‘I’m Not Onlya Sex Worker’: An Empirical Exploration of the Histories, Experiences and Identities of Women Who Sell Sex in the Midlands, UK.



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This thesis is dedicated to my loving parents, Sherrell and David, and my sister Abbie, for always believing in me.

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**Abstract**

This thesis empirically explores the histories, experiences and identities of women who sell sex in the Midlands, UK. It draws upon twenty life history interviews conducted over a period of twelve months, supplemented with many hours of informal observation at both the organisation where participants were initially recruited and other establishments such as sauna’s and working flats.

While debates around commercial sex may be prominent within public, political and academic arenas, the voices of those who choose to sell sex are still often assumed, overlooked or ignored. This thesis permits a unique exploration of how women perceive their lives, journeys and their choices and provides them with a platform to be heard and the opportunity to tell their own stories, in their own way, rather than them being constructed for them.

The main finding of this thesis is that while some women who work within the UK sex industry acknowledge the stigmas of sex work, they do not internalise these stigmas to such a degree that it affects their own sense of self. Instead, the majority of women in this study utilise sex work as a coping strategy for other forms of marginalisation they receive, and as a method of managing other ‘deviant’ roles and identities that they embody.

This thesis also highlights the importance of unresolved childhood trauma when examining entry into sex work and exploring *who* sex workers are today. The data indicates that those who sell sex from outdoor markets report ‘normal’ and ‘happy’ histories until a significant event caused them great distress, disruption and pain. At particularly traumatic times in their lives the women interviewed for this research chose to sell sex. The interview data I collected and my analysis of that explores why.

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**Chapter One**

Introduction

*I’m not* ***only*** *a sex worker, that’s just what I* choose *to do (Tessa) [Original emphasis].*

**Women and Sex Work**

Traditional prostitution is well established as both a historical and biblical fact (Walkowitz 1980), whereby women have engaged in sexual intercourse with men for monetary payment for many centuries. However, since the reframing of prostitution to sex work, the industry now encompasses a wide range of physical and virtual activities that may involve direct and/or indirect services (Harcourt and Donovan 2005).

Today’s global sex industry presents a vast assortment of services available for adult entertainment, sexual pleasure and untamed desires. The boom in sex commerce evidenced by the growth of adult sex shops, clubs, escort agencies, pornography’s global reach and a rise in sex tourism and international sex-trafficking, has seen traditional outdoor-based prostitution evolve to encompass many forms of other sex work including erotic dancing, escorting, web-cam work, live sex shows, fetish clubs and sadomasochist services.

Technological advances can be held part responsible for this increase of, and flexibility and diversity in, sex work as women are now able to advertise their services extensively from various milieu. The new technological economy and a heightened sense of ‘freedom’ makes such services increasingly accessible, eradicating obstacles (such as shame and ignorance) that were often present during traditional trading of sexual services.

Those who sell sex now have greater options to advertise away from obvious public display and can organise their encounters beforehand without the embarrassment that may be present for clients requiring more specialist services during face to face negotiations. This online and mobile communication economy has ultimately increased sexual tolerance, blurring the boundaries of social space and consequently the once clear cut differences between ‘respectable’ citizens and individuals of the ‘underworld’ (Bernstein 2001).

As such, prostitution/commercial sex is an area that has been extensively researched with various global studies detailing information about the lived realities and experiences of adult sex workers across the spectrum (see Hardy *et al* 2010; O’connell Davidson 1998; O’Neill 2001; Sanders and Campbell 2014; Sanders 2005a for UK examples). Despite female sex workers being acknowledged within academia as a diverse group of ‘ordinary’ women, ‘drawn from all walks of life’, that should not be stereotyped (O’Neill *et al* 2015: 6; Sanders *et al* 2009: 33), the stigmatisation of those who participate in consensual sex work continues to happen, posing increased harm and risk to those involved (Benoit *et al* 2018; Vanwesenbeeck 2017).

Public perceptions of women who sell sex are still based largely on historical stereotypes and myths which are continually reinforced by media depictions of sex workers as scantily clad drug dependent women hustling for business on dark street corners, which have dominated representations and understanding in popular and political discourses for many years (Bernstein 2007). Whilst this may be true for *some* women who sell sex, it does not represent the majority (Sanders *et al* 2017).

It is difficult to measure with any certainty the number of women who currently engage in sex work in the UK due to the hidden, secretive and transient nature of the industry (Cusick *et al* 2009). The Office of National Statistics (2014) estimated that the female sex worker population in 2009 was 60,879. However, Jane Pitcher’s more recent study suggests that there are between 80,000 to 85,000 sex workers operating in the UK, with almost 72% working off-street (Pitcher 2015).

With the sex worker population increasing, each year, new aspects of sex work develop, presenting a new arena to be explored. There are extensive international bodies of work that have paid focus to street-based sex work (McKeganey and Barnard 1996), indoor-based sex work (Sanders 2005a), women who escort (O’Connell Davidson 1998), men who buy sex (Sanders 2008), sex work as violence against women (Westmarland 2015), sex work as erotic labour (Chapkis 1997), migrant sex work (Agustin 2007), erotic dancing (Colosi 2010), the decriminalisation/criminalisation of sex work (Levy 2015; Vanwesenbeeck 2017), and more recently internet sex work (Cunningham *et al* 2018; Scoular 2016).

However, while debates around prostitution/commercial sex may be prominent within media, political and academic arenas, the voices of those who choose to sell sex are often assumed, overlooked or ignored. The voices and personal journeys of women who choose to sex work in Britain today, particularly from the outdoor arena, have been somewhat silenced and made to appear one-dimensional (Cheng 2013) in a need and desire to explore new types (of sex) in sex work. Whilst detailing activity across the spectrum is important to inform current political and legal debates, there is still a need for ‘better knowledge and understanding of [all] the people involved in [all types of] sex work’ to provide a clearer and stronger evidence base to inform policy and debates (O’Neill *et al* 2015: 6).

Therefore, this thesis considers the participants in this research as women who engage in sex work rather than sex workers who are women, recognising that individuals have lives, relationships and experiences outside of the sex industry. By adopting this approach, rather than setting out to examine a particular sector of the market, relationships or transactions, this research permits a unique exploration of how women perceive their lives, their journeys and their choices. It also provides women who engage in sex work the opportunity and platform to tell their own life stories in their own way.

**A Note on Language**

The terms, sex industry, sex market, sex economy and sex commerce are used throughout this thesis to reference the ‘organizations, owners, managers and workers involved in commercial sex enterprises’ (Weitzer 2000: 3). Such terms have previously come under the remit of ‘prostitution’ and have been traditionally understood as the exchange of sexual services for monetary payment. However, as mentioned, the sex industry is now understood to encompass an assortment of activities, products and performances that can be described as ‘sex work’, located across multiple sites, both urban and rural, for varying forms of material compensation (Weitzer 2003).

The terms sex work/sex industry/sex worker are now more commonly used by academics, activists and policy makers in an attempt to challenge the stigma traditionally embedded in the labels prostitute/prostitution and as a way of ‘identifying that sexual labour could be considered work and that the woman’s identity was not only tied up with the performance of her body’ (Sanders *et al* 2009: 9).

As will be discussed in detail in Chapters Two and Three, ‘the prostitute’ has been, and still is, considered a problematic and degrading term with negative connotations of dirt, disease and immorality attached to it (Foley 2017). It has been used throughout time to separate out a category of women from ‘the norm’ which reduces women to only their identity as ‘prostitute’ (Pheterson 1996).

Throughout this thesis the term ‘prostitute’ is employed where it is the terminology used by the author(s) of a particular source or a particular body of work and to make reference to historical and/or biblical knowledge. In no way is ‘prostitution’ or ‘prostitute’ used in this thesis to emphasise any personal ‘particular subcultural perspective on prostitution’ (Shrage 1994: 123).

The twenty women in this research engage in *consensual* sex work having made an independent rational choice to enter the industry, primarily to financially support themselves and any dependents. Whilst the sexual exploitation of some women is undeniable, the women in this study are not coerced into providing sex for payment or material goods by a third party; they choose to sell sexual services, performances and activities to men in return for monetary payment or material goods.

**Research Aims and Key Questions**

The **key** aim of this research is to explore the lives, histories, motivations and lived experiences of women who sell sex in contemporary Britain (specifically, the Midlands) today to address the question of **who** they are.

The subsidiary aims of this research study are:

* To explore any influences that affects a woman’s choice to enter sex-commerce, and the journey that leads them to entry.
* To explore the motivations women give for their participation in prostitution/sex work.
* To examine the subjective meanings that women apply to their involvement in the sex industry.
* To investigate whether, and to what level, women who work within the UK sex-market feel stigmatised by the long-standing stereotypes associated with the identity/role of prostitute/sex worker.
* To assess how women manage their identity/role of prostitute/sex worker with other identities/roles that they embody.

The central research questions encapsulating the study’s broad aims include:

* How do women come to enter prostitution/commercial sex?
* Do women who sell sex today reinforce or challenge the characteristics that are frequently associated with stereotypes and popular perceptions, and if so how?
* How do women who sell sex feel about the activities that they engage in and how do they feel they are perceived by wider society?
* Do women who work within the UK sex industry today feel stigmatised and/or marginalised by the label ‘prostitute’/’sex worker’, and to what extent?

However, as a researcher becomes more knowledgeable about their research area they become aware of specific issues and areas of interest and consequently aims and objectives can shift, change and develop. Therefore, to reflect this increase of awareness and knowledge, sub-questions are presented in the concluding parts of both the theoretical and literature review chapters (Chapters Two, Three and Four).

**Outline of Thesis**

As mentioned, prostitution is a historical fact that has shaped popular understandings of the industry and those who participate within it and its construction is important for framing my research. The following chapter (Chapter Two) provides a historical overview of the construction of ‘the prostitute’ in official discourse highlighting how women who sell sex are perceived and regulated as different. First, the chapter explores how Victorian social and moral reform and the professionalisation of medicine and state intervention, first positioned female (working-class) sexuality (and consequently ‘the prostitute’) as immoral, deviant and diseased through discourses which constructed twin regimes of sex: legitimate and illegitimate. Feminist perspectives on prostitution/sex work are also explored here to further illustrate the polarised and shifting viewpoints on prostitute/sex worker bodies. Popular media and fictional stereotypes attached to sex-selling women are briefly examined before concluding with a discussion of ‘whore stigma’ (Pheterson 1986: 1) and how women who sell sex are subject to a unique ostracising experience threatening their other roles and identities.

Chapter Three then provides a theoretical overview of female sexuality, ‘studying-up’ to understand the conceptual practices of power, ‘revealing the ideological strategies used to design and justify the sex-gender system and its intersections with other systems of oppression’. (Harding 2004: 6). Here, I utilise broad Foucauldian understandings of power and regulation to explain, and make sense of, how women who sell sex have previously been, and continue to be, stereotyped, perceived and treated as ‘other’ and consequently how their subjectivities are often assumed, overlooked or ignored except as relevant to wider society as dangerous, dirty or deviant.

Existing literature centred on the lives of women who sell sex is then critically reviewed in Chapter Four highlighting areas of empirical and/or theoretical weakness, situating my own research and identifying how it can contribute to existing literature and understanding. This chapter also explores how previous research has addressed issues of (whore) stigma management, highlighting how some sex-working women have managed their sense of ‘self’ with the competing identity/role of sex worker/prostitute.

Chapter Five outlines the methodological and conceptual frameworks guiding this research. As a central aim of this research is to provide a more accurate account of the experiences of female sex workers, privileging women’s narrative, feminist methods were utilised whilst allowing a ‘theory-constructing’ approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The conceptual categories that emerged from the data, leading the data analysis were: childhood and family relationships; trauma; pregnancy and motherhood; deviant and criminal experiences.

Complementing the research methods chapter by highlighting the data coding and analysis process, Chapter Six presents the complexity of one participant’s (Polly) journey towards entry into the UK sex industry, the identities and roles that they manage alongside that of ‘prostitute’/’sex worker’, and how these interplay to ultimately affect ones sense of self. The themes that emerge from Polly’s story provide a broad range of analytical hooks to explore the experiences of the remaining nineteen women woven together in Chapters Seven and Eight.

This research regards the twenty participants as women who sell sex rather than sex sellers who are female and therefore the remaining data analysis is organised into three larger chapters. Chapter Seven provides a unique insight into the childhoods and early lives of the participants, highlighting how women who sell sex can, and do, report ‘normal’ backgrounds. This chapter argues that what has traditionally been reported as a ‘damaged’ background of ‘the prostitute’ has developed to include a multitude of other forms of emotional turmoil and traumatic experiences that left them feeling ‘othered’ prior to any involvement in commercial sex.

Chapter Eight explores in-depth how those experiences increased the women’s vulnerability to risky and illicit activities, specifically drug taking, which influenced and impacted their journeys into commercial sex. The transition from drug use into sex work is examined in this chapter.

Chapter Nine reveals how sex work itself can function as a coping mechanism for other forms of marginalisation and ‘spoiled’ identities, alleviating various voids in the women’s lives caused by unresolved childhood trauma.

In conclusion (Chapter Ten), how the findings of the empirical data presented in Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine connect to existing literature is critically discussed and the implications for theory, policy and future research are discussed, before reflecting on the original contribution my research has made to the field of commercial sex.

**Chapter Two**

Sex for Sale: Presentations of Prostitute Bodies

Controlling the sale of sex is not as timeless as we might imagine it to be. Commercial sex – as a practice and an industry – as well as the class of people within it are continuously being reinvented (Gira Grant 2014: 13).

Since the global sex economy’s move out of the shadows and into obvious public display (for the most part), ‘traditional’ prostitution has evolved to encompass many other forms of sex work with a wide variety of adult entertainment services now easily accessible to the paying customer. However, commercial sex has not always been so widely available, or as ‘acceptable’, as now. Prostitute/sex worker bodies, as body-objects and what they represent, have long been subject to scrutiny, persecution and regulation consequently enduring a difficult journey to the place/space that they occupy in contemporary western societies, where I argue though more visible they are still predominantlyviewed as ‘other’ and deviant bodies.

Even in a time of postmodernity when prostitution/commercial sex is seemingly accepted (it is not illegal in the UK), sex work is still held in low regard and the status of ‘the prostitute’ has failed to improve with time (Begum *et al* 2013; Lazarus *et al* 2012). Female sex-sellers are still largely perceived as ‘different’ and positioned as ‘others’, posing a threat to ‘normal’ standards of femininity (Scrambler 2007; Weitzer 2012). As a result sex workers suffer multiple forms of social exclusion, marginalisation, discrimination and stigmatisation (O’Neill 2001). ‘Whore stigma’ (Pheterson 1986) has existed for many centuries and remains attached to the history and regulation of (female) sexuality, social and sexual inequalities, and representations of women more generally.

To better understand the representations of the category ‘prostitute’, and later ‘sex worker’, and thus further problematise these classifications I examine both historical literature and fictive texts in addition to the narratives of women who engage in the selling of sexual services (See Chapters Three and Four for theoretical and empirical presentations).

Representations of sex work in cultural discourses tend to reproduce stereotypes and myths which ring-fence popular, legal, media, political and, to some extent, even sympathetic academic perspectives inhibiting both understanding and change. They are also likely to impact on the subjectivity of sex workers themselves, corralling them into narrow stigmatised identities, neglecting the ‘totality of human beings’ and deny their other selves such as daughters, mothers and friends (Shdaimah and Leon 2018: 25). How sex workers manage powerful discursive labelling is key to understanding them, their lives and experiences, which is central to my work adding to the broad body of research that focuses on them as sex workers rather than women who sell sex.

It should be noted at this point that both prostitution and prostitute bodies have long and often quite different histories and contemporary experiences in other locations. In contemporary South Asia for example, the majority of prostitutes are illiterate, have little access to clean drinking water and basic sanitation and can rarely afford to educate their children (Sultana 2017). The silence to their experiences does not mean to diminish their lives or experiences, but rather set them aside from the main focus of this thesis which is centred on the lives and experiences of women in contemporary Britain, specifically the midlands, for reasons of access.

This chapter explores historical, legal, feminist and cultural presentations of prostitution/commercial sex and conflicted prostitute/sex worker bodies in western societies. It illustrates how the perceptions and regulation of both sex work practice, and its female providers, have changed (or not) over time. Ultimately, I relate this to the women involved in my research in relation to the stories they have told me about themselves.

First, I explore the moral and criminal context of selling sex historically before considering how legislation and regulation has continually been used as a mechanism to contain women who sell sex, and women’s sexuality more generally, in a way that prioritises public protection (from the immoral sex-seller) and maintains ‘correct’ social order. Feminist perspectives on prostitution/sex work are then examined to further illustrate the polarised and shifting viewpoints on prostitute/sex worker-bodies. I then highlight common whore stereotypes and fantasies as frequently associated with sex-selling women by media, fiction, film and wider society. Finally, I explore how these popular perceptions attached to women who occupy the prostitute/sex worker role/identity may cause them to experience whore stigma.

**Prostitution and Prostitute Bodies: Morality and Criminality**

Prostitution and the prostitute body have not always been considered deviant. The ancient world viewed prostitution as a sacred ritual performed in the context of religious worship and thus regarded women who practised temple prostitution as occupying a position of honour (Elkins 1998). Erotic religions regarded women who participated in sacred prostitution as servants to Aphrodite, the Goddess of love, who, by offering their bodies as gateways provided men with the opportunity to worship and communicate with the divine (Elkins 1998). In some cultures women were expected to serve time as a sacred prostitute as part of their initiation into womanhood and rather than viewing this ‘duty’ as an obligation used it as an opportunity to explore their own sexual desires in service to their Goddess (Qualls-Corbett 1998). At this time ‘whores’ were given status and credited with autonomy in a recognised profession; ‘commercial activity was taxed by the emperors, and the vestigial yielded a handsome return to the imperial treasury’ (Henriques 1962: 26).

