . so he turned me on to this place that was called Research Institute of Encounter Therapy . . . and he told me it was actually a whorehouse. He said, “Go in there and just tell ’em a friend referred you, and they’ll hire you.” And I went in there, and they taught me, and they took me under their wing, and they taught me how to . . . (Jenny)

Ashley remembered a rather traumatic event involving Child Protective Services (CPS) removing her children after they had been drugged by their paternal grandmother and nearly died. This was after CPS had routinely failed to intervene on her behalf when her father was physically abusing her as a child.

I’ve been raped, kidnapped [by a customer], beaten, my kids’ babysitter almost killed them, and CPS took them from me because of it [prostitution] and I did everything CPS wanted me to do and they still wouldn’t give me my kids back, so I asked my dad and his wife to please intervene so my kids wouldn’t be lost in the system. (Ashley)

“THE LIFE SUCKS YOU UP”

As noted previously, the women described feeling lured into the sex industry because of financial need and the projection of a glamorous lifestyle by friends, family, and others they thought they could trust. They described feeling trapped by the industry due to a lack of financial or familial resources, or the stigma associated with having been in the sex industry. These feelings of entrapment appeared to be compounded by the maligning of trust experienced historically and currently by caretakers, loved ones, or service professionals. As such, “the life [sucked] them up.”
So the only thing I had to turn to was that industry. . . . And then I tried to go back to school, but nobody would ever hire me, because you have a record of prostitution. And the life sucks you up. Yeah. My daughter went to private school. My stepson went to private school. My son just graduated from [private Christian university]. So people ask me what I did with the money, and it's like, well, $32,000 a year for [private Christian university]. (Jenny)

You get intrigued and so deep into the money, and the cars and the clothes, and then in your mind you start to think that this is all you're worth. And this is all you're good for. If you catch cases [arrests for prostitution] then you have a background and how are you going to make a transition whenever you have prostitution charges? Because sometimes they look at those prostitution charges worse than they look at a drug charge. It's like a stigma you get out of it. So I think you stay because you get in that lifestyle, and it's hard to get out. (Katie)

I felt like I was trapped, and I felt like I had a baby now and what was I going to do now, and I felt like my mom didn't want me. . . . I felt like I was very trapped and, um, I didn't have anyone to call; I didn't. No one was looking for me so it was like, I didn't have an ID, I couldn't work, you know, I wasn't old enough to get a job to support myself, so I felt like that was the only place I could go [back to the pimp who had rescued her from another pimp who had kidnapped her]. (Mabel)

Learning to Trust

Some of the interview questions referred to overall experiences with the agency from which participants were receiving services. Two of the questions elicited much about trust:

1. Which services have you enjoyed the most? Why?
2. At what point did you realize the services you were receiving were actually helping you? Please explain in detail.

Many of the responses can be summarized by this statement from Sandra: “The counseling, just the supportive staff, period, they're all so patient and humble with those ladies that come through here, and they genuinely care.”

The researcher analyzed the responses to these questions (Preble & Aguirre, 2013), and in so doing realized that the participants were detailing the nuances surrounding how they have learned or are currently learning to trust. For example, Mabel said, “And how to trust people. And, you know, not assume that they always want something from you or that their intentions are not always good.” As indicated in Table 1, 69% of the study’s participants self-reported they had experienced childhood sexual or physical abuse or
neglect, suggesting this is a population with a long history of trust violations and that, possibly, they have not learned how to trust another person. The analysis of this theme resulted in the following subthemes: commonality of experiences, staff modeling of trust, and accountability. Throughout this section, common threads of genuineness, the receiving of help, and faith are intertwined.

Commonality of experience

Throughout this subtheme, women describe the relief they felt at not being judged and being surrounded by the genuine emotions, support, and acceptance of staff and clients. As illustrated by Sandra, common experiences shared by clients and staff allowed the women to begin developing feelings of trust. Additionally, in the group sessions, the women found camaraderie in these shared experiences. Because of this, participants indicated that they did not have to worry about being judged because of their past.