The first resistance to these sexual activities came around 1200 BC when Israel voiced its disapproval of such religions and forbade temple prostitution (Eisler 1995). In 350 AD Christians also successfully prohibited temple prostitution in Rome after the Christian church began its repression against sexuality tying it to immorality and sin against one’s own body (Elkins 1998).The growth of Christianity, and later Protestantism, also saw ‘whores’ become ‘bad girls’ and contrasted to the ideal of the ‘good wife and mother’ (Roberts 1992). This denigration of (female) sexuality increased prejudiced and intolerant attitudes toward prostitute bodies, and characterised the early signs of the marginalisation of female sex-sellers.

During Medieval England prostitution became a feasible survival strategy for women at a time that offered them limited opportunities in the labour market. This was due to a rise in populations shortly after the Black Death of 1348, and consequent unemployment which left women with less chance of marriage as fathers could not offer dowries. Medieval brothels were licensed, regulated and tolerated as a ‘necessary evil’ recognising male sexual desires as ‘natural’ (O’Neill 2001: 128). However, the law had little respect for the women providing men with an outlet for their sexual urges and outlawed whores (Mazo-Karras 1996), as ‘the prostitute woman’ is assumed to sell her honour along with sex; she is then ‘scorned on the basis of moral principle’ and receives no status within mainstream society (Pheterson 1996: 42). Gail Pheterson refers to this as ‘whore stigma’(1986: 1).

The regulation of female sexuality during this period was not only limited to commercial sex. Medieval law blurred boundaries between ‘whores’ and deviant women more generally, at a time when there was not only fear of crime but of ‘uncontrolled feminine lust’, which was considered a woman’s sin and something that needed to be contained to protect social order (Mazo-Karras 1989; O’Neill 2001: 16). The classification of ‘whore’, an undefined status rather than a set of behaviours at this time, was widely applied to ‘immoral’ women displaying sexually promiscuous or adulterous behaviour and moral outrage and campaigns against vice were prevalent. Women convicted as whores faced public punishments and shaming.

By the Victorian era (women) selling sex was incontestably regarded as impure, dirty, and an activity that should be hidden from public display to protect respectable citizens. The increase of prostitution at this time saw the activity deemed as a ‘social problem’ and consequently brought harsher regulation of sex work and women’s bodies more generally as prostitutes were blamed for the spread of venereal diseases amongst the armed forces. This concern led to increased management of both prostitute women’s hygiene and morality by introducing the *Contagious Diseases Acts* (1864, 1866 and 1869; repealed in 1886). These Acts constructed prostitute bodies as a site of medical and moral depravity and enforced mandatory internal examinations of female prostitutes in certain ports and towns, and if a woman was deemed as ‘diseased’ she would remain in confinement until ‘cured’ (Walkowitz 1992).

The Victorian prostitute was not only visible in ports but also emerged in the common working class districts of large cities, seen advertising herself on back-streets outside popular pubs and music halls (Walkowitz 1980). She was studied as an object of deep prejudice and social shame with moral reformers branding her a ‘common nuisance’ and an ‘agent of corruption’ (Lewis and Ellis 2012: 1-9). Most eighteenth and nineteenth-century studies centred on the analysis of how such a ‘condition’ could be prevented and the women involved ‘rehabilitated’ (Caslin 2010; Hall 2013). The *Contagious Diseases Acts* and the increase of prostitution regulation during the Victorian era also reflect an attempt to address and manage cultural and social anxieties over unmarried working-class women and their shifting roles within society at a time of economic and social change (Walkowitz 1980).

When entered into the English dictionary in the sixteenth-century, ‘prostitute’ was a verb; ‘to prostitute’ was to set something up for sale. The ‘prostitute’, as we know her now, did not exist until the nineteenth-century. A new ‘type’ of woman was invented and these characteristics were then applied to earlier sets of prostitute behaviour (Gira Grant 2014). Similarly, ‘whore’, or ‘whoring’ did not mean ‘prostitute’ but was a term used to describe sex outside of marriage. However it is now commonly used to describe women who cross the boundaries of feminine respectability, and thus transforms these characteristics and behaviours into an identity, whether acknowledged by the ‘whore’ herself or not (Agustin 2007).

The nineteenth-century criminalised the activities of prostitute women. Cesare Lombroso’s pathological model (1985) considered ‘the prostitute’ as the archetypal female offender suggesting that criminals could be distinguished from non-criminals by various physical anomalies. These physical ‘irregularities’ included: darker eyes; darker hair colour (although there were lighter haired prostitutes as there was a demand for them); anomalous teeth; larger hands; and shorter feet (Lombroso and Ferrero 2004: 130). The prostitute was seen to have a prevalence of male characteristics such as: a deeper voice; a more muscular frame; a large jaw; hair moles; and exaggerated hair in the pubic region (Lombroso and Ferrero 2004: 130-1/163-4). She was also considered further different from the ‘normal’ woman as she was thought to lack maternal drive and affection, with her overt sexuality, blamed for bad mothering skills (Lombroso 1895).

Lombroso considered prostitutes as the ultimate criminal class of women and likened them to women in asylums arguing that they displayed signs of madness as well as criminality with their ‘wild eyes and perturbed facial expressions’ (Lombroso and Ferrero 2004:142). Although now largely discredited for his arguably flawed scientific approach to the study of crime, Lombroso’s legacy and the continued association between female criminality and immorality including, but not limited to, prostitution lasted well into the twentieth-century and arguably still continues today.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century prostitution was ‘bound to the instinctive physical needs of upper class males’ and the prostitute body was an ‘accepted part of social organization’ (Corbin 1990: 213; O’Neill 2001: 128). During the early twentieth-century Functionalist theorist Kingsley Davis (1937) suggested that although many social theorists often imply that institutions are only sustained by favourable attitudes, prostitution manages to thrive whilst being widely disapproved of. He concluded that prostitution remains a ‘necessary evil’, satisfying male desires and thus serves a useful function in wider society. He further adds that prostitution lowers divorce rates as it prevents men from seeking sexual gratification through affairs and therefore also serves to protect the sacred institution of marriage. Such conclusions suggest that there remains a common acceptance that male desires must be met, but failure to accept the women who satisfy them as anything other than ‘useful’ for such a purpose.

Since the late twentieth-century there has been a shift in the commercial sex arena marked by sexual entertainment services, venues and establishments that were once hidden now on display in obvious public gaze as part of the everyday contemporary British high street. This increased sexualisation and commercialisation of the (female) body resulted in the twenty-first century sex worker becoming a ‘post-modern leisure phenomenon’ that sees women frequently visited by stag parties, sex tourists and embedded within the after-hours office culture (Sanders *et al* 2009: 2).

The history of othering of sex workers in many ways is still very evident in discourses today. Despite the obvious increase in sex-commerce visibility women who work within the industry continue to experience varying forms and levels of stigmatisation and marginalisation, with women who work from traditional outdoor locations still widely perceived as ‘dirty’ and of lesser status than indoor sex workers participating in adult entertainment economies. Although research has shown that street sex work now only involves around one-fifth of those who work within the global sex economy, the image of the immoral ‘common prostitute’ who became a ‘problem’ during the nineteenth-century, still features heavily within the public imagination (Foley 2017).Yet there has been no recent significant study with sex workers themselves to examine whether those who do currently seek custom from the outdoor arena still display the characteristics frequently associated with street-walkers (Weitzer 2012).

The next segment of this chapter explores how UK legislation created the category ‘prostitute’ and anchored this once temporary identity within the cultural imagination, before exploring feminist presentations of female bodies who participate in the sale of sex. Each of these accounts is explored in this research with sex workers themselves in the life history interviews in terms of how they view themselves and other sex workers.

**The Formation of Western Sexual Immorality: Victorian Reform and State Intervention**

Although some resistance to female sexual expression first emerged during the growth of the Christian Church, it is the Victorian period that is considered to have been most influential in shaping the public attitudes on sex and sexuality that remain common today.

Although it was a time of silence concerning everything erotic, the Victorians, often cited as sexually ‘repressed hypocrites’, created an explosion of discourses on sexuality which have remained fascinating to social and cultural historians for many decades (Hall 2013: 10). Such attempted repression began with a programme of public health that emerged after the cholera epidemic (an infectious and often fatal bacterial infection of the small intestine contracted from contaminated water) that dominated much of Europe in the 1820s. It reached British shores in October 1831 when a ship carrying infected sailors docked in Sunderland.

The disease soon spread throughout both England and Scotland claiming over fifty-two thousand British lives before it had run its course after the third pandemic in the mid-1960s (Mort 2000; Royle 2012). Medics from leading periodicals, and medical journal the *Lancet,* produced numerous articles on the suspected causes of cholera and how best to prevent it. Although such evidence proved conflicting, officials were all in agreement that the urban poor were responsible for the spread of disease. This was confirmed when medical evidence was submitted to the Board of Health during the summer of 1831 which recognised that ‘the environment and the physical and moral habits of the poor actively stimulated the disease’ (Mort 2000:12).

After the first of three Cholera epidemics in Britain, the newly formed Board of Health permitted the formation of numerous district boards that became responsible for monitoring and containing disease within their local areas (Kay 1832). Like the medical profession, early social reformers of the 1830s blamed the urban working class for unsanitary social conditions, using ‘dirt’ as a grand metaphor for urban disorder, deeming them a great cultural threat in need of discipline and education (Burns and Innes 2003).

Concern over the physical conditions of the working-class also extended to their morality and sexual conduct. Moral environmentalism, ‘a belief that sexual depravity was the cause and result of urban decay, disease and squalor’, sought to discipline the labouring classes and educate them in ‘appropriate regimes of cleanliness and morality’ (Carabine 2000: 82). Using moral environmentalism, reformers ‘constructed the sexual through the class-related polarities which were central to their programme: physical health/non-health, virtue/vice, cleanliness/filth, morality/depravity, [and] civilisation/animality’ (Mort 2000: 33). This consequently positioned sexual immorality within the labouring classes which was ‘defined through the significations of dirt, disease, squalor, corruption and the political and cultural threat of an urban working class populace’ (Mort 2000: 37-38). Subsequently, the image of sexuality of the poor was *always* deemed negative in multiple ways.

**The Medicalisation of Sexuality: The Contagious Diseases Acts**

As a result of the public health movement that monopolised the 1830s, increased pressure was placed on state officials from medical professionals and military personnel for sanitary sanctions to be put in place after a steady increase of venereal infections in men of the armed forces since the 1820s (Mort 2000). Prostitute women were blamed for the spread of such diseases after widespread public anxiety surrounding prostitution dominated the1840s, which resulted in the activity being deemed as a ‘great social evil’ and the women participating in it as a ‘social problem’.

Such social concern and anxiety led to increased management of prostitute bodies, their hygiene, morality and sexual behaviour through the introduction of the *Contagious Diseases Acts* (1864, 1866 and 1869; eventually repealed in 1886).These Acts constructed prostitute bodies as a site of medical and moral depravity and enforced mandatory internal medical examinations of female prostitutes in specific naval ports and army garrison towns. If a prostitute woman refused to cooperate with officials she could then be subject to up to three months imprisonment in a lock hospital, and if deemed ‘diseased’ by medical professionals could remain in confinement until ‘cured’ (Walkowitz 1992). The Contagious Diseases Acts were aimed at controlling the moral and sexual behaviour of two social groups; prostitute women and the lower ranks of the armed forces. However, the manner in which these two groups were disciplined was very different. Men were encouraged to engage in healthy exercise and recreation activities to resist temptation, whereas women were ‘defined as human agents of infection, threatening national health and security, challenging the social order by their active and autonomous sexuality’, and consequently became subject to intense surveillance (Mort 2000: 59).

The Contagious Diseases Acts of 1866 and 1869 extended the geographical locations where women suspected of engaging in prostitution could be examined and detained and bound women to a police and medical registration system (Walkowitz 1980). This registration system was similarly applied to the surveillance of the urban poor as it extended to the neighbourhoods and communities where the women lived (Walkowitz 1977). For that reason, the Acts also served as ‘part of the institutional and legal efforts to contain geographical mobility [and] an attempt to clarify the relationship between the unrespectable and respectable poor’, whilst managing cultural and social anxieties over unmarried working-class women and their shifting roles within society at a time of economic and social change (Walkowitz 1977: 72).

The Contagious Diseases Acts have been widely regarded as ‘the single most important legislative intervention addressing sexuality throughout the nineteenth-century’ (Mort 1987: 53) as they introduced the medical discourse by which prostitute women became criminalised, and ultimately crystallised representations around female sexuality, isolating her as unhealthy, deviant and dangerous (Laite 2008; Mort 2000). The Acts caused much controversy within Victorian society and exploded debates over gender inequality. The Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts was established in 1869 by Josephine Butler, acclaimed feminist and social reformer ,who led the campaign against the Acts from 1869 to 1886 (Ward D’Itri 1999). The organisation, along with numerous others, attracted enthusiastic moralist and feminist supporters who were also concerned with wider gender inequalities and issues of human rights as the Acts violated the civil liberties of women (Nicholls 1996). The Acts openly acknowledged female sexuality, raising questions about women’s place in society more generally whilst questioning the role of the state in governing people’s behaviour and morality, which remain a central debate for modern culture today.

The Acts were officially repealed in 1886 after a nationwide petition was presented at the House of Commons, proving a great defeat for the medical profession who fought to extend the Acts, but a success for repealists and women everywhere. Although the abolition of such legislation ceased mandatory examinations of (prostitute) women’s bodies, and whilst there remains no UK legislation that forces women who engage in sex work to undergo such intrusive investigations, there are however, other sanctions in place which seek to regulate such bodies and protect public health (which is discussed in more detail in Chapters Three and Four).

The way Victorian reform, medicine and state intervention, positioned female (working-class) sexuality as immoral and diseased has been theorised as part of an exercise of power in the Victorian period in order to maintain social control. For Foucault (1976) power informed discourses to discipline and regulate sexualities that failed to adhere to accepted codes of heteronormality and marital-morality.

**Legislation and Regulation: Fixing and Sustaining ‘the Prostitute’ Identity**

The social attitudes established during the nineteenth-century led to the categorical construction of ‘the prostitute’, a label that was attached to an immoral woman’s identity, and ultimately ‘created the framework in which the problem of prostitution as a crime against morality is organized, perceived and regulated today’ (Sanders *et al* 2009: 112). Judith Walkowitz (1977) highlights that during the Victorian period women viewed their participation in prostitution as temporary. Due to limited opportunities for women in the labour market selling sex became a survival activity, for many poor women, during the gap before marriage and domestic life. Nineteenth century official legislation cemented ‘the prostitute’ identity as fixed and no longer temporary.

Although the term ‘common prostitute’ was first introduced into statutory law under the *Vagrancy Act* (1824), which could be applied to arrest women in the street for disorderly conduct (Self 2003), it was the *Contagious Diseases Acts* of the 1860s that introduced the medical discourse of dangerous contagion through which ‘prostitute’ women became criminalised and contained (Laite 2008). These Acts forced women to undergo mandatory internal medical examinations. If refused they could be subject to up to three months imprisonment in a lock hospital. The Acts also bound women to a police and medical registration system (Walkowitz 1980). This registration system was similarly applied to the surveillance of the urban poor as it extended to the neighbourhoods and communities where the women lived (Walkowitz 1977). Therefore, these Acts were also ‘part of the institutional and legal efforts to contain occupational and geographical mobility [and] an attempt to clarify the relationship between the unrespectable and respectable poor’ (Walkowitz 1977: 72).

Although the attitudes established during the Victorian period ultimate set the foundations for how women who sell sex are treated and perceived, the twentieth-century has also influenced how women who sell sex are viewed, managed and contained. Sir David Maxwell Fyfe, the Secretary of State for the Home Office, commissioned a committee chaired by John Wolfendon to examine both homosexuality and prostitution after concern that the streets of London gave a ‘deplorable impression of British morality to foreign visitors’ (Self 2004: 3). The findings from this committee became known as the *Wolfendon Report* (1957) and its recommendations ultimately resulted in the *Street Offences Act* (1959). The report ‘attempted to bring the existing disparate body of legislation into a new synthesis’ (Matthews 2003: 491), but according to Self (2003: 9) only ‘strengthened the impact of a law which incorporated the ‘common prostitute’ as a member of a legally defined group of women and placed a judicial stamp of approval on [the type of] social stigmatisation’.

According to the *Wolfendon Report* the law is only to concern itself with public morality, not private morality; and thus only to involve itself with prostitution when it affects the wider public. In Britain selling sex is regarded as a private matter between two consenting adults and therefore not criminalised at present. However, prostitutes/sex workers face a paradoxical situation as although providing sex for payment is not illegal, several pieces of legislation designed to control and contain the effects of prostitution/commercial sex are in place, making it increasingly difficult for those providing sexual services to do so without breaking a number of laws. Therefore prostitute/sex working women are only criminalised when they (publically) attempt to work or work together from a property, creating a brothel (Bresler 1988).

Within Britain’s current legal framework women who sell sex are still considered a social ‘problem’ and public nuisance, constituting them as different from other women. Taking a neo-abolitionist model of regulating sex work, the law aims to prevent sex work by making it extremely difficult for sex workers to work legally by criminalising the activities associated with it (Klambauer 2018). For example, it is not currently an offence to operate as either a private prostitute/sex worker or an outcall escort, but the activity of soliciting in a public place (which some sex workers depend on for business) for the purpose of prostitution remains illegal (as set out in the Street Offences Act 1959). It is also illegal for women to advertise or perform sex services in public space. The *Sexual Offences Act* (1956, 1959, 1985, and 2003) which sets out offences relating to prostitution was last amended in 2003 which made managing or assisting in the management of a brothel, and landlords letting property to be used for the purpose of a brothel, criminal offences. This 2003 amendment also made pimping for financial gains an offence, along with prohibiting child prostitution and setting out offences relating to sex trafficking. The most recent legislation passed in the UK regarding sex work is that of the *Policing and Crime Act* 2009 which made it an offence to purchase or attempt to purchase sex or sexual services from any person using force.

In 2012 the Scottish Government announced that they were considering criminalising those who purchase sex which has since sparked debate about whether England and Wales should consider adopting this ‘Nordic Model’ (Topping 2012). The ‘Nordic Model’ refers to Nordic countries such as Sweden, Norway and Iceland who, attempting to tackle the demand rather than the supply, have criminalised the buyers of sexual services and have thus placed pressure on others to consider following suit and adopting a similar approach. The fact that the UK, apart from Northern Ireland in 2015, has chosen not to follow this approach suggests that women who sell sex, rather than men who buy sex, are still largely regarded as the ‘problem’.

Furthermore, deliberation as to whether prostitution/commercial sex should be decriminalised/legalised/regulated constitutes much current debate. Commentators have suggested that the current laws that govern prostitution are outdated and contradictory and that they merely shift the ‘problem’ underground away from public display. This ultimately heightens risk for sex workers, or those who sell sex, move on to work from other area’s, venues and establishments such as saunas and lap-dancing clubs (Hubbard 2006; Sanders *et al* 2009; Sanders 2006;). Such legal constraints and the ‘out of sight, out of mind’ attitude often force sex workers to operate in lonely and isolating conditions which further risks their safety and increase the dangers of experiencing violence and abuse.

During the 1970s ‘vice’ squads emerged to deal with prostitution related crimes and are still in effect today. These task forces specifically target ‘moral’ crimes and focus on protecting the general public from the unwanted anti-social behaviour that these crimes often cause. Since, the *Police Reform Act* (2002) sex workers identified as persistently causing annoyance and problems for neighbourhoods and communities may be served with an *Anti-Social Behaviour Order* (ASBO). These are civil orders made in court designed to protect the public from individuals who engage in anti-social behaviours that cause stress or harassment. When a sex worker receives an ASBO they are usually prevented from visiting a certain area, if they breach this order then they become guilty of committing a criminal offence. Alternatively some women may receive a *Criminal Related Anti-Social Behaviour Order* (CRASBO); essentially an ASBO added on to a criminal conviction and may be accompanied by restrictions. Again, the criminalisation of sex workers is an aspect of their life history stories which this research explores from their view point.

In 1983 the successful campaigning of activists saw imprisonment removed as a penalty for soliciting, however the introduction of recent anti-social behaviour legislation has seen the ‘reappearance of imprisonment through the back door without any wide ranging public debate or consultation’ (Campbell and O’Neill 2006: xvi). This legislation is used to control, restrain and (physically) contain prostitute women (Graham 2017). However, these orders are often selectively enforced and have been accused of being a fast track to criminalise sex workers and do little to improve the conditions of those involved (Sagar 2007). This regulatory framework , which Corbin (1990) highlights as tolerance, containment and surveillance, still views women who sell sex as ‘unruly’ and a ‘problem’ that needs to be contained for public protection.

The law is a powerful tool that not only prohibits certain acts but also establishes what types of (feminine) behaviour are considered deviant and therefore what is considered correct. Current UK law, which continues to be framed around morality, implies that selling sex remains unacceptable and does little to change the perceptions of those who actively choose to work within the sex industry, continuing to regulate female sexuality more generally. Although selling sex is not illegal in Britain it is still not regarded ‘as an acceptable way of life and the general intention is to discourage the practice’ (Self 2003: 4), and as a result the women involved in selling sex are treated with less respect than ‘normal’ women, and deep-rooted prejudiced attitudes continue to flourish and sustain sex-working women in a position of low status and power and further ‘reproduces sex workers’ status as second-class citizens’ (Hubbard 2006: 28). A central purpose of my research is to explore if, and how, such popular attitudes impact on sex workers sense of self-worth and identity.

**Feminist Perspectives on the Prostitute Body**

Prostitution/commercial sex and feminism have a long-standing contentious relationship with different strands of feminism offering diverse interpretations of the sale of sex using various theoretical lenses. The apparent ‘golden age’ of feminist consensus on prostitution, a time when feminist views on prostitution were somewhat homogenous, emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century around debates on the *Contagious Diseases Act* (Bell 1994). This legal deed, which united feminists in their campaigns, was seen as the ultimate ‘profanation of the dignity and individuality of women’ (Jeffreys 1997: 34) constructing the prostitute as a ‘failed’ body that was ‘profane, diseased, and excluded’, signalling to all women to suppress their sexual desires and disassociate themselves with the deviant activity of prostitution (Bell 1994: 2) or anything other than monogamous marital sex.

Since early wave feminism sought to address ‘inequalities of a patriarchal culture which disadvantaged women in all areas of public and private life’ (Sanders *et al* 2009: 5), fluctuating feminist views on prostitution/commercial sex have continued to develop. However, there remain two prominent polarised perspectives on ‘the prostitute body’, two dichotomies that characterise the sale of sex; victimhood and exploitation, and choice, agency and ‘free will’. Both divisions have been criticised as overly simplistic and avoiding the complexities and realities of sex worker experiences (which are explored in further detail throughout this segment and in my analysis).

Feminists who hold a radical or ‘abolitionist’ perspective focus on the eradication of prostitution because they view it as the purest expression of men’s dominance over women and the ‘absolute embodiment of patriarchal male privilege’ (Kesler 2002: 19; Levy and Jakobsson 2013). That privilege, as long as it continues, contributes, through the medium of sexuality, to the wider oppression and subordination of women increasing their dependency on men (Jeffreys 1997). For abolitionist feminists:

The prostitute symbolizes the value of women in society. She is paradigmatic of women’s social, sexual and economic subordination, in that her status is the basic unit by which all women’s value is measured and to which all women can be reduced (Giobbe 1990: 77).

The idea of prostitution as ‘sexual slavery’, a violation of women’s human rights, was first coined by Kathleen Barry and remains a foundational value that informs the political and legal viewpoints of radical feminists. Feminists, Kathleen Barry (1979; 1995), Andrea Dworkin (1987; 1989), Catherine MacKinnon (1987; 1989), Kate Millet (1975) and Carole Pateman (1983; 1988), understand prostitution as the epitome of oppression and violence against women. Pateman (1988: 56) states that prostitution is ‘one of those most graphic examples of men’s domination over women’, as womanhood is ‘conﬁrmed in sexual activity, and when a prostitute contracts out the use of her body she is thus selling herself in a very real sense’ (Pateman 1988: 207). My research explores this view through sex workers self-accounts of the act of *selling yourself.*

Through examining social relations radical feminists highlight women’s disadvantaged position in a capitalist society and how this is maintained through sexual practices: ‘sexuality is to feminism, what work is to Marxism; that which is most one’s own and yet that which is most taken away’ (MacKinnon 1982: 515). Central to these arguments is the premise that prostitution is wrong and inexcusable as it degrades *all* women and is therefore the foundation of *all* sexual exploitation of women (Barry 1995: 65). Pateman (1988: 207) highlights the association between the self and degradation by drawing on the relationship between sexuality and the sense of self to argue that:

The sexual contract reveals the patriarchal construction on the difference between masculinity and femininity is the political difference between freedom and subjection, and that sexual mastery is the major means through which men affirm their manhood.

Others contend that there can be no positive experience for women selling their bodies to men for sex, those who claim there is, are only subject to a kind of false consciousness (Barry 1979; Brownmiller 1975; Millet 1971). For Farley (2005: 951), the domination of, and submission to, male sexuality is apparent in the damage inflicted on the women involved in prostitution which is ‘multi-traumatic with extremely high rates of physical and sexual violence perpetuated against people who are vulnerable’. The radical feminist theory of sexuality that developed out of the women’s movement informs feminists such as Mackinnon (1989: 315) who argue that prostitution, rape and sexual harassment, among other practices such as pornography, ‘express and actualize the distinctive power of men over women in society’.

However, scholars such as Shrage (1989) argue that the commercialisation of sexuality is not innately oppressive to women; rather that it is the widespread acceptance of particular social and cultural values that marginalise women. Shrage argues that it is the cultural context of prostitution that maintains and reinforces patriarchal principles and is oppressive to sex workers and women more generally. These cultural conventions include the acceptance of a strong male sex drive and an association between sexuality and identity, which in turn constitutes a double standard where ‘promiscuous’ women are seen as ‘damaged’ and of lower status.

Radical feminist theory on prostitution has also been accused of overemphasising gendered power dynamics; consequently all prostitutes are reduced to their services and all women are reduced to prostitutes in their approach. A key criticism is that such an image of the prostitute as sexually subordinate ultimately sustains and reinforces the myths and stigmas associated with the sex industry (Shrage 1994). Women’s identities are reduced to the single trait of gender without any consideration given to other identity traits such as social-class, race and ethnicity. Radical feminists ascribe a particular defining value to sex and no value to other body mediated activities such as domestic work and childcare (Scoular 2004).

Furthermore, the confusion between paid sex and ‘genuine’ sex which Pateman (1988: 204) defines as ‘the reciprocal expression of desire and unilateral subjection to sexual acts with the consolidation of payment: it is the difference for women between freedom and subjection’, fuels ‘whore’ stigma, and ignites ‘deeply felt anxieties about women trespassing the dangerous boundaries between private and public’ (McClintock 1992: 73). This failure to identify the role of stigma in constructing the marginal status of sex work means that radical feminists:

Often underestimate how much of what they identify as harmful in prostitution is a product, not of the inherent character of sex work or sexuality but rather of the speciﬁc regimes of criminalization and denigration that serve to marginalize and oppress sex workers while constraining and distorting sex work’s radical potential (Zatz 1997: 289).

Sex worker rights discourse began to emerge in the 1970s in opposition to the victimisation of sex worker perspective and it put forward a new perspective based on human rights, sexual freedom and diversity of experience. Importantly it argued that:

Claiming the ‘injured prostitute’ as the ontological and epistemological basis of feminist truth [radical feminist work] forecloses the possibility of political confrontation with sex workers who claim a different experience (Doezema 2001: 28).

Scholars such as Phoenix (1995) argue that traditional feminist debates surrounding prostitution focus largely on issues of coercion and control. Strong disputes have since arisen between radical and what O’Connell Davidson (2002) terms ‘sex work’ perspectives, in which the latter understand sex work as work like any other, recognising and accepting that many women enter the industry for economic reasons free from coercion and involvement of third parties. Again, this constitutes a theme I explored in eliciting sex workers own accounts of their lives. This standpoint therefore argues that women should have access to the same legal and political rights and protections as other workers in more traditionally acceptable forms of employment (Boyle 1994; Jackson 2016; Jarrett 1997).

Similarly,liberal feminists call for legal reform in order to protect the women involved in such a trade with reformist feminists campaigning for the decriminalisation of the profession. Liberal feminism recognises individuality and choice in the sex industry and argues that by decriminalising the women involved it will provide them with healthier and safer lifestyles that will permit them to access services and to assess their health and well-being without such strong shame and stigma. These feminists campaign for women’s right to work without the fear of persecution or violence that they often fall subject to, arguing that for this to happen prostitution should be formally recognised as a legitimate, and more importantly, a respectable form of employment (Chapkis 1997; McLeod 1982). Similarly those belonging to the Prostitution Rights Movement argue that working women should be given the same rights of other employees, have equal status and protection before the law (Jenness 1993). In contrast, radical feminists strongly advocate that if sex work were to be either legalised or decriminalised it would only reinforce the viewpoint that women are second class citizens, merely in existence to satisfy male desires (Shulman 1980).

The late 1990s saw the development of ‘pro-sex feminists’ who highlight sex work as ‘performing erotic labour’ and aim to ‘help heal the schism within feminism that had developed around commercial sex’ (Chapkis 1997:1). Pro-sex feminists argue that ‘the feminist movement has failed the prostitute’ (Roberts 1994: xi), and that traditional feminist analysis of oppression is not the only lens through which to interpret feminism and commercial sex. Instead, authors such as Jill Nagle (1997) and Wendy Chapkis (1997: 1) provide a platform for the voices of feminist sex workers highlighting that prostitution can be empowering and ‘liberatory terrain for women’.

Although feminism may be conflicted over prostitution/commercial sex, feminists meet unanimously in their consensus that women who work within the sex economy are deemed different from ‘normal’ women and suffer the consequences of being ‘othered’ by mainstream society. ‘Othering’ prostitute women causes them to experience stigma and marginalisation and thus portrays them as lesser than ordinary. Although different feminist perspectives/theories contrastingly present the prostitute/sex worker body, they share the common ambition to highlight women’s experiences (just as this research does), and improve the conditions, of working within the sex industry. My research may also help inform feminist theoretical accounts, through the perceptions held by sex workers themselves of their work, experiences and identity rather than others’ (often well meaning academics and policy makers) presumptions about the same.

The next section of this chapter explores the long-standing perceptions of women who sell sex. It highlights how media and fictional text often romanticise or sensationalise stereotypical images, before concluding with exploring how the stigma associated with sex work in such material may affect those involved in selling sex and those interacting with them, which is a key theme of this research.

**Popular Perceptions of Women who Sell Sex: ‘Whore’ Stereotypes and Fantasies**

Since the Victorian period when prostitution and the women involved were regarded as a social evil and a site of shame, the prostitute body has been portrayed variously and depicted differently over time. As described earlier, traditionally prostitute women have been portrayed as ‘dirty’ bodies, the carriers of disease, social nuisances, and sites of immorality deserving of the exclusion they receive. The dominant image of the prostitute woman remains the streetwalker who is described as ‘damaged’ with an irregular and unstable home life, a background of childhood abuse and neglect, low educational attainment, difficulty in adjusting to school and/or employment, addiction to drugs and/or alcohol, and extensive experience of institutions such as refuges, drug rehabilitation clinics, and care homes (Hoigard and Finstad 1992: 15-16; see also Dalla 2004; Hubbard and Sanders 2003; Phoenix 2000; Weitzer 2009). Again, these are representations this research seeks to explore through qualitative interviews with sex workers themselves, which provides a platform for their voices to be heard, amongst the myriad academic and policy accounts that speak on their behalf.

Problematic drug-use is also a central focus of the ‘dirty’ streetwalker (which is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four). Previous research reports strong correlation between drug-addiction and sex work suggesting drug-misuse plays a pivotal role in prostitution entry and those who work the streets selling ‘themselves’ do so to fund an ever consuming drug habit, whose lives are devoted to the daily struggle of coping with addiction that compels them to sex-work to ensure their next fix (Dalla 2002; Erickson *et al* 2000; Farley 2003; Farley and Barkan 1998; Hoigard and Finstad 1992; Maher *et al* 1996; May and Hunter 2006; William and Cluse-Tolar 2002). Research demonstrates much lower levels of problematic drug use from indoor sex work spaces, and where it does exist, it remains hidden (Cusick 1998; May *et al* 1999; Church *et al* 2001; Sanders 2005a). The ‘clear demarcation between street and off-street sex work’ (May and Hunter 2006: 170) is explored further in the next chapter.

Similarly, reports within the media support these stereotypical images by focusing on characteristics that portray women who sell sex in a negative and derogatory way. Illustrations attached to such reports highlight scantily clad women on dark street-corners eyeing vehicles and potential customers as they pass in the night. Such images reinforce and reproduce the stigma and outdated, unrepresentative picture of the contemporary prostitute/sex worker (For examples see BBC News 2008; Furness 2012 for The Telegraph; Heffer 2012 for The Daily Star; Smith 2007 for The Guardian).

Attention has since been paid to the prostitute body as one subject to severe violence, force and exploitation and consequently in need of ‘rescue’ and reintegration. Prostitute women working under these conditions are portrayed as victims of circumstance who have been failed by agencies and authorities whose role it is to stop, prevent, rescue and support those involved in a world of violence, abuse and crime. The prostitute as a violated victim is usually deemed more worthy than the common street-working woman who freely ‘chooses’ to sell her body, she is a ‘real’ victim deserving of sympathy and support that others do not. As earlier discussed, there are feminists who argue *all* forms of sex work are exploitative, not only when coercion is involved, as no woman can ever truly choose to sell her sexual self; instead women are forced to provide sexual services and need to be ‘saved’ from a violent and abusive life. This is particularly apparent when underage girls or trafficked victims are involved (Barry 1979; Farley 2003; Jeffreys 1997; Mackinnon 1982; O’Neill 2001; Shrage 1994; Stark and Whisnant 2004).

More recently, since the growth of the adult entertainment industry and the commodification and commercialisation of the (female) body, which has seen a diversification of sexual activities and services within the sex industry, a new popular stereotypical image of the sex worker has emerged; the high class call girl/escort. The call girl/escort/entrepreneurial prostitute resides in contrast to the street-walker at the top of the commercial sex hierarchy, tolerated through her mysterious and ‘exclusive’ qualities (O’Connell Davidson 1998; Weitzer 2009).

Portrayals of sex workers in news and wider media reports, television drama’s and film, fictional books and texts, also hold influence over how those who sell sex are viewed by wider society. The Hollywood film *Pretty Woman* widely circulated the idea that prostitute women really just want to be, and can be, ‘rescued’; rescued by wealthy, handsome, successful men who fall in love with them, ‘saving’ them from ever having to sell their body to another man again. In reality this scenario is not commonplace, not all ‘prostitute’ women get ‘picked up’ by nice respectable men, fall in love with their clients, or live happily ever after. Sex work is not a fairytale, but equally not all women who sell sex report accounts of severe violence and/or abuse but actually experience a very wide range of encounters which are explored in my research.

Like *Pretty Woman*, the *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* series based on the blog and books by the pseudonymous ‘Belle de Jour’ can be seen to be glamorising sex work through its humorous approach arguably promoting prostitution/sex work as easy and enjoyable (although some research has shown that women can and do enjoy sex work, see Smith 2017). Belle is portrayed as a sexy independent woman who openly enjoys no strings sex and the money associated with her profession, displaying prostitution/sex work as an obvious and natural career option. Again, *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* depicts sex work as a fantasy with a happy ending. Although the main character in *Pretty Woman* is a street-based prostitute and Belle a high end escort they are both seen as strong attractive women who entertain and engage with pleasant clients, again previous research has shown that this is not always the case (Sanders 2005a).

The romanticisation of sex work through film and television drama such as the two mentioned, which are only examples of many, have seen the perceptions of prostitutes/sex workers be moved away from vulnerable victims and diseased undeserving ‘whores’ to strong independent attractive women who take pleasure and enjoyment in their work. This contrast causes concern as the two extremes, common to classy and exploited to entrepreneur, lack explanation, ignore those who fall outside of these categories and perpetuate myths about gender roles and expectations.