Many women expressed that they never fit in anywhere (e.g., family, in the sex industry, or the “real world”) and that they have to learn how to develop relationships and fit in their circles now. As Ashley illustrates:

I have a little friend now. And it actually took a little while to be his friend. And, the first time that we actually did have sex I felt like, “OK, get off and go.” Even though, I know the whole act of doing the condom and stuff was just so, I was like: “Oh my God, is it ever going to be good for me again?”

Moreover, the modeling of trust the staff projected allowed the women to emulate trust and trusting relationships as they began to see that others can and do care about them. Staff demonstrated respect and encouragement to the clients, inspiring feelings of trust among agency clientele. The agency recognizes the desire to meet the needs of women who show up at individual events, but gives priority to those who demonstrate consistency in attendance and interest. Furthermore, the agency offers new clients financial stabilization assistance to secure housing and utilities, and develops a plan with clients to obtain technical training or education skills needed to find suitable employment. This formal service provision sends the following message to clients: If you show us you are serious about leaving sex work, we will support you in every way we can because we now trust you.

But it just helps to have people [other clients] that I can relate with . . . I don’t trust people; I have major trust issues. So that’s why I don’t talk with a lot of the other ladies [during fellowship meetings]. That’s another thing that helps having a friend here. I don’t, I don’t trust anyone. I’ve just had a really crappy life as far as people that I trust just crushing it,
crumble it up, and throw it in the corner. So I just don’t trust people, and it will probably take a few more months. But I talk a little bit more now, in there. (Ashley)

It’s because I’m with women who walked the path I’ve walked, so I don’t have to worry about being judged or anything like that, whereas women that I attend church with, and I don’t think they judge me, but it’s just different when you can be in a group of women that have been down the same path as you and you get their feedback and you give them feedback and you hold one another and console. And learning it from another woman, it’s just powerful to me; it really is. (Sandra)

**STAFF MODELING OF TRUST**

Several of the women described problems reaching out for help because they had always been the ones fixing other peoples’ problems. These women had seemingly never been able to count on anyone but themselves to provide even basic necessities in life. The thought that someone else would be able and willing to help them in a time of need without an expectation of something in return was uncharted territory, as Cathy noted, “because I don’t know how to receive help from people and feel comfortable with it.”

I was so used to helping other people that I was like I don’t want someone helping me. Weird, just awkward, someone out there is going to help me? No, I doubt it. (Janie)

Participants generally articulated their responses in the framework of seeing the agency as an extension of their family, in which they could trust and not feel judged because of their past:

The greatest thing about this place is they don’t pass judgment, and I think that was probably one of the biggest fears that I had coming here, because being in the system and even being on probation or whenever you go in front of the prosecution, you’re just a whore. You’re just a whore. And here you’re not just a whore; you’re a person. (Jenny)

Many women compared the relationship they have with the agency to a marriage or partnership in terms of the support the agency offers; as Cathy explained: “But now it’s like a marriage . . . it’s like a partnership, I’ve got somebody that I can depend on, and is not hurting me at the same time.” While discussing their journey to being able to receive help, the women also articulated that they had to be ready to receive the services and for the vulnerability that would come with leaving “the life,” which requires a certain level of trust that the agency will take care of their physical and emotional needs during the process.
I think you have to be really ready. Some people aren’t ready so I think if you’re not quite ready for a major change in your life it could be frustrating to people. But if you’re tired, and ready then you’re willing to do whatever it takes. And if you see these women who have come through this program and been successful, then you know they know what they’re doing. (Lacy)

[The therapist] has put me in a place where I can be at peace . . . you know she lets me be me, she lets me talk. If I wanna cry the whole hour, she lets me cry. She’ll write and give me tissue, she won’t say a word. She don’t force, you know, you to talk. But, you know you, just whenever you’re ready, she’s just like “Whenever you’re ready I’m right here.” And that’s why I love her . . . all I did was cry for I think for about 3 weeks. I cried when I went in there, and she just let me cry. [I cried] for all the times I wanted to cry and couldn’t. (Megan)

ACCOUNTABILITY

For some women, like Cathy, having someone hold them accountable to the goals and dreams they set for themselves helped them learn to trust others as it conveyed that someone else, in fact, cared about them and their desires.