For the past decade there has also been an increase in research on indoor workers such as erotic-dancers, and those who work from other entertainment venues, saunas, brothel’s, working flats and even their own homes after much critique over the concentration of research on the outdoor sex market. Indoor-women are portrayed as different from the diseased street prostitute and are often credited with having greater agency and control over their working lives (Sanders 2002; Sanders 2004a; Sanders 2004c; Sanders 2005a; Sanders 2005b).

Indoor workers, who are reported to make up eighty-percent of the sex worker population (Weitzer 2009), are generally regarded as more respectable and tolerable than the typical street worker, but only when they conform to societal conditions by keeping their presence and activities hidden from public view and display. Although indoor workers are commonly perceived as having greater societal status than the common street prostitute, they are regarded as having less status and respect than those who ‘escort’ themselves, with these women remaining at the top of the prostitution hierarchy (O’Connell Davidson 1998). My research considers the differences and similarities between different sex work contexts to investigate these assumptions.

The relationships between fictive and real accounts of prostitution/sex work are unclear and ‘contradictory in contemporary culture, but both are two parts of the same whole’ (O’Neill 2001: 148). Each ‘group’ of (female) prostitute/sex workers are perceived differently, with the long-standing history and stereotype of the street prostitute still remaining the greatest threat to the social order, normative feminine respectability and general public decency. Whore stereotypes and fantasies are transferable to all women, particularly those who transgress the boundaries used to socially and morally contain women more generally, and they become ‘an index for all women’ to live by (O’Neill 2001: 149). These stereotypes and fantasies highlighted in research, fictional and media reports represent women who sell sex in a way that ensures the continuation of ‘whore stigma’ (Pheterson 1986: 1) and defamation that restricts women from living free from fear of condemnation and also often restricts their access to support and services (Lazarus *et al* 2012).

There are many characteristics of sex work, types of sex work and sex worker experiences that are missing from the popular media and literature reports surrounding the sale of sex for payment that research has since sought to discover and relay their accounts and experiences. Among the hype of the street whore, the trafficked victim and the fantasy of the high class escort those that practice prostitution in other forms, from other walks of life, who engage in such an activity for a variety of individual reasons are often forgotten. The everyday lives of much of these women remain hidden and without understanding therefore the true nature of contemporary sex work cannot be fully appreciated and understood. My research hopes to explore the reality of sex work beyond the popular myths by talking to women themselves about the how, why and what of their work.

**The Stigma of Sex Work: ‘Whore’ Realities**

The popular stereotypes and fantasies described above must ultimately impact, although to what extent remains seemingly unknown, on both the working and private lives of women who choose to provide sexual services for payment in today’s sex market. As discussed, wider society accepts that the institution of prostitution exists but still fails to accept the prostitute herself, and this threat to traditional femininity punishes her with the ‘whore stigma’ (O’Neill 1996; 1997; Pheterson 1986):

The stigma associated with being a prostitute may make it impossible for these women to return to more legitimate lifestyles. Thus, it is extremely difficult for women to identify themselves as prostitutes. Often, those who have made a disclosure have lost so much that they have nothing left to lose. The women who are unable to hide their status are often the most vulnerable (Weiner 1996: 100).

For women who sell sex the social sting of the label ‘prostitute’ may evoke feelings of stigma, shame, and exclusion; whore stigma. Pheterson (186) argues that a ‘whore’ is an unquestionably female role, and although men may feel some form of stigma when deviating from traditional models of masculinity and heterosexuality, they do not experience the severity of whore stigma but are instead deemed ‘unworthy’. The ‘whore stigma’ felt by sex workers is not bound to one stratum but felt by all women involved in the sex industry, although some may experience different levels of the stigma, as my findings indicate. Any woman who associates herself with the selling of sex is automatically consigned to the margins as an ‘other’ for destabilising the social ordering of sex acts (Bell 1994; Koken 2012).

The term ‘stigma’ originated from the Greeks who used the term as a visual aid to identify the unusual. By defining an individual as ‘unusual’, we automatically realise and give support to a particular social and/or cultural norm. A stigma, as Goffman (1963) describes, is a ‘special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype’ (p.14). Such a relationship has a discrediting effect on the individual who possesses such an attribute. Societies (normals) then construct a ‘stigma theory’ (p.15) to explain the inferiority of others, which in this case is that of the ‘whore stigma’.

Vulnerability to the whore stigma is increased by ‘shameful differentness’ (Goffman 1963: 167) and serves interests of societal groups and organisations by shaming women into feeling inadequate and immoral by utilising the stigma as a method of social control. This stigma:

require[s] the individual to be carefully secret about [her] failing to one class of persons, the police, while systematically exposing [herself] to other classes of persons, namely, clients, fellow members, connexions and the like (Goffman 1963: 93).

This requires ‘the prostitute’ to lead a double life - those who *think* they know her, and those who *really* know her – having two ‘circles’, neither knowing of the other and each having a different biography of the individual. The world of a person possessing a stigma becomes divided spatially by both personal (those who know you) and social identities (those who don’t) with management of both needed to control the ‘undesired differentness’ (Goffman 1963: 15). My research exposes that duality and assesses sex workers’ coping strategies and sense of self.

Goffman (1963) divides victims of stigma into two categories, ‘the discredited’ whose stigma is immediately visible, and ‘the discreditables’ whose stigma is not always known to the public. Prostitutes/sex workers fall into the latter category as their stigma is not doubtlessly obvious unless observed. This forces them to undergo an everyday dilemma – to display or not display - whereby they must employ management techniques to keep the stigma hidden. Goffman (1963) terms this management of undisclosed discrediting information as ‘passing off’, whereby sex workers often feign to be someone else. Sex workers may manage this by constructing a separate and very distinct identity that allows for the separation (from the self) and justification of selling sex (which is explored further in the next chapter).

Gender is also an important aspect of ‘the prostitute’ and a key component of whore stigma. Gender is perhaps the most significant categorisation of identity that permits attachment of cultural norms and social expectations of what is acceptable female behaviour (Katz 1979). Society imposes cultural characteristics and enforces a social dichotomy of conformity to what that particular society deems ideal femininity; anything outside of this code of behaviour is regarded as ‘troubling’ (Butler 1990). Gender norms are therefore maintained and policed through social taboos with those who fail to adhere to gender binaries ‘correctly’ being ‘punished’ within the social system.

Judith Butler (1990) stresses that gender is not something we have but something we ‘do’ and to perform the role of ‘prostitute’ challenges the ideals of normative femininity, both symbolically and literally. A prostitute fails to conform to traditional models of feminine respectability as she is consistently required to be sexually promiscuous when creating business, and openly discuss financial transactions. Therefore, by asserting her sexual authority and adopting an unnatural and unfeminine appetite for sexual experience she is accused of adopting a masculine role, which she is then punished for by the social system (Pheterson 1996; Shrage 1994).

The ‘whore stigma’ and projection of ideal femininity placed on women by mainstream societal norms and values increases vulnerability to other forms of stigmatisation and marginalisation. The consequences of whore stigma can be far reaching:

Being a prostitute makes a woman vulnerable to the loss of social services, removal of her children and termination of parental rights, expulsion from social support systems, such as family or church, rape or other violence, and arrest (Weiner 1996: 100).

Academics have highlighted how there is an important difference between those who self identify as ‘prostitutes’ and accept this, and those who trade sex for goods (Katz 1991; McKeganey and Barnard 1996). For some women who sell sex, the ‘prostitute’ identity may be resisted and instead accepted as a role that they perform in certain spaces/places. Women who choose to provide intimate services in today’s sex industry may experience the role of sex worker/prostitute differently from one another. Some may view sex work as a role that they adopt only when performing the position in certain times and spaces, whilst others may internalise this role and consequently take on a sex worker/prostitute identity and perceive sex work/prostitution as part of their lives that they are unable to separate from their personal self. Others may prioritise different identities over their role as a sex seller and may consequently experience conflict from competing identities.

It is important to understand how those who work within a stigmatised industry and adopt a morally criminalised, and ultimately marginalised, role experience the process of stigma and how this influences (or not) life choices and their wider sense of self. That understanding may impact on and improve attitudes, policies and practices around sex work. Sex workers may undertake other stigmatised identities and/or roles that they themselves may regard as more damaging to their character and self-esteem than the stigmatised identity/role of ‘prostitute’, but these are often overlooked as mainstream society continues to view women who sex work as the ultimate moral violation of womanhood. My research looks beyond the stereotypes and stigma of sex work to explore how women who sell sex perceive themselves, not only in relation to sex work but to their wider lives and identities.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore how societal attitudes to women who engage in prostitution/sex work have developed and changed (or not) with time by providing a historical overview of key developments in legislation, regulation, feminist, media and fictional portrayals that impact on how women who participate in selling sex are still perceived, and treated, as different and deviant bodies by wider society.

The UK sex market is ever shifting, evolving and expanding but the perceptions of those involved in such activities have remained largely unchallenged within the public and cultural imagination. The misrepresentations, romanticisation and sensationalisation of women who sell sex for payment ultimately have an effect on sex workers everywhere, from all demographics and across all strata. These stereotypes, fantasies and myths can cause workers to remain trapped, whereby they are often shamed and socially shunned as immoral women who are frequently outcast and excluded from mainstream activities.

Although some more recent research (not all UK based and discussed in Chapter Four) has attempted to capture diversity within the global sex-economy by exploring new forms of work, and ‘types’ of sex workers, often at the borders of prostitution (Colosi 2010; Cunningham *et al* 2018; Roberts *et al* 2010; Scoular 2016), and address some issues of stigma and separation management techniques (Barton 2007; Benoit 2015a; 2015b; Kamise 2013), they do little to explore the following questions, which this thesis addresses, in any great detail:

* Do women who work within the UK sex industry today perceive *themselves* as different to ‘other’ women? If so, how and why?
* *Are* women who work within the UK sex industry today different from ‘other’ women? If so, how?
* Do women who work within the UK sex industry today experience, absorb and/or internalise whore stigma? If so, how, and to what extent?
* Do women working across different strata of the UK sex industry today experience, absorb and/or internalise whore stigma differently from one another? If so, how?

The next chapter builds on the historical overview of the categorical prostitute woman discussed in this chapter by examining how ‘othering’ of the prostitute body is not natural, but rather constructed through the effects of power.

**Chapter Three**

Framing Sexuality and Subjectivity: Theoretical Foundations of the Subversive Body

As soon as you produce categories of what is normal, healthy and good, you produce other categories – the deviant... In some ways, forms of social-scientific knowledge and research make these people up – bring into being the categories into which they fit, and hence produce their subjectivities – as they go along (Danaher *et al* 2000: 79).

‘Prostitute’, and most recently ‘sex worker’, are categories for (predominantly) female bodies. As discussed, such categories have been processed throughout history and undergone modifications following developments in knowledge and understanding, yet these categories have failed to transform into anything other than ‘deviant’. Classifications such as these are not natural but rather part of the ‘effects of power’ (Foucault 1976), present in all societies. Those effects of power include marking out behaviours that are deemed right, ‘normal’, healthy and acceptable and therefore anything other is deemed wrong, ‘abnormal’, unhealthy and unacceptable.

‘Normal’ does not require pressing thought or analysis, we tend to take it for granted, ‘deviant’ on the other hand does as it presents a challenge to the taken for granted normality of our world. Women who sell sex fail to comply with normalised models of behaviour and are therefore of immediate social interest and concern. Because she transgresses not only ideals of conventionalised true femininity but also broader marital and heteronormative sexual boundaries, the prostitute/sex worker positions herself as a ‘subversive body’ (Butler 1993). That subversiveness attracts negative value labels which are then used to classify her socially and potentially subjectively.

Sexuality is considered a crucial site of our subjective identities - who we are (Foucault 1976). However, the subjectivities of contemporary British female sex workers (who they are and their own sense of self) have received only cursory attention, with literature often ignoring other aspects of their identities that formulate their ‘subjectivities’, or the ‘self’, in favour of concentrating purely on their engagement in sex work (what they do). Whilst this may be useful in highlighting the mechanical and operational details of the sex industry it does little to unveil *who* these women are and raise understanding of their personal journeys. This research addresses these issues by prioritising the voices of female sex workers, providing them with the opportunity to tell their life-stories in their own way, without feeling limited to only specific questions and/or topics accordant with the research hypotheses and aims.

This chapter provides a context to better inform and understand current perceptions of (female) sex workers, and (female) sexuality more broadly, laying theoretical foundations informed by Foucauldian understandings of how power disciplines and regulates (female) sexuality and (female) bodies that fail to adhere to societal codes of normality and morality. Subjectivity and the formation of identity and the self are also considered before feminist interpretations of Foucault’s work are assessed. This chapter closes with a discussion positioning the history of power and sexuality for my own research on female sex workers. It highlights how the theory discussed in this chapter will be taken forward within this research to explore both perceptions of sex work, and sex workers self-projections.

**Foucault, Power and Sexuality: A Brief Overview**

French post-structuralist Michel Foucault has been hugely influential in shaping understandings of power claiming that ‘power is everywhere’ and ‘comes from everywhere’ (Foucault 1998: 63), and is therefore not fixed according to either agency or structure.

Power dominates Foucault’s genealogical works (*Discipline and Punish* and *the History of Sexuality Vol 1*) – genealogies are local and specific histories but unlike traditional histories they focus on disruption rather than continuity, and therefore challenge the concept of progress and raise questions about how current practices become the way they are.

Rather than drawing on a grand theory of power, Foucault concerns himself with the practices through which power is exercised and the relationships that sustain it. He is ‘particularly interested in the complex of ‘power-knowledge’, the way in which power operates through the construction of particular knowledges’ (Weeks 2012: 8).For Foucault, power transcends politics and is an everyday social phenomenon present in all societies. It is fluid, changeable, and diffused and embodied through organisations, groups, discourses, individuals, knowledge and ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault 1975).

Such ‘regimes’ are historically specific instruments which create discourses that function as ‘true’ during particular times and spaces. Like power, ‘regimes’ also remain in constant negotiation pervading society through accepted forms of scientific knowledge and understandings of ‘truth’. According to Foucault ‘truth’ in a ‘political economy’ is characterised by five important factors;

1. It is centred on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it.
2. It is subject to constant economic and political incitement.
3. It is the object under diverse forms, of immense diffusion and consumption.
4. It is produced and transmitted under the control dominated by, but not exclusive to, a few great political and economic apparatuses.
5. It is the issue of a whole political and social confrontation (Rabinow 1984: 73).

Institutions which produce these ‘truths’ include, but are not limited to, education systems, court systems, as well as religious and medical agencies. Such associations also provide surveillance of ‘subjects’ (people) allowing them to be disciplined accordingly. It is also important to acknowledge that different ‘truths’, practices and understandings on sexuality change across history and cultures (Howe 2008). Foucault uses children’s sexuality as an example of this – in the Middle Ages it was accepted that children were sexually aware, but by the Victorian period only sex between heterosexual couples was accepted and other sexualities remained hidden (Foucault 1976; 1998).

**Power, Normality and Morality: Governing (Female) Bodies**

Although certain characteristics of power and who/what monopolises it may have changed with time, its functioning has not. Power continues to act as a form of social control, and through various technologies and apparatus teaches us what is ‘right’, ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’ and consequently what is ‘wrong’, ‘deviant’ and ‘unhealthy’ (Foucault 1976).

‘Discursive norms’ (policies established by disciplinary institutions) ‘organise their practices through actively producing scandalous identities, or subject roles, [which] serve as the ‘other’, against which normality can be measured’ (Danaher *et al* 2000:61). Only those who meet these standards of normality are considered acceptable members of, and awarded ‘normal’ status within, society. Power also works to constrain sexual bodies and consequently we learn to value specific kinds of sexuality and sexual behaviours and deem others harmful to the correct social order (Butler 1993). We are continually being judged in terms of normality including our sexual preferences, attitudes and feelings and we are classified by our bodies and bodily functions. Women labelled ‘promiscuous’ (such as prostitutes/sex workers) are considered ‘perverse’ and occupy a lesser status for breaching ‘normal’ respectable feminine ideals of monogamy and passivity.

During the early modern era, which was characterised by dramatic and public acts of power performed upon an individual body when criminal or unacceptable behaviours were displayed, ‘promiscuous’ women would have been tortured and executed (Mansfield 2000). Fortunately, such displays are no longer part of everyday social life. Instead, ‘quiet coercions’ govern social bodies. These are filtered through various ‘moral systems’ such as the family, imposing institutional values and judgements on individuals (Mansfield 2000). These operate within society at both macro (formal) and micro (informal) levels and can therefore discipline subjects, such as women who sell sex, both overtly and covertly.

We are trained through such ‘moral systems’ to value particular bodies and behaviours as ‘normal’, and to regard those that fail to adhere to such codes as ‘damaged’ (Foucault 1975; 1976). Particular moral codes are then imbued with ethical value as of subjective and social value; Foucault argues that both moral codes and ethical behaviours are important as they act as a technology regulating social relations and relations with the self.

Foucault uses the prison in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) to illustrate how institutional disciplinary and surveillance techniques circulate throughout the whole of society shaping how individuals behave and how they ‘see’ the world. Power manifests itself on the body through a ‘monitoring gaze’; we are incessantly exposed to the gaze of others, and ourselves, monitoring our bodies and assessing our morals, ultimately influencing our values and behaviours (Foucault 1975).

From birth the body is:

Evaluated, measured, tested and categorised with the purpose of reading and determining its ‘truth’. That truth – or those truths – can be obtained by comparing the body and its markers to the various discourses of knowledge produced by different institutions (Danaher *et al* 2000: 77).

Bodies do not always comply with ‘truths’ or social norms and consequently call into question the hegemonic force of regulatory law. (Sexed) bodies are policed through public discourses, as the types of bodies we possess mark us socially – for example, young or old. We are born into different body types then our appearances and behaviours are defined through specific institutions and political histories define our appearance and behaviours (Howe 2008; Wykes and Gunter 2005). So effectively social ‘rules’ are ‘written’ on the body which shape or even determine social actions – how women and men should sit, for example, needs to be adhered to in order to convey the modesty or authority associated with femininity or masculinity.

Consequently, the social identities and behaviours we define as feminine are products of cultural and historical forces rather than natural; ‘one is not born, but becomes a woman’ (Simone de Beauvoir 1952: 249). These writings shape both the way we see ourselves, our mental self-concept, how we perform our bodily selves and also how others see and evaluate usand our actions. It is important to recognise that the categories and ‘markers’ created by institutions are not natural, but are actually the ‘effects of power’ (Foucault 1976). As mentioned in the introduction, such classifications are ‘subject to change and transformation as new knowledge develops’ but nevertheless the effort is to regulate subjects of societies (Danaher *et al* 2000: 77).

For Foucault ‘dividing practices’ separate divergent identities from the normal (for example, hospitals are used to divide the healthy from the sick), working to qualify or disqualify individuals as ‘proper’ members of society and treating those who violate that propriety in places of confinement such as prisons, hospitals and asylums (Foucault 1975). Such classifications produce identities that are different from the social norm. For Foucault that process is part of the operationalisation of a technology of power which reproduces the social and subjective identity through discourse. Discourses of sex and sexuality reproduce models of normal and abnormal sexuality which relate closely to acceptable and unacceptable gendered subjective and social identity. This chapter now considers that formation of (feminine) identity and assesses feminist interpretations of Foucault.

**Subjects and Subjectivity: Identity and the Self**

For Foucault power comes before the subject (individual) and everything that make up our selves – bodies, values and behaviours. Such characteristics are actually the ‘effects of power’, making subjects (people) the material of power. Like power, identity is not fixed but rather a shifting and temporary construction. Identity is not something we ‘have’ but rather what we communicate to others during our interactions with them. A Foucauldian view rejects the idea that subjects (people) are ‘natural’ or have a ‘real’ identity within themselves, arguing instead that such discourse is just a way of referring to ‘the self’ in different historical periods (Mansfield 2000).

Who is ‘the self’ is an important question that has dominated philosophical thought for many years because when the self is determined that shapes how a person should be treated and how they should treat others (Foucault 1976). The ‘self’ is created through various ‘technologies of the self’ and ultimately affect how people see themselves, how they come to understand the world, how they behave and the values and hopes they develop.

‘Technologies of the self’ are techniques that allow individuals to work on their bodies, regulating their thoughts and behaviours. Such techniques are, for Foucault, channels to purity and happiness as they ensure ‘self-knowledge’; an important technology as only by knowing the truth about oneself can we work towards perfectibility (Martin *et al* 1988). In this sense, caring for oneself is ethical as it produces a person who interacts with others with integrity.

There is no straightforward social identity:

An individuals’ understanding of their own identity changes, depending on circumstances. Different factors – such as gender, race, age, ethnicity and religion – may be important one day and irrelevant the next; and we all have many (potential) identities, and belong to a variety of different groups (Danaher *et al* 2000:88).

Subjectivity has become a mode of social administration and organisation: we define and organise ourselves according to authoritative ideals of what is good and are apparently ‘free’ to choose, but in reality there is one ‘right’ choice available to us.

Foucault also explores the importance of a name which denotes identity and differentiates one subject from another; a technology of differentiation: ‘human beings across cultures and across history have named themselves, both as communities and as individuals, and have denied names – and hence ‘real’ subjectivity’’ (Danaher *et al* 2000: 127). To deny a name, is to deny identity, which therefore results in losing subjectivity. Because you aren’t ‘normal’ your subjectivity isn’t ‘real’. Our identities allow us to take on subject positions such as mother, daughter, worker and friend or in relation to my research: ‘prostitute’, sex worker or ‘whore’.

Foucault’s writings on ‘subjects’ change throughout his career. In his early work Foucault focuses on how people do not make their own meanings or control their own lives, but rather have their lives scripted for them by social forces and institutions such as schools and the media. However, in his later work Foucault pays concern to how individuals negotiate their own identities using ‘arts of the self’ rather than ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault 1984a; 1984b; Taylor 2014; Strozier 2002). The next section considers those progressions in Foucault’s work and explores feminist assessments of his thinking, before a final discussion positioning the history of power and sexuality in relation to my own research.

**Foucault and Feminism: Praise, Criticism and Misinterpretation**

It is no secret that female bodies are perceived differently from the bodies of men. Unlike men, women are reduced to their bodies, they *appear* whereas men *act*; ‘women watch themselves being looked at…she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight’ (Berger 2008: 41), men watch women, and women must continually watch themselves as objects watched by men. Feminists see that reduction as an operation of patriarchal power and when discussing power in relation to the body feminists draw on Foucault’s work more than any other poststructuralist thinker, particularly his genealogies (*Discipline and Punish and the History of Sexuality Volume 1*). However, feminist scholars remain divided as to the usefulness of Foucault’s work, largely because in his work Foucault barely discussed gender or patriarchal power.

Key feminists such as Judith Butler (1993), Susan Bordo (1993), and Jana Sawicki (1991) find Foucault’s work on the body, power and subjectivity promising and productive as his understandings of power in relation to the body can be used by feminists to explain women’s oppression (see McLaren 2002 for a discussion). His suggestion that power is not an innate quality of the body, but rather the affect of historical and cultural power relations, provides feminists with an analytical framework in which to show how women’s experience is controlled within ‘certain culturally determined images of feminine sexuality’ (McNay 1992: 3).

However, scholars such as Nancy Hartsock (1998), Somer Brodribb (1992) and Rosi Braidotti (1994) deem Foucault’s work dangerous for feminism. Foucault stands accused of painting women as passive bodies by placing emphasis on the negative and repressive effects of power on the body rather than subjectivity or empowerment, which ultimately contradicts feminist aims of re-discovering the experiences of women (McNay 1992). If this critical view is right sex workers will self-stigmatise and absorb the negative and denigrative cultural meanings associated with sex work leading to self-stigmatisation. If not right that may be able to resist such label and invert or subvert them to negotiate counter to negative accounts which enables a more positive identity. My research seeks to explore these theoretical possibilities.

Foucault is also accused of being gender-blind and andocentric (Bartky 1988, Braidotti 1991; O’Brien 1982) by failing to recognise the separation of sex and gender, and accepting gender as natural thus naturalising women’s oppression and making change impossible (Wittig 1992). Given all his work on sexuality, it is surprising that Foucault does not distinguish between male and female bodies or male and female disciplinary practices. However, he does touch on sexual difference in his later work when discussing the formation of the ethical subject; though he focuses only on the male subject.

However, like McLaren (2002), I believe that some feminist thinkers may have misread Foucault’s notion of power. They pay little attention to his later work on the self where he acknowledges individuals as no longer such docile bodies, but rather self-determining (ethical) agents capable of resistance; we may be the effects of power but we are not formed by power (Foucault 1982; 1984b; McNay 1992; Moss 1998). Here he further elaborates on his notion of power, attempting to distinguish between power and domination. In his essay *The Subject and Power* (1982), Foucault remarks that ‘domination’ refers to a situation where the subject is unable to resist; resistance is impossible, while ‘power’ refers to situations where relations are fluid and reversible.

Whilst it is important to recognise agency and highlight choice, it is also necessary to explore the undeniable fact that we are all, in some way, connected to something bigger; structure. Therefore, Foucault’s ideas, particularly concerning notions of formal and informal power are useful for exploring how (sex-working) women are governed, and to what extent, if at all, such control results in experiences of stigma and how this may impact on women’s lives. The concept of subjective power seems a useful theory in any effort to discover the experience of women’s lives.

Finally, this chapter provides a discussion of power, regulation and subjectivity in relation to sex work and the women who work within the industry. It maps the context of their working lives to provide a background for analysis of their views and experiences of contexts whilst highlighting how the theory discussed in this chapter will be taken forward in my own research.

**Discussion**

Although this thesis takes a ‘theory-constructing approach’ and does not set out to test or verify existing theory like traditional theory-testing study, *broad* Foucauldian understandings of power and regulation can be utilised to explain, and make sense of, how women who sell sex have previously been, and continue to be, perceived and treated as ‘other’. A consequence of this is that their subjectivities are often assumed, overlooked or ignored except as relevant to wider society as dangerous, dirty or deviant.

As Foucault suggests, sexuality is a fundamental site of power and used to classify and, to a certain extent, predict our subjectivities (who we are). This places focus on the subject (person) rather than the act (sex work), and consequently a status of ‘abnormal’/’immoral’/’dirty’/’unhealthy’ is attached to the subject (woman) who engages in sex work rather than the activity itself (Foucault 1976; Howe 2008). Therefore, power, and consequently sexuality, literally reduces women to their (dirty) bodies (McNay 1992).

The negative social status given to women categorised as ‘prostitutes’ is used not only to describe the sexual behaviours and activities they engage in, but also about their lives more generally. Foucault uses ‘the criminal’ in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) as an example of this; the label ‘criminal’ is used not only to refer to the crime they have committed but about their personal histories, characteristics and daily realities.

Certain characteristics of ‘criminals’ have traditionally been amplified and exaggerated within the media, fictive and historical texts, as well as in literature and empirical research, as discussed in Chapters Two and Four. These characteristics provide a bench-mark for us against which ‘acceptable’ can be measured against ‘unacceptable’ forms of behaviour, so we can distinguish between ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ subjects and identify ourselves as one or the other.

‘Prostitute’ and/or ‘sex worker’ are ‘othering’ categories that are only the ‘effects of power’ and therefore the characteristics associated with women who engage in sex work are also ‘effects of power’. As a result, sex work can be viewed as a ‘performance’, or a ‘performance of sexuality’, where the female sex worker is continuously being ‘written’ by different discourse of sex or sexuality in different times and spaces. To what extent those inscriptions impact on, and concur, her ‘true self’ (Butler 1993) is key to this research.

What this thesis addresses includes;

* Do female sex workers acknowledge and/or embody the social stigma associated with the label/category/role/identity of prostitute/sex worker that the ‘effects of power’ have created?
* Do female sex workers feel ‘controlled’ by their (subversive) sexuality? If so, how, to what extent and do they use any method of resistance?
* How do female sex workers feel society perceives them as ‘subjects’ (people), and the (sex)work that they choose to perform?
* How do female sex workers perceive themselves as ‘subjects’ and the (sex)work that they perform?
* Do female sex workers employ any ‘technologies’ or ‘art’ of the self in which to (self)regulate the negative status of prostitute/sex worker?

My research questions enable a testing-out of Foucault’s later theory of power, agency and the self as actively countering deviant social constructs.

This chapter has illustrated how female (working-class) sexuality has been regarded as unhealthy, immoral and abnormal repeatedly over history and across discourses reinforced by legal, medical and moral frameworks. This chapter has also introduced the theoretical foundations which broadly underpin the remainder of this thesis. It has also provided an overview of how the subjectivities of women who sell sex may be overlooked, categorised or assumed through what Foucault (1976) terms the ‘effects of power’, whilst subjectively they may not necessarily identify with negative social constructs. My research explores the self-stories of women who sell sex rather than accepting the social constructs and seeking ways to help, punish, contain or ‘heal’ them.

The following chapter critically reviews empirical presentations of women who sell sex then examines pathways into prostitution/sex work, addressing questions of why *some* women enter the industry and who these women really are, before exploring how female sex workers manage the stigma associated with the role/identity of sex-seller. This chapter also addresses how women who sell sex are portrayed, not only by wider society but also within academic research in order to provide bench-marks against which the way sex workers view themselves and their work can be compared and evaluated.

**Chapter Four**

Researching Women Who Sell Sex: Who, Where, Why and What Do We Know?

A profile of psychological propensity, economic need, and coercion is not all wrong. What is wrong with it are the assumptions that prostitutes are more neurotic, more financially needy (due to poverty or greed) and more coerced into life choices than other women (Pheterson: 1996: 55).

Women who sell sex are frequently imagined in ways that cause them to experience ‘othering’ through long-standing stereotypical myths that may leave sex workers vulnerable to discrimination and marginalisation, as discussed in Chapter Two. Media and fictional texts are often blamed for the amplification and sensationalisation of certain sex worker characteristics that cause damaging images of female sex-sellers to remain engrained within the public and cultural imagination (Foley 2017). However, the ways in which ‘prostitute’ women are defined and represented empirically and theoretically are also influenced by trends in research, and by broader socio-political concerns, that often feed such media and fictive presentations. Therefore, as developments in theory, policy and legislation occur, the personal profiles of sex-working women, both within academic and public arenas, may vary accordingly.

Those who sell sex are not a homogenous group, no type of woman (or man) is better suited to prostitution/commercial sex, but rather different life circumstances *can* facilitate entry into sex work. Although research now claims that there is no ‘typical’ sex worker (Sanders *et al* 2009), and a ‘profile of the prostitute’ can no longer be built up (O’Neill 2001: 75), scholars have consistently emphasised specific differences between women who sell sex from contrasting markets. Although these differences are useful in highlighting the diversity within the sex industry and the differences of experience, they imply that there may be a categorical divide and definitive difference between the ‘types’ of women who sell sex. This is particularly evident in the divisions claimed between those who work from outdoor spaces and indoor places in relations to personal histories, motivations, entrance into prostitution/commercial sex and working routines (O’Doherty 2011).

The discourse of *who, where, why and what do we know* examined in this chapter represents an interlaced series of concepts and theories that present openings where new questions can be asked and new ideas formulated. The purpose of this chapter is not to demonstrate that the findings of previous research are invalid or biased, as socio-historical and cultural backdrops are imperative contextualising dimensions, but rather to highlight areas of empirical and/or theoretical weakness, gaps or biases, so I can situate my own research and identify how it can contribute to or build on or perhaps even challenge some existing literature and understanding.

Therefore, this chapter is divided into two sections. The first section critically explores traditional and contemporary presentations of women who sell sex that attempt to explain **why** and **how** *some* women enter the commercial sex industry, and **who** these women are.

The second section of this chapter then reviews literature surrounding the spaces and places **where** sex-working women operate, before concluding by exploring the management strategies that women occupying the ‘deviant’ sex-seller role may employ as a method of maintaining distance between their personal and professional selves. In both instances this allows me to map existing knowledge paradigms and use such maps to critically inform my own aims, methods and analysis.

**Traditional Presentations: Questions of Difference**

Fundamental questions that have dominated ‘traditional’ academic discourse on prostitution centre on the differences between a ‘prostitute’ woman and an ‘ordinary’ woman, and in what ways the two may be alike or dissimilar. Entrance into prostitution is central to these questions, namely *why* some women engage in the sale of sexual services and others do not. As a result, criminological and sociological theorising has constructed ‘prostitute’ women as:

* Biologically and/or psychologically different to ‘normal’ women who do not enter prostitution (Lombroso and Ferrero 1985; Glueck 1934).
* Different from ‘normal’ women (Benjamin and Masters 1964), and yet in some ways the same as ‘normal’ women (Wilkinson 1955).
* The same as ‘normal’ women (McLeod 1982).
* Different from ‘normal’ women in some respects (Hoigard and Finstad 1992).

Phoenix (1999) organises these constitutions of prostitute women into four dominant explanatory models or ‘ideal types’ (Weber 1949) that attempt to explain (and to some extent contain) how it is some women come to sell sex and others do not.

First, the *pathological explanatory model* ‘transforms women involved in prostitution into ‘prostitutes’ who are utterly separate and distinct from ‘ordinary women’’, arguing that ‘some type of individual abnormality or pathology causes women to become prostitutes, and that being a prostitute means to be a woman possessed of an individual pathology*’* (Phoenix 1999: 37; Lombroso and Ferrero 1895)*.* This model advocates that such psychological pathology of ‘prostitute women’ derives from their socio-economic backgrounds and family histories of ‘broken homes’ with ‘low moral standards’, with parents of ‘low mentality’ who exercise ‘unintelligent disciplinary standards’ (Glueck and Glueck 1934: 299). This ‘unfortunate psychological atmosphere’ then creates unstable women resulting in ‘illicit sexual indulgence’ (ibid, p.300). The psychological ‘problems’ that are embedded in these women consequently lower their inhibitions and constraints making it very likely that they will enter prostitution.

Second, the *social and criminal subculture model* favoured by Wilkinson (1955) argues that the subculture which a ‘prostitute’ inhabits is unique and separates her from ‘normal’ women consequently marking her as ‘different’. Wilkinson constructs prostitute women as ‘social satellites’ and members of deviant subcultures disconnected from mainstream society who are both without, and yet still within, ‘normal’ society. Such disconnection from legitimate social institutions sees prostitute women ‘as belonging to and committed to a normative system that makes their engagement in prostitution virtually inevitable’ (Phoenix 1999: 43).

Wilkinson divides prostitution entry into three key stages: (1) the female is failed by social institutions; (2) she then becomes isolated from ‘normal’ society; and finally (3) she is introduced to the world of prostitution. This can however be a slow process and she (the prostitute) ‘is used to the idea by the time she accepts it’ (ibid, p.108). Prior to entry the ‘pre-prostitute’ is characterised as a disorganised drifter without anchor to mainstream society or stable family, she resides in a state of personal isolation and ‘social rootlessness’ (Phoenix 1999: 44). According to Phoenix (1999: 45) such ‘social rootlessness’ can occur after experiencing social deficiencies in early years or ‘sudden occurrences’ such as the birth of an illegitimate child or marriage breakdown, which may have ‘dislodged’ her in later life.

Similarly, the *economic position and poverty explanatory model* also takes the prostitute woman’s social environment into account centring on the idea that women are channelled into the sex market as they have very few opportunities to earn a legitimate and independent income within their own social surroundings (Finnegan 1979). Prostitution is therefore purely an economic decision as selling sex becomes a feasible way to earn a living. However, in contrast to the two previous models, this model views the prostitute woman as an economic agent who ‘chooses’ prostitution as the money earning potential is often much greater than in other occupations that are available to her (Overall 1992).