They listen to what I say, and even when I try to renege on some of them, they hold me to what I said I wanted or to change something in my life. Because I tend to be one of those that I tend to stay in my box and I don’t venture too much from my box. But there were things that, like going to school, that I wanted to do but never felt like I was good enough, or traveling places that I’m uncomfortable with they’ll put me out there. You know and it’s kind of funny ’cause it’ll be a phone call, you know, “Orientation is Monday, class starts Wednesday, be there at 8 a.m.” So I don’t think—it’s uncomfortable, but it’s all good and beneficial to me. They are not out to get me. (Cathy)

The idea of faith was a complicated one that was interwoven in nearly every interview. For some of the women, spirituality and faith were sources of newfound strength, or had gotten them through adversity. For other women, faith was a source of confusion and even contempt as they saw it as an original violation of trust. Even though this agency is faith-based, the women referenced faith in powerful ways beyond the faith community established by the agency. Often women talked about their faith or trust in God even though their trust had been so egregiously violated repeatedly throughout their lives.

I’m not ashamed of what’s happened in my life, of who I was, of what I experienced in life, I feel like God took me down that road because he
wanted me to learn something from it, and, um, you know, I have no problems with who I was before, I’m just glad that I was able to come out of that and be a better person now, you know. So I don’t have any shame. (Mabel)

Still, other women like Megan, articulated that even God betrayed her trust.

So that’s kinda how I was raised, so now I’m still like that. I think “your word is your bond,” so when I feel like I done said something and I didn’t stick to it that that takes me somewhere else. I mean it just makes me feel like . . . worthless. I don’t have a place here on earth, you know? Maybe that’s why I’m going through what I’m going through, because I did I didn’t keep my word [to God], uh, you know, I don’t know, I don’t know. (Megan)

It appears as though for these women, trust, as taught by their families, was more cognitive-based trust as illustrated by Mabel and Megan, in the theme history with betrayal—friends and family. The lines between an intimate partner relationship and a professional relationship become synonymous, as described by Cathy when she found herself prostituting with long-term customers. Janie’s experience in giving all of her earnings to her boyfriend to support the opening of a restaurant also demonstrated the dynamics of trust relationships studied by Buchan et al. (2007). The benevolence that Janie shared with her partner came from the desire to support a perceived common goal. However, Janie’s partner viewed her trust in terms of reward–punishment or as being calculus-based rather than from the viewpoint of intimacy. Thus, the parties’ abilities to efficaciously act on agreed outcomes also becomes less clear, as they are working from different trust viewpoints to achieve an end goal. Janie’s viewpoint was more of communally working toward a goal, whereas her partner’s viewpoint was using Janie’s earnings to achieve his dream. This enmeshed pattern of trust and distrust could take emotional tolls that permeate one’s sense of well-being, efficacy, and sense of purpose as Jenny described in her statement, “It sucks you up.” Moreover, the cognitive ability to rationally think through interactions with others appears to be more difficult for these women as they have remained in a heightened state of intense emotional distrust (amygdala response) over several decades.

This study contributes to the knowledge of sex worker experiences in unique ways. First, accountability is a critical component of the helping process with this population. Additionally, the participants in this study modeled the trust observed between staff and clients. Commonality in experiences across clients was also instrumental in creating trust. Moreover, the study provides insight that, perhaps for exiting sex workers, trust is both identification and calculus based. Trust is more complicated than previously assumed, perhaps.
LIMITATIONS

Despite this study’s importance in exploring the nuances of creating and developing trust among sex workers, there are several limitations beyond the exploratory and qualitative nature of the study leading to the lack of generalizability of the findings. The surprising homogeneity of the sample (majority White) limits the findings in this study. Additionally, at the onset of the project, participants were made aware of the intent of this study to assist the agency in developing better programming. This knowledge might have caused some participants to offer a more positive critique of their overall experience, thus creating social desirability biases. Coupled with this limitation, the interviews were conducted in agency space, thereby more favorably influencing participant responses. The space used for these interviews was also not always private; however, the PI reminded the participants that they did not have to answer any questions they did not want to answer, and could stop the interview at any time.