Eileen McLeod’s landmark text *Working Women* (1982) examines what women gain from prostitution/sex work using both a neo-Marxist and feminist perspective. She concludes that prostitute women are simply poor women attempting to secure a stable income, and therefore engage in prostitution as an act of resistance to poverty. McLeod argues that women’s poverty is caused by a capitalist labour market that favours the male breadwinner and a segregation of domestic and childcare responsibilities which consequently disadvantage all women. Therefore, women struggle with limited means of supporting themselves due to the social and economic structures of a patriarchal society and become ‘economic entrepreneurs’ through participating in prostitution. For McLeod, prostitution is a chosen activity and a form of work like any other, making women who sell sex no different to other women who engage in the labour market.

The *gender and male violence explanatory model* also considers social and sexual inequalities, placing particular emphasis on men’s control over women’s sexuality. This model, supported by radical feminists who argue that prostitution is the ultimate violation against women, highlights how prostitute women are subject to physical, psychological and financial abuse (by male perpetrators). Hoigard and Finstad’s Norwegian study, rich in ethnographic detail, *Backstreets: Prostitution, Money and Love* (1992) utilises this model to investigate who is likely to enter prostitution, how and why they enter, and how women are affected through selling sex. The story-telling narrative of this research provides valuable knowledge on the lives of streetwalking women that is both moving and insightful.

Their research found that women selling sex from the street had irregular and unstable home lives, backgrounds of childhood abuse and neglect, low educational attainment, difficulty in adjusting to school and/or employment, addiction to drugs and/or alcohol, and extensive experiences of institutions such as refuges, drug rehabilitation clinics, and care homes (p.15-16). Hoigard and Finstad consider institutions as ‘important training grounds for prostitutes’ (p.16), but regard breakdown of self-respect as ‘an essential and necessary self-transformation before [a woman] begins to prostitute herself’, and that leads her to view her ‘body [as] her most important asset’ (p.18). Like McLeod, Hoigard and Finstad also acknowledge economic positioning when entering prostitution/sex work and conclude that the need for money is the *only* reason *for* prostitution (i.e. they would not chose to sell sex if they did not have specific financial need), and therefore prostitution is an economic activity - not a deviant one - with the experiences that women encounter *after* entering prostitution/sex work making them *different* to non- sex working women.

Although the four models discussed above provide some thoughtful insight, and highlight the chronological progression of sociological and criminological theorising on ‘prostitute women’, they provide little understanding of the realities that contemporary British sex workers, from all strata, face in today’s sex-economies and how these experiences may, or may not, mark them as ‘different’ from non-sex selling women. My research acknowledges that women who provide sexual services for monetary payment today are in some respects different from ‘normal’ women regarding the social consequences of engagement in prostitution/commercial sex, but that they are also similar, and in many ways no different, as they are a woman in a society steeped in a particular set of gender and economic relations and expectations (Hoigard and Finstad 1992; McLeod 1982).

Recent research that concentrates on the indoor sex-markets demonstrates that women who sell sex no longer neither fit neatly within these dominant explanatory models nor conform to stereotypical images and psychological profiles (discussed later in this chapter). However, to what extent these models may still be relevant in other contexts is largely unknown, suggesting an exploration of the following questions:

* Do women who sell sex actually feel ‘different’ from ‘normal’ women?
* Do women still choose to sell sex purely for cash payment?

Next I explore more contemporary presentations of women who sell sex considering the ‘background’, ‘situational’, ‘push’, and ‘pull’ factors that scholars believe to contribute to ***why*** *some* women enter the sex industry, and ***who*** these women are, before the second part of this chapter considers the differences scholars have highlighted between the indoor and outdoor sex-markets and what this means for those involved. The who, why and where of sex work are all central to both my research questions and respondents’ stories.

**Contemporary Explanations: Contributing Factors**

The four explanatory models described above may help in understanding why some women may have been more likely to enter prostitution than others, but do little to unveil *who* these women are now and *why* they actually sell sex in today’s diverse sex-economies. Nor can they unveil the personal experiences encountered before (whilst, and after) doing so. Women’s pathways into prostitution/sex work have been extensively researched with scholars attempting to identify common processes and reoccurring themes that women who sell sex encounter during the entry process (Clarke *et al* 2012; Cronley *et al* 2016; Potterat *et al* 1998; Roe-Sepowitz 2012). How this data is analysed and the significance given to particular factors involved has drawn attention to certain dynamics and characteristics that attempt to explain what influences women to ‘choose’ prostitution/sex work (O’Neill 1997; Potter *et al* 1999; Sharpe 1998; Weber *et al* 2004).

Historically, much interest has been paid to the personal biographies of women who sell sex. Scholars have focused on how particular ‘background’ or ‘situational’ factors may facilitate pathways into the sex industry and explained why certain women enter prostitution and others do not (Matthews 2008). Early studies on the personal histories of women participating in sex-economies concentrate on the most visible aspect of the sex industry: street-based sex work, whilst the majority of research in recent years has seen a shift from the outdoor arena and focused more on sex workers who work from a range of indoor venues and establishments.

The classic psychological profile (see also Chapter Two) of ‘the prostitute’ as a damaged woman has been amplified by research that reports correlation between (street) prostitution and socio-economic, familial and structural disadvantage (Dalla 2002; 2003; 2004; Dodsworth 2012b; Erickson *et al* 2000; Farley 2003; Farley and Barkan 1998; Maher *et al* 1996; May and Hunter 2006; William and Cluse-Tolar 2002). Studies (such as those mentioned) suggest that women who sell sex, particularly from outdoor locations, share similar life experiences, ‘background’ and ‘situational’ factors that promote entry into the sex industry, and are thus considered ‘typical’. By highlighting these socio-economic and familial backgrounds of street-based prostitutes/sex workers and giving significance to certain ‘factors’, discussed in the following pages, the personal profile of the streetwalker continues to remain embedded within the public and cultural imagination despite research highlighting an increasingly diverse population now choosing to enter the sex industry.

Involvement in drug cultures and problematic drug use is a common ‘situational factor’ frequently reported, with the connection between street-based sex work and class-A drug use (specifically heroin and crack cocaine) well documented with evidence suggesting that a heavy drug habit precedes entry into sex work which then aids to sustain it (Epele 2001; May *et al* 2000; Pearce *et al* 2002). Potterat *et al* (1998) examined this sequence of timing in greater detail to find that sixty-six percent of sex workers reported having a drug habit before entry into prostitution; eighteen percent said that entry and drug use occurred concurrently; and only seventeen percent claimed to begin using drugs following entry into sex work.

However, contrasting research has also shown that drug (and alcohol) misuse does not always necessarily precede involvement in prostitution and can evolve as a ‘coping strategy’ among street-based sex workers (Brown 2013; Dalla 2000; Graham and Wish 1994). Therefore, drug-use and entry into criminal activities more generally requires further investigation to better understand the complex interrelation and criminal turning points in a woman’s life rather than exploring single cause explanations for entry into sex work.

Abuse is another ‘background factor’ repeatedly reported, both nationally and internationally, when examining the histories of ‘prostitute’ women. This reporting typically suggests that a large percentage of women who sell sex have suffered some form of abuse or neglect within the household, usually during childhood (see Bagley and Young 1987; Dalla 2003; Hunter 1994; Pearce *et al* 2002; Pereda 2015; Tyler *et al* 2000). Childhood abuse is widely regarded as a ‘baseline experience’, particularly for streetwalking women, and is thought to overwhelmingly increase the probability of entry into sex work as sexual abuse experienced in childhood can result in the removal of emotion from sexual activities (James and Meyerding 1977; Lalor and McElvaney 2010; Paolucci *et al* 2001; Wilson and Widom 2010). This enhanced vulnerability makes prostitution more accessible to child abuse victims as they are able to emotionally distance themselves during sexual activities with customers (Miller 1986).

A study by May *et al* (2001) established that two thirds of the sex-working women they interviewed had strong histories of unhappy childhoods with over fifty percent stating they had experienced some form of abuse as a child. Melrose *et al* (1999) also found that twenty-one of fifty sex workers they interviewed admitted that their first sexual experience was in the context of abuse. Similarly, Giobbe (1993) reported that ninety percent of sex workers interviewed during a study on issues of pimping described being physically abused as a child, with seventy-four percent reporting experiences sexual abuse by a family member.

Abandonment, both literal and symbolic, during childhood is also considered a common experience for street-based sex workers. Dodsworth (2012a) explored twenty-four women’s accounts of their involvement in sex work to examine the management of dual identities. She reports abandonment as a key feature in the histories of the majority of the participants and found that this experience negatively impacted on the women’s life-opportunities and self-worth, ultimately increasing their likelihood of involvement in sex work.

For some women, the negative experiences of dependency that occurred during childhood accompanied by a strong desire for independence and a sense of freedom, becomes the driving force that allows them to see sex work as a realistic strategy for effectively rejecting dependency. As Phoenix (1999) found through her qualitative study involving twenty-one women who sold sex; ‘many of the interviewees saw their families or their childhoods in terms of unwanted and forced dependency that had included various forms of abuse, neglect and/or restriction that were perceived to be unduly harsh’ (p.96).

The majority of literature that explores the family backgrounds and childhoods of prostitute/sex working women report high levels of abuse, neglect, abandonment and forced dependency. However, little is known about the early histories of women who work from outdoor markets in Britain today (see Dodsworth 2012a; 2012b for an exception) in any great detail and whether the issues and experiences that once dominated ‘prostitute’ women are still applicable to those who presently walk the streets. My research explores whether women selling sex in a contemporary context report similar or different childhoods to those of the earlier studies.

Poverty is also regarded as an important ‘situational’ factor when considering why some women enter prostitution/sex work as it ‘acts as a constraining force in an individual’s life’ (Phoenix 1999: 76). Signifiers of poverty include: lone motherhood, lack of educational achievements and qualifications and/or vocational training, few key skills, and unemployment which are also commonly associated with ‘prostitute’ women (Lister 1992; Room 1989). These components act as barriers and reduce opportunities to participate wholly in social life, including the legitimate employment that gives purpose, structure, status and routine to everyday reality.

As previously mentioned in the *economic position and poverty explanatory model*, for some prostitution/sex work is viewed as a ‘gendered survival strategy’ (McLeod 1982; Phoenix 1999: 75), whereby poverty and economic need permits women to regard selling sex as a viable means of alleviating their financial circumstances. Women have traditionally suffered in the labour market and consequently become increasingly dependent on the welfare state and/or their partners due to inadequate welfare benefits, making it increasingly difficult to maintain and secure legitimate employment. The higher wages available in prostitution/commercial sex than in the limited work women may be able to find, along with other perceived benefits (including no interview process, receiving payment immediately, and the self-regulating conditions), may make prostitution/sex work an attractive option to them (Phoenix 1999).

Whilst some authors pay particular attention to ‘background’ or ‘situational’ factors, such as those already discussed, others conclude that women enter prostitution/sex work due to a combination of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors including, but not limited to:

The use of force; deception or manipulation; poverty, hunger and economic need; social and political marginalisation; familial neglect and abuse; experience of sexual victimisation; peer influence; drug addiction; children’s consumerism; children’s desire for independence; excitement and or experience; children’s sense of duty or responsibility for their kin (O’Connell Davidson 2000: 46).

Unlike simply examining the backgrounds of those involved in the sex industry the ‘push-pull’ approach better captures the complexity of the dynamics that factor in the prostitution entry process, but fails to provide an analytical framework for actually understanding the ‘complex and interconnected processes’ involved (Matthews 2008: 63). An alternative method by which to analyse the dynamics and attempt to understand these ‘interconnected processes’ is to distinguish between ‘predisposing’ factors, which are considered essential, and ‘precipitating’ factors that are used to explain how only a percentage of women exposed to the predisposing factors actually end up selling sex (Silbert and Pines 1982). However, as Matthews (2008) accurately points out there is often little consistency in the identification of ‘predisposing’ factors; in some accounts the main predisposing factor is poverty and in others it is drug addiction.

Alternatively, several scholars regard entry into prostitution/sex work as less of a decision-making process and more an unconscious process of ‘drift’ (Davis 2000; Levy 2004). Matza’s (1964) classic model of how individuals drift into delinquency can be used to explain how, by loosening the moral restraints that would ordinarily control members of a society, some women are able to challenge societal norms and ‘drift’ into prostitution. Matza’s analysis focuses on the conditions that allow individuals to become involved in selling sex; including desperation and excitement.

However, Matza’s concept of ‘drift’ can be criticised as being too subjective and ignoring the structural processes that affect the decision making course of those involved. Also, exploration of what ‘causes’ an individual to lose these mainstream moral constraints may ultimately be just, if not more, significant to understanding entry pathways into commercial sex as the consequences of drifting in a semi or unconscious state (working within the sex industry). Issues of ‘push’, ‘pull’ and ‘drift’ shape the life-history discussions with sex workers in this thesis.

Commentators who discuss ‘pathways’ into prostitution or ‘factors’ (such as those discussed) that determine some women’s entry into the sex industry automatically give significance to one particular aspect, and sideline other influences or events that fall outside the popular perception of the prostitute. We need to remember that:

The way into the sex trade constitutes the culmination of a long chain of previous destructive events… Many of the women are labelled as ‘whores’, often long before their actual entry into prostitution. Given such a perspective, the women’s debut into prostitution is often undramatic, even if the context in which it takes place can be quite chaotic (Mansson and Hedin 1999: 71).

These ‘destructive events’ need further investigation to allow us to fully comprehend the personal journey’s women take before prostitution/sex work entry remembering that the realities of women’s lives are complex. In order to address this, the following questions are asked in this research:

* What ‘factors’ contribute to women’s entry into sex-economies today?
* Do women who sell sex, particularly from the outdoor-market, still report ‘damaged’ backgrounds and stories traditionally associated with the label ‘prostitute’? And if so, what constitutes ‘damaged’?

As mentioned in the opening section of this chapter, scholars now claim there is no ‘typical’ sex worker (Sanders *et al* 2009), yet previous research suggests that there are two distinct ‘types’ of sex worker; the indoor worker and the street-based sex worker. The next section of this chapter explores the evidence for that dichotomy.

**Where Women Sell Sex: The Outdoor - Indoor Divide**

Research that explores the sex industry and those who work within it has been criticised for its heavy focus on street-based work, which is now considered as the ‘harsh end of a wide spectrum’ (Sanders 2006: 94). Since the late 1990s and the ‘boom’ of the adult entertainment industry, venues and establishments that were once hidden become easily accessible on the everyday high-street. Consequently research has moved away from the overt face of prostitution (street-based) and has paid significant attention to indoor-based and other less traditional forms of sex work such as erotic-dancing, escorting and stripping (for examples see Colosi 2010; Cunningham and Kendall 2011; Hardy and Sanders 2015; Sanders and Hardy 2012; Veena 2007).

The increase of, and diversity in, sexual services offered for both sexual pleasure and entertainment is believed to be a direct consequence of increased tolerance towards both pre-martial and extra-marital activities in late modern societies (Jackson and Scott 2004). Indoor-based sex workers, unlike their street-based counter-parts, tend to be tolerated and even credited with a degree of professionalism as they tastefully respect public decency, veiling their activities from obvious display and keen to distance themselves from the negative stereotypes associated with street workers (Cusick 1998). Outdoor sex work has not benefited from ideas of female sexual liberation and remains tainted by associations with immorality, drugs, dirt, disease and danger.

The outdoor-indoor divide with regards to working conditions, clientele and the workers themselves have been the focus of much research with scholars highlighting different issues and aspects of the industry that set those who work within the two apart from one another. This work has, like research on street-based sex work before it, also attempted to capture the indoor sex worker experience. Teela Sanders’ (2005a) ethnographic study of women working from the indoor sex-market in Birmingham, *‘Sex Work: A Risky Business’* provides a detailed account of how the indoor commercial sex industry is organised, and how those who work from such markets manage this within their everyday lives. The principal theme of *risk* centres the project, exploring the types of risks indoor sex workers face, how they manage these, and what impact they have on their personal and private selves.

Sanders (2005a) examines the relationship between choice-making and risk-taking and the complexities involved when working within the indoor sex trade. She argues that indoor workers construct a ‘hierarchy of harms’ whereby potential risks are prioritised (2005a: 45). Levels of violence vary across the outdoor-indoor spectrum, with sex workers in Britain twelve times more likely to die from violence than ‘other’ women of a similar age (Ward *et al* 1999), it is not surprising that sex workers from all markets employ various protection strategies in an attempt to remain safe whilst working. Working from an indoor premise is often assumed as safer than soliciting outdoors as street-based workers are the most obvious and easiest targets for everyday violence. However, Sanders highlights how women who work from private establishments and venues also suffer from various hazards and dangers, having to constantly assess and negotiate the risks involved.

The different types of violence the women in Sanders’ sample reported experiencing whilst working included: violence from clients (sixteen women); being beaten (fourteen women); sexual assault or rape (seven women); being robbed at knife point (five women), and at gunpoint (three women); being confined against their will (three women); and being drugged (two women). Like street sex workers, indoor workers also employ techniques of ‘selectivity’ (Prus and Irini 1980: 59) to ‘screen out’ clients (see also Barnard 1993; Campbell 1991; Dunhill 1989; Maher 2000). Forty-two of the fifty indoor sex workers Sanders interviewed claimed that, like street-based workers, they too rely on instinct and intuition when screening clients and that this ‘basic trust game’ (Bacharach and Gambetta 1997) determines whether they accept or reject offers of business (see p.52).

However, it is important to note that thirty-four (all indoor workers) of the fifty-five sex workers Sanders interviewed had never encountered any form of violence whilst working. This may be accredited to the increased security that indoor establishments are privileged to such as a receptionist or door man, CCTV, and peepholes. Workers and receptionists/door-men are also able to view a possible client first and assess their ‘genuineness’ acting as a further screening method.

Women who work from managed establishments such as saunas, brothels, or working flats are also frequently believed to exercise greater control over their work: when they work, who they service, what price they demand, and are generally thought to receive all, or the majority, of their earnings compared to street prostitutes who tend to have a high dependency on others (Gilmour 2016). However, Plumridge (2001) highlights how indoor-based sex workers can also suffer reduced autonomy due to strict house rules and fierce competition from other working housemates mirroring the competition for business on the streets and control from authorities such as the police who regulate the outdoor markets.

Like previous studies on street-based sex work, attention has also been paid to the personal biographies of women who sell sex from the indoor market. As already discussed, existing research highlights how those involved in street prostitution have histories of troubled childhoods, unsettled home lives, low educational attainment, drug and substance misuse, periods of institutionalisation and are often victims of violence, neglect and abuse (Hoigard and Finstad 1992; McKeganey and Barnard 1996). Research surrounding the socio-economic and familial backgrounds of indoor sex workers contrastingly indicates a varied set of sex worker characteristics, with women engaging in sex work ranging from single mothers, to highly educated entrepreneurial women (O’Connell Davidson 1998; Sanders 2005a; Dodsworth 2012a). Yet, despite this, the derogatory image of the ‘common street prostitute’ remains engrained within the mainstream imagination as representing what sex work is (Sanders *et al* 2009).

Like street-based work, the conditions of indoor sex work include drug use but on a much lesser scale. Sanders (2005a) reports only four women (all street-based workers) of the fifty-five interviewed confirmed using crack or heroin. She also highlights how recreational (soft) drug use is tolerated indoors but is not ‘usual’ as women want to ‘stay alert and in control’ (p.50). Similarly, Morgan-Thomas *et al* (1989) found that among Edinburgh parlour workers they interviewed only one admitted to being an injecting drug user (see also Church *et al* 2001 and McCullagh *et al* 1998 for comparable results). Drug use can also be a factor used by clients for determining the legitimacy and reputation of a business with women keen to establish a high-quality reputation to secure new and repeat custom.

Women engaging in sex work from indoor establishments often have a longer history of employment within the mainstream labour market (Sanders 2006). Phoenix (1995) also draws on this claiming that employment status is a key difference between street and indoor sex work in Britain. Those who work from indoor establishments often hold the status of ‘employed’ whereas those who solicit on the street are usually regarded as ‘unemployed’ and this ultimately effects how these women are perceived by wider society which may explain why the stereotypical image of the streetwalker still remains a cause of social concern and anxiety.

Price (and financial exchange) and clientele (and mode of client contact) are also reported as being different for indoor workers compared to street-based workers. Research illustrates that women who work from the street charge based on their needs, the greater the need the lower the price, with some women selling sex for as low as a few pounds when the need (often for drugs) is too intense to tolerate (Hoigard and Finstad 1992). Sex workers who operate from indoor establishments such as brothels, saunas, working flats or their own homes commission a significantly higher wage for sexual services that increases depending upon the act(s) required (O’Connell Davidson 1998). The high class escort or ‘entrepreneurial prostitute’, although a small elite group, is able to commission high amounts for her services, often earning hundreds or even thousands of pounds in one night (O’Connell Davidson 1998).

The indoor arena is frequently considered, by those who work within it and by wider society, as of higher status than street-based sex work. Codes of practice exist and rules and etiquette are adhered to by colleagues and management ensuring effective regulation preventing exposure of both the workers and the business establishment (Hart and Barnard 2003). This ‘social code’ (Sharpe 1998: 80) creates ‘norms among sex workers [that] are social rather than individual norms because they do not always maximise individual advantage but they are designed to foster collective interest’ (Sanders 2006: 110). The relationships between indoor sex workers, unlike the outdoor arena, are credited as trusting, with women receiving greater support from one another (Brewis and Linstead 2000). This ultimately results in a strong (sexual) code of practice between the female workers, taking a more occupational approach to business, determining what is and what is not acceptable (see McLeod 1982: 40 for examples).

The move away from overt prostitution (street-based) to the indoor and adult entertainment arenas allows for the identification of key differences between the two strata and those who work within each. However, since little significantly detailed qualitative research has been carried out on street-based sex work and its workers for several years, how do we know if this is still the case in Britain today? Other questions of interest regarding this issue include:

* What do we know about the outdoor sex market now? Has it changed? If so, how?
* Have the street-based workers changed or do they still remain separated (from indoor-based workers) by status, drugs, place and price? If so, how and why?

Again, my research asks these questions and assesses the contemporary operation of the sex work industry in a major English city. Answering such questions may help to provide and develop policy and practices that better suit the modern sex worker and the general public, so possibly impacting on stereotypes and labels.

**Operating as a Sex Worker: Stigma Management and Separation Techniques**

Women’s involvement in prostitution/commercial sex (street and indoor based) includes being stigmatised, marginalised, and criminalised and consequently having to manage ‘prostitute status’ or ‘whore stigma’ (Vanwesenbeeck 2017; O’Neill 2001: 89-90; Pheterson 1986: 1). To successfully manage the negativity and tensions attached to such an activity/occupation coping and distancing strategies are often utilised by women to facilitate the separation between their personal souls and their working bodies (Bowen and Bungay 2016; Day 1994; Edwards 1993; Nasir *et al* 2010; Phoenix, 2000; Shdaimah and Leon 2016; Warr and Pyett 1999). The mechanisms women employ to ‘make out’ in prostitution/sex work (O’Neill 2001: 27) vary considerably ranging from using humour (Sanders 2004b) to always using a condom with clients (Abel 2011; Sanders 2002).

Previous research highlights correlation between involvement in prostitution/sex work and depression (Bagley 1999; Carlson 2017), feelings of self-blame (Sanders 2005a), low self-esteem and post-traumatic stress disorder (Farley *et al* 1998; Kramer 2004), as well as eating disorders (Cooney 1990). Protection strategies against such emotional, physical, and psychological damage are complex internal processes that come with their own psychological burdens (Kamise 2013), requiring great effort from those involved:

Prostitutes, due to the intensity and intimacy of their physical involvement in their work, do not necessarily find the distancing process easy, and a variety of styles and methods are employed by working girls (and boys) to sustain the mask, or series of masks, which make earning a living through the sale of sex possible (Brewis and Linstead 2000: 84).

Teela Sanders (2005a) explores how sex workers manage the effects of the consequences of stigmatisation rather than simply describing the effects of the ‘whore stigma’. Her previously mentioned study of fifty indoor and five street-based sex workers highlights how women ‘cover up’ their involvement in sex work by employing management strategies such as, telling lies and creating fictitious life stories; relying on geographical space to physically distance themselves from their home lives; employing pseudonyms to create a character; alienating themselves from other sex workers; and only disclosing partial truths about their money-making activities to their friends and families (p.116). Similar to findings captured later by other scholars (Koken 2012; Ngo *et al* 2007; Sallmann 2010), only three of the fifty-five sex workers in Sanders’ sample claimed that they were not overtly affected by the social stigma of sex work. In contrast to the majority of her interviewees the family and friends of these three sex workers were supportive and accepting of the work the women had chosen. The remaining fifty-two sex workers admitted that negative societal views on the sex industry had directly impacted them with wide reaching effects:

Workers had received hate mail in the post; six respondents had been subjected to outside campaigns by angry neighbours; fifteen had been the victims of false allegations regarding the care of their children, sparking investigations from child-protection agencies; two women had been photographed by local media and humiliated by newspaper reports; thirteen had experienced discrimination by housing associations; at least sixteen women had been labelled as common prostitutes in court; and a further thirteen respondents said that attacks were not taken seriously by police, because of their job (Sanders 2005a: 118).

To avoid association with ‘whore stigma’ and immoral stereotypes women involved in (indoor) sex work create what Sanders terms as a ‘manufactured identity’ (2005b: 328) and ‘undergo a reconceptualization of their own sexuality in the workplace that is distinct and purposely separate from the construction of their identity in other spaces’ (p.322), allowing workers to explicitly exploit their sexuality to secure business whilst retaining a sense of power and separation from their private intimate self ultimately rationalising their ‘prostitute’/’sex worker’ role. This seems to confirm findings from Simmel (1955), who commented many years ago, that the modern ‘self’ has multifaceted identities that are acted out in the form of many social roles which are switched on when we engage with a particular audience at a certain time. Certain rituals that sex workers adopt such as rigorous bathing practices and specific clothing choices allow them to opt in and out of their public sex-seller role (McKeganey and Barnard 1996). Hoigard and Finstad (1992) also found that by employing techniques such as avoiding emotional relationships with regular clients, keeping to the agreed timeframe, utilising ‘blanking out’ methods (such as using drugs and alcohol), and maintaining physical boundaries, women were able to switch between these roles more effectively. My research explores this through the personal reflections of sex working women in contemporary Britain.

Enforcing bodily exclusion zones is commonly used by those involved in the sex industry as an effective means of retaining physical and mental boundaries whilst working. O’Connell Davidson (1998) reports that Desiree, a successful London-based escort adhered to a rigorous code whereby certain parts of her body were off-limits to clients as they were regarded ‘too intimate’ and were strictly reserved for her own private sexual pleasure. O’Neill (2001) regards such separation of the body from the self as a successful means of retaining emotional control as performing the prostitute identity only in certain times and spaces secures greater success (both professionally and personally) in the role.

The notion of ‘performance’ is considered central to retaining control and managing the stresses of sex work. Several studies have shown that women who provide sexual services often liken it to acting (see for examples Brewis and Linstead 2000; Roberts *et al* 1995; Thompson and Harred 1992; 2003), whereby they build up a skill set that often involves convincingly faking orgasms to provide clients with a satisfying sexual experience yet remaining emotionally detached from the encounter themselves (see Roberts *et al* 1995). Participants from Sanders’ study (2005b: 327) describe their sexual encounters with male customers as ‘clinical’ and ‘sterile’, using the condom not only for protection against sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy but also for filtering out feelings of intimacy, removing any emotion from the act (see also Plumridge *et al* 1997 and Warr and Pyett 1999).

Abel (2011) uses Arlie Hochschild’s concepts of ‘surface’ and ‘deep acting’ (1983) to explain how sex workers distance themselves from their public role. Abel interviewed fifty-eight female sex workers between 2006 and 2007 following the decriminalisation of sex work in New Zealand to find that sex workers ‘professionalize’ their role in order to maintain boundaries by viewing sex work as just that: *work*. Similarly, McKeganey and Barnard (1996) also report, sex workers do not place particular emphasis on the sexual acts themselves but instead focus only on the end result of cash payment. However, Abel highlights that street-based sex workers report being unable to adapt to ‘deep acting’ as well as indoor workers and instead had to rely on other distancing methods such as drug use to block out the emotional affects of paid sexual encounters. This de-personalisation of services ultimately permits successful separation of self from working roles/identities and, according to Abel, such strategies are not as damaging as radical feminists would claim (see Chapter Two for discussion), but rather an effective strategy to manage the emotional strains of sex work.

In addition to the emotional management techniques discussed above, strategies of secrecy are also utilised by women who adopt the role of sex worker in an attempt to avoid consequences of the ‘whore stigma’. As Sanders (2005a: 119) points out ‘one of the main motivations for secrecy is shame’. Women who sell sexual services in the global sex market are continually at risk of being labelled by mainstream society as deviant, immoral and dirty. Becker (1963) describes how it is not necessary to be publically labelled to feel such shame and stigma, as individuals participating in activities that are deemed deviant by the mainstream internalise these messages and consequently a process of self-stigmatisation occurs.

Other research that has addressed issues of avoiding shame and maintaining separation within the sex industry, and how those involved in such a market manage this with their everyday identities, has paid significant attention to those who participate in forms of erotic dancing. Barton (2007) highlights how dancers manage and separate their identities as sex workers from their personal selves by employing three psychospatial boundary setting strategies: (1) personal rules; (2) ‘othering’ fellow dancers; and (3) creating a dancer persona. By setting personal rules dancers are able to define their relationships with clients, and ‘othering’ their fellow dancers allows them to establish a mental distance from their peers and ultimately position themselves away from the identity category of sex worker by projecting the negative stereotypes onto other performers. Creating a dancer persona, usually by employing a pseudonym, permits the dancer to project an idealised version of herself and maintain a boundary between her personal identities and her professional identity as an erotic dancer. Like other women involved in the sex industry, dancers utilise distancing techniques in an attempt to neutralise the stigma attached to their work (Barton 2007).

Similarly, Thompson and Harred (2003; 1992) spent nine months in Las Vegas observing and interviewing female topless dancers who worked in a variety of clubs and found that women employ two common (whore) stigma management strategies: (1) dividing the social world (Goffman 1963); and (2) utilising neutralization techniques (Sykes and Matza 1957). To manage the strain of whore stigma, women in the global sex-economies have to both manage and control their flow of information and effectively divide up their social world. Sykes and Matza (1957) identify types of neutralisation of a stigma and rationalisation, (1 ) denial of responsibility; (2) denial of injury; (3) denial of the victim; (4) condemnation of the condemner; and (5) appeal to higher loyalties. Numbers (3) to (5) were particularly applicable to sex workers involved in Thompson and Harred’s (1992) study as the women involved refused the victim role, transferred stigma and shame to their fellow peers by disassociating themselves from them, and appealed to higher loyalties by justifying violating social norms for the benefit of others such as funding an education or providing for children.

More recently, Benoit *et al* 2018 interviewed 218 Canadian sex workers, delivering services from a range of venues, about how their work affected their sense of self. From the 146 participants (73%) who spoke about self-worth, that is, the sense of value they attributed to themselves influenced by social cues from others (Stets and Burke 2014), the majority (58%) described their involvement in sex work as supportive to their self-worth suggesting that despite the stigma attached to such activity, they derive value from their involvement.

Unsurprisingly the 31% of participants who reported damaged self-worth, expressed most frequently through feelings of shame, scored higher on perceived stigma. Mirroring findings from previous literature (Gorry *et al* 2010; Smith and Marshall 2007), Benoit *et al* found that workers detailing negative self-worth and greater levels of felt stigma were street based, entered the industry during childhood and reported backgrounds of substance misuse.

Whore stigma can affect female sex workers differently depending on a variety of factors such as the length of time they have spent working in the sex industry, their family backgrounds, biographical details, and their future plans (Sanders 2005a). Twenty-two out of the fifty five respondents in Sanders’ study admitted that they would never be free from the stigma, even after they exit the industry and no longer sell sex, and for that reason chose to continue selling sex. Previous research, such as that discussed, that centres on whore stigma and its consequences successfully highlights how some women from different strata manage the effects of working within a ‘deviant’ industry and adopting a marginalised role. However, much research assumes that *all* female sex-sellers absorb, or put strategies in place not to absorb, whore stigma and does little to explore how whore stigma may interplay with other stigmatised roles/identities that women of ‘prostitute status’ may have, and how these factor accordingly within their everyday lives. Therefore, the following questions are explored via the qualitative interviews in my research:

* Do all women who sell sex absorb whore stigma?
* How do women ‘manage’ whore stigma today? And does this still vary with strata?
* Do women of ‘prostitute’ status internalise other stigmatised identities/roles that they consider more damaging to their character than prostitute/sex worker? If so, what are these and how do they interplay?

**Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted how since the reframing of sexual labour from prostitution to sex work, research has moved away from the traditional dominant explanatory models that attempt to explain why some women come to enter commercial sex and others do not. Instead research has explored contributing factors that may make sex work an attractive option, recognising the complex conditions under which sex commerce takes place. However, despite this recognition and the acknowledgement of diversity within the sex industry, research represents women who sell sex in ways that suggest a divide among the ‘types’ of women who currently sell sex.

By paying increased attention to the diverse range of sexual services now on offer since the rise in sex-commerce (and focusing on the ‘sex’ in sex work) those who still sell sex from the street, although now regarded as the minority and the ‘harsh end of a wide spectrum’ (Sanders 2006: 94), are continually overlooked. Therefore, the stereotype of the street prostitute (as described in Chapter Two) remains prevalent in the minds of the mainstream as there is no significant current study that seeks to challenge or establish whether the street sex worker still remains as she is widely portrayed or whether her history has changed with time. Thus, there is a need to revisit earlier research in light of huge changes in the sex industry as well as in the broader socio-economic conditions of work and the night time/informal economies.

This chapter has also highlighted how more current research has addressed issues of (whore) stigma management highlighting how some sex-working women manage their sense of ‘self’ with the competing identity/role of sex worker/prostitute. However by giving precedent to the sex worker/prostitute identity/role such research fails to explore other stigmatising identities that a sex-selling woman may experience and how these interact with one another. Further research is needed in this area in order to uncover and understand the personal journeys of those who come to work within the sex industry and answer the central question of *who* these women are which this thesis will address in the remaining chapters.

In addition to the questions posed at the end of Chapters Two, which focus on difference and stigma, and Three, which focus on sexuality and stigma, my empirical research also addresses the questions posed in this chapter, which include:

* Is economic need still the ‘bottom line for entry into street prostitution’ (O’Neill 2001: 75)? If not, what are the other reasons?
* Has selling sex from the street changed? If so, how?
* Do street-based sex workers still come from backgrounds of abuse and broken homes or is that merely and outdated myth, is there something deeper happening, something new?
* Is there ever a pathway into street prostitution/sex work or is it more a consequence of destruction, a series of destructive or traumatic events, which influence a woman to look for work on the street?

These are all questions barely addressed in other research and yet they are key to better understanding women’s own experiences of the sex trade without which discussions about criminalisation, decriminalisation and legalisation can be argued are somewhat ill-informed. The remainder of this thesis presents an empirical examination of women who sell sex from one or more strata of the sex industry in the Midlands area of the UK, specifically. After outlining the study’s methodology in the next chapter, in Chapter Six I present the story of one participant (Polly) in detail to illustrate my analytical method before moving to my findings analysis holistically.

**Chapter Five**

Research Methods

Women’s oral history is a feminist encounter because it creates new material about women, validates women’s experience, enhances communication among women, discovers women’s roots and develops a previously denied sense of continuity (Rheinharz 1992: 126).

Feminist activism and research continues to be inextricably linked with prostitution/sex work and consequently feminist methods are commonly utilised in this field. Although there is lack of consensus among feminist researchers as to what exactly constitutes ‘feminist methodology’ (Gelsthorpe 1992a), the shared aim remains to produce knowledge that contributes to an ‘understanding of [women’s] experience as they understand it, interpretation of their experience…and a critical understanding of the research process’ (Ramazanoglu 1989: 453). Therefore, my research is characterised as feminist based on the methodological decisions made in advance that ultimately inform each stage of the research process.