In addition, the fact that the PI initially asked questions of the participants regarding their experiences with coercion could be considered a limitation, as the responses indicated constructs later understood as trust, not coercion, specifically. In spite of the fact that the PI tested the questions with a pilot interview, the ultimate data analysis indicated a more broad construction of coercion than the questions were eliciting. One possible hypothesis by which to understand this confusion is that a Type III error might have occurred. However, this author hypothesizes that to understand concepts of coercion within a population, one must also understand concepts of trust within that population (i.e., Gambetta, 2000). Moreover, it is common in qualitative inquiry for themes to unexpectedly emerge from findings. Finally, the focus group member-check might have caused some participants to become uncomfortable discussing the emerged themes in a group setting. However, richer data emerged, due to this method, as participants were able to relate, refine, and develop ideas and solutions that did not surface individually.

Implications

Striking gaps in knowledge exist in understanding the experience of trust and trust building among sex workers limiting discussions and interpretations of this study within the context of similar literature. This article is a step toward a greater awareness of how sex workers trust and develop trust, particularly with social workers; and as such, critical research and practice implications materialized from this study. The following discussion details the need for future studies that would aid in the academy’s understanding of sex workers’ experiences with trust and trust building; hence, filling in the gaps in knowledge.
It is hypothesized that, for participants in this study, IBT and CBT forms of trust are enmeshed, and are constantly changing throughout their lives before and during sex work. No longer are they able to predict future desires based on a full understanding of the other's values and preferences (IBT) because this knowledge is established through punishment and reward systems (CBT). Further examination of this hypothesis is needed. More research should explore the area of trust building and restoration among the sex workers and how trust is viewed both while working in the sex industry and after exiting as there appears to be scant literature surrounding these concepts. Moreover, understandings about trust and rapport building among sex workers are couched by researchers' assertion that sex workers do not trust because of historical mistreatment by helping professionals. More exploration is needed regarding possible assumptions imposed on research that prevent more focused examinations of trust concepts. Further, exploration into the differences in trust between street-based sex workers and those who have worked in less stigmatized areas of sex work, like stripping, is needed to target interventions more specifically to the experiences of the client.

This study suggests that trust and distrust are also often intertwined at a cognitive level (i.e., Dimoka, 2010). Once someone has proven their lack of trustworthiness or has violated the trust given to them, the cognitive reaction related to distrust can be severe and much more difficult to repair as the stress response is already heightened and at a more permanent state much like that which might be observed in highly traumatized populations whose biophysical responses to stress (e.g., blood pressure, heart rate) remain at elevated levels even in nonstressful environments. Future research on the neurological outcomes of distrust among sex workers is warranted.

The power dynamics of interpersonal and intimate relationships expressed by the participants in this study also support the literature in unique ways. Lazarus et al. (2011) found in their qualitative study that when sex workers perceive power balances to be equal they expressed trust more easily. As the themes of genuineness and accountability demonstrate, the women were able to learn from the modeled behavior of the agency's staff. They began to feel other women in the agency were trustworthy without fear of reprisal. More research is needed in the area of accountability measures focused on client desires and purposive modeling among agency staff as possible intervention techniques to build trust with sex workers receiving supportive services.

Because of the apparent blending of IBT and CBT forms of trust among this population, social work practitioners should bear this in mind in their approach to rapport building. Trust, among the participants in this study, has a utility and is viewed in a communal sense. As such, practitioners should develop rapport-building exercises with their clients to include elements of utility and community—at least initially. Moreover, the idea that sex workers
learn to trust through observation is extremely important in recognizing the implications of purposive modeling among agency staff as an intervention itself, so as to demonstrate to clients how one trusts another and the circumstances surrounding “healthy” trusting relationships. The understanding that accountability inspires trust among this population suggests that more formalized use of accountability measures should be explored, with specific emphasis on achieving the clients’ desired goals, rather than meeting program requirements.

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REFERENCES


Creating Trust among the Distrustful