While my research methods, techniques and values are undoubtedly feminist, I also draw on more traditional qualitative elements. I take from feminist practice the need to be participant-centered and allow women to ‘tell their stories’ in their own way, whilst investing my own identity into the social interaction (to a certain extent). However, I also adhere to traditional qualitative interviewing values whereby I acknowledge that a degree of focus must be kept during the interview and over intimacy avoided. I take from both frameworks the need to engage in ‘reflexive interviewing’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 1989: 113), to position myself within the research process, and address the complexity over power relations and structural dynamics.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section immediately positions my own research within an epistemological framework and explores interviewing as a data collection technique. Focus is then paid to differences in qualitative interviewing styles with a deeper discussion of feminist research values whilst drawing on my own interviewing techniques. The second section then provides a detailed description and justification of my research methods, choices and practice including: gaining access to the sample of participants; ethical and safety considerations; the data collection process; and analysis of findings.

**Standpoint Feminism**

This research is influenced by feminist standpoint epistemology to provide a more accurate account of the experiences of contemporary female sex workers whilst adding value to general human knowledge (Harding 2004). In this respect my research considers how ‘whore stigma’ effects *all* women, not just those who sell sex, and how measures put in place to police sex workers ultimately regulate *all* women.

Feminist standpoint theory aims to explore the social worlds of women from their perspectives, enabling participants to feel heard, valued and validated whilst acknowledging the depths and complexities of women’s lives (O’Neill 2001). Like much feminist research, the notion of ‘voice’ is a core value of this research, where privilege is given to individual narrative. This is particularly important when participants are members of excluded and marginalised communities and, as Stephanie Wahab (2004: 145) argues, ‘because sex workers have so frequently been denied the validity of their statements by researchers and service providers, the intention is for the narratives to speak by themselves, for themselves’.

It is important when studying such groups not to further victimise them, as some feminist scholars who position themselves as combating patriarchal regimes can actually perpetuate the status of women as victims through generalisations and denying individual agency (Bell 1994). However, to better understand the experiences of women it remains essential to examine the systematic oppressions that devalue women’s knowledge and experience.

Like the majority of standpoint projects, this thesis ‘studies up’ to understand the conceptual practices of power as conventionalised practices and values that 'justify the sex-gender system and its intersections with other systems of oppression’ (Harding 2004: 6). It does so by using broad Foucauldian understandings of power. Such understandings see the oppression of sex workers, and women more generally, maintained as if natural and acceptable through the dissemination of discursive constructions that reproduce that oppression as legitimate. It seeks evidence (or not) of such discursive meanings in the self-accounts offered by the women I interview.

**Interviewing as a Research Method**

An interview is a method of conducting a survey, an ‘information-gathering tool’ (Benney and Hughes 1970: 196) that has come under intense debate within various academic discourses. Whatever the interview purpose, and regardless of the method used, there remain practical problems that every researcher must overcome. These practical challenges include capturing truthful responses, full and detailed disclosures, and maintaining a focus for the duration of the encounter (O’Connell Davidson and Layder 1994). An interview is, in essence, one individual (researcher) talking to another individual (participant), but the skills required to conduct a ‘good’ interview are different from those applied in everyday conversations. These ‘skills’, and the idea of what a ‘good’ interview is, depend on the type of interview approach the researcher applies to their study.

There are two broad types of interviewing techniques; orthodox and qualitative. Orthodox interviewing prioritises asking questions in a standardised manner whereby answers of ‘yes’ and ‘no’ are frequent, as is the some kind scale or rating system. The hierarchical, controlled, impersonal nature of orthodox style questioning is favoured by researchers adhering to positivist philosophy. Positivism assumes that objects, behaviours, events, and ideas can be stripped of the meanings that individuals attach to them, that they can exist on their own, and be regarded as ‘facts’. Researchers practising positivism in their studies take inspiration from the natural sciences, and argue that procedures carried out in laboratory-like conditions can, and should, be applied to the social sciences. The rigorous and systematic testing of formulated hypothesis using controlled variables aim to eliminate bias and measure social ‘facts’ in a value-free way (Bryman 2008).

Contrastingly, interpretivism regards people as purposive actors who attach meanings to social action. For interpretivist researchers ‘what people do has to be *interpreted* in the light of the meanings, motives and intentions behind their actions’ (O’Connell Davidson and Layder 1994: 31). This relates closely to what Max Weber terms ‘Verstehen’. Verstehen is a term used to describe the notion of understanding the social world through the eyes of the research subject (Martin 2000). This corresponds to ethnographic methods, or repeat-interviewing, whereby the researcher immerses him or herself in the participant’s natural environment over an extensive period of time, so data is collected as experienced by the interviewee not as if it is objective truth (Bryman 2008).

My own research is positioned within an interpretivist framework, where a large amount of qualitative research sits. As discussed in my introductory chapter, the key aim of this research is to explore the lives, motivations and experiences of female sex workers who currently work within one of the many strata’s of the UK sex industry. In this I recognise that people are social actors who attach meanings to their life experiences and are consequently shaped by their own pre-existing beliefs, values and perceptions; it is my role as researcher to understand and interpret these subjective life experiences.

I also acknowledge that all human beings, myself included, are ‘selective in their seeing’ and shaped by their socialisation and cultural practices (O’Connell Davidson and Layder 1994: 24). Thus, I take a realist ontological position where I recognise that I, like Howard Becker (1963), cannot be a truly objective researcher, but although not devoid of my own ethical stance, I consciously work to approach the research process in a non-judgemental manner.

I adopt ‘feminist objectivity’ (Haraway 1988; Harding 1993; Bhavnani 1993), which recognises that knowledge is ‘situated’, so to ignore biases is unrealistic and consideration must be given to researcher positionality. Although such transparency during the research process has long been advocated by feminist researchers, broader social science research has now also shifted to recognise the importance of reflexivity, orientating its researchers to critical self-reflection (Ellis 2014).

The following portion of this section provides a detailed discussion of qualitative interviewing as a data collection tool and sets out the varying techniques used when interviewing women.

**The Qualitative Interview**

Interviewing is rather like a marriage: everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed front door there is a world of secrets (Oakley 1990: 31).

Just as a ‘good’ interview means something different to different methodologists, so does a ‘good’ qualitative interview. Feminist methodologists, although against the orthodox ‘yes/no’ style, have also been particularly critical of traditional qualitative interviewing techniques branding them ‘malestream’ (see Sanders *et al* 2009). The key debates here centre on the interaction itself, with feminist scholars accusing traditional techniques of being ‘mechanical’ and focusing too much on practicalities, such as length of interviews and how they were recorded, rather than the quality of the interaction and the emotions involved in the process (see O’Connell Davidson and Layder 1994).

However, both approaches agree that the researcher-respondent relationship is paramount to a successful interview. Any qualitative interview is characterised by dialogue where ‘rapport’ is vital: ‘rapport is tantamount to trust, and trust is the foundation for acquiring the fullest, most accurate disclosure a respondent is able to make’ (Glesne and Peshkin 1992: 79). To sustain a trusting relationship the interviewer must manage their behaviour and appearance as the way one self-presents can affect the trust of the participant. For example, given my interviewees working context, if I had met a potential participant for the first time wearing smart business-like attire, that would have most certainly deemed me unapproachable and perhaps they would not even have contemplated talking to me.

Attitude is also a contributing factor to the quality of the interaction and ultimately the validity of the data:

When you are warm and caring, you promote rapport, you make yourself appealing to talk to, and, not least, you communicate to your respondents…In an effective interview, both researcher and respondent feel good, rewarded and satisfied by the process and the outcomes (Glesne and Peshkin 1992: 87).

This ‘feel good’ notion is one that was taken forward within my research. The role of researcher is one of privilege as we are ‘guests’ in somebody else’s life (Shaver 2005). Respondents chose to share personal information with me and as a result the approach utilised needed a harm-reduction focus whereby I practised a conscious desire to minimise distress to the women involved. I did this by not merely focusing the interview discussions on the (most likely) negative and traumatic events they had experienced, but also on more general discussions about the women's lives.

In addition to this, I made efforts to end interviews on fairly neutral topics of discussion so as not to leave interviewees feeling distressed or upset. When closing the interaction interviewees were also given contact details of further support agencies. By employing these techniques I believe I upheld the ‘guest mode’ (Shaver 2005) role and understood that the safety and emotional well-being of others was more important than, and took precedence over, my research outcomes.

Traditional interviewing is often viewed as a ‘one-way process in which the interviewer elicits and receives, but does not give information’ (Roberts 1990: 32). Feminist scholars such as Ann Oakley regard this approach as ‘absurd’. During an empirical research project on women’s transition to motherhood (1979), she recorded 878 questions posed to her by her participants, with 76% of these requesting information (Oakley 1990: 42). During pilot interviewing (where interviewees asked her multiple questions during the interaction), Oakley decided she would seek to provide answers to her interviewee’s requests as she found it difficult not to respond without being honest and full in her replies.

Contrasting advice is put forward by other researchers who suggest that, ‘if he (the interviewer) is asked for his views, he should laugh off the request with the remark that his job at the moment is to get opinions, not to have them’ (Selltiz *et al* 1965: 576). During my fieldwork interviews I took a friendly interactive approach whereby I would chat informally with the respondents prior to the commencement of the interview, after it had finished, and if I came into contact with them again. I offered my thoughts and opinions on everyday issues such as the weather, hobbies and ordinary conversational topics, however during the interviews I was never asked, nor required, to give personal opinions on matters that the research sought to explore.

The reasons as to why an interviewer should be seen as ‘opinionless’ aim to reduce the possibility of bias. If the researcher were to project their own opinions during the interview process, the participant may be led to tailor their responses to the interviewers set of values, which would colour the information given and clearly invalidate the data collected. Leading questions also pose the threat of bias. The researcher must be conscious of the delivery of their questions at all times as not to influence the interviewee into shaping their response towards a specific area of discussion. I was particularly mindful of how I phrased the questions I put to my female participants by making the questions open; for example, I would ask: what do you think about x, rather than do you think x is y.

Oakley argues that traditional interviewing techniques advocate that ‘the person doing the interviewing must actively and continually construct the ‘respondent’ as passive’ (1990: 35). This corresponds to the central debates around the hierarchical dynamics of the interviewer-interviewee relationship. Power/control is an ‘ambiguous issue’ (O’Connell Davidson and Layder 1994: 125), where feminism and other methodologists root their indifference.

Although there are various strands of feminism, they all unite with their concern to address the unequal power relationships between the researcher and respondent and explore how this may be best minimised (Maynard 1998; Oakley 2002). However, O’Connell Davison and Layder (1994: 124) point out that although the interviewer may be seen to be in a dominant position they too are ‘simultaneously submissive’, as it is the interviewee who controls key factors such as the length of the interview, the topics they wish to talk about, and ultimately whether there is an interview at all.

In order to address issues of power-imbalance I was keen to clarify to women who expressed the wish to participate in my research that, in no way did I desire to exploit them or the information they were willing to provide me with and that they were free to decline the invitation to participate. They were also informed that if they wished to take part they were free to terminate the interview at any time and/or withdraw their involvement. They were also able to refuse to answer any question or discuss any subject that they were not comfortable with. I also made it clear that during the interview if there was anything that they wished to talk about that we had not discussed that they were to feel free to express themselves. I was also keen to exercise the ‘sympathetic listener’ role and as already mentioned, prioritised participant voice (O’Connell Davidson and Layder 1994).

However, the distinction between some feminist studies and my own research is the idea that interviewees can, and perhaps should, become genuine friends. During her research with expectant mothers Ann Oakley (1974) became friends with some of the women involved in her study. She states that she became close friends with four women and several others she continued to visit on a regular basis, as well as maintaining sporadic contact with the majority of others. I did not become *friends* with any of the women who participated in my research investigation although I remained *friendly* with them if I ever came into contact with them after the interview. I only had to re-interview one of my twenty respondents whereas Oakley re-interviewed her participants four times in total: twice prior the birth of their child, and twice after they had given birth. I imagine that this repeated contact played a significant part in her evolving friendship and attachment to those who became ‘friends’.

Since Oakley, other researchers have come to admit having ‘strong bonds’ (Sanders 2005a: 33) with their research participants and although I disagree with some feminist methodologists that advocate participants *should* become genuine friends, I do take other values and techniques forward within my own research. As stated in the introductory paragraph of this chapter, I take from both feminist and qualitative interviewing the need to engage in ‘reflexive interviewing’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 1989: 113). Reflexive interviewing is in essence unstructured whereby the:

Interviewer must enter into an interaction with interviewee and therefore needs to be prepared to respond flexibly to the interviewee as an individual, subjective being. Each interviewee and therefore each interview is accepted as different regardless of whether a structured interview schedule is being followed or not (O’Connell Davidson and Layder 2004: 122).

The spontaneity and unpredictability of these encounters makes listening an imperative feature of qualitative interviewing, which requires interviewers to improvise and ‘think and talk on [their] feet’ (Glesne and Peshkin 1992: 76). The interviewer needs to be totally responsive when engaged in a qualitative interaction. In traditional qualitative interviewing the researcher typically applies a sense of focus and direction to the interaction, whereby they acknowledge key issues or subject areas that need to be considered during the encounter.

Although interviews can be pre-planned they can also take a greater free-flowing approach. This is common in feminist methodology where women are often given the freedom to determine the whole course of the interview itself (O’Connell Davidson and Layder 1994). During each of the twenty interviews I had an ‘interview guide’ (See appendix 4) which outlined key topic areas that I hoped to address during the interview (see later section for more detail). However, as formerly mentioned, my respondents were free to bypass any question or issues that they did not wish to discuss, as well as to feel free to introduce topics that they particularly wanted to explore.

Feminist methodologists such as Oakley (1981), argue that traditional interviewing fails to address issues of emotion and the feelings that arise, for both interviewee and interviewer, during the research process. With the area of this research often viewed as ‘deviant’ or ‘immoral’ the women involved spoke of experiences that were sometimes painful or difficult to recall. The emotive topics that were discussed in the majority of interviews included, but were not exclusive to, rape, violence and abuse. It seems unrealistic to be expected to ignore issues of emotion when they contribute to the research process. Researchers in this area have commented on the ‘emotional strain’ when listening to women’s stories where violence is common and have admitted to feeling a sense of relief when leaving the field (Miller 1997). The importance of the researcher’s emotions when interviewing women, particularly when centred on sensitive issues, is discussed later in this chapter.

Although there are clear differences between them, both feminist and traditional qualitative methodologists aim to develop sincere and accurate responses through the researcher-respondent rapport. As discussed, my research takes elements from both traditional qualitative interviewing techniques and feminist methodology. I feel that my interviewing style allowed the women involved to have a voice, and tell their own stories without being too confined to pre-set topics and conversation areas, but maintained enough focus to generate valid and reliable data that was applicable to the research’s original aims and objectives. The next segment of this chapter provides an explanation as to why I chose in-depth life-history interviews over other qualitative methods whilst highlighting key existing research studies in the area of sex work and the methods used.

**Why In-Depth Interviews With Women Who Sell Sex?**

The research questions, aims and objectives are the foundation for methodological choices and consideration must be given to the research design before the research process can begin. Qualitative methods produce information-rich data, often from a limited number of cases, which undergo a more intensive process of analysis that relate to the central research objectives.

These methods remain most popular when undertaking sex work research. Although quantitative methods can be used to study the sexual entertainment market (for examples see Benson and Matthews 2000; 1995 and Matthews 1997), and may be useful in providing an insight into statistical elements of the industry, they do little to vocalise the experiences of those involved.

There are a variety of approaches to qualitative research with a range of methods to choose from including ethnography, case-study, in-depth interviews, life-history, oral narrative, and participatory action research (see O’Neill 2001 for a discussion). Certain methods of data collection are best suited to different studies, again dependent upon original aims, and often practicalities such as time-frames and financial constraints. For this study I chose to employ the method of life-history in-depth interviews as the main method of data collection to raise awareness and understanding of the lives, experiences and everyday realities of contemporary sex workers selling sexual services in the Midlands area of the United Kingdom today. I did so after careful consideration of other qualitative approaches to method.

Qualitative research methods are commonly used within the area of sex work research (for examples see: Bernstein 2001; Brewis and Linstead 2000; Colosi 2010; Day 2007; Hoigard and Finstad 1992; McKeganey and Barnard 1996; McLeod 1982; O’Connell Davidson 1998; O’Neill 1997; Phoenix 1999; Sanders 2005; Thompson and Harred 1992; 2003; Warr and Pyett 1999; Wesely 2003), with a variety of techniques employed during data collection.

Ethnographic study is frequent, Teela Sanders (2005a) used ethnography as her method of data collection whereby she formally interviewed fifty-five indoor-based sex workers, and totalled over one-thousand observation hours of indoor establishments in Birmingham City. Although, Sanders effectively uses ethnographic methods to gain considerable insight into Birmingham City’s indoor sex market and the lives of the women who work within it, my research includes women from multiple strata of the industry and to immerse myself in the variety of spaces/places where each of the women worked for a considerable amount of time would have been a stretch for the time constraints of this project.

While there are clear benefits to ethnographic study, using ethnography, which often includes participant observation, to research women who sell sex, carries significant risk. Female sex workers may often engage in criminal activities and therefore place the researcher’s personal health and safety in direct threat. Ethnography and observation also cause researchers to take legal risks, Maher (2000) documents how she was questioned on several occasions by New York police whilst researching female drug-users who also sold sex from the outdoor market, as she spent so much time ‘hanging around’ the Brooklyn street scene.

My existing insight into the reality of the local sex market (from volunteering at a local sex work project - see later section for more detail) led me to decide that participant observation would not have been feasible for multiple reasons. First, the local ‘beat’ had seen a recent increase in violence, from both clients, passers-by and between the working women themselves. Second, the majority of women chose to work alone and if I were to shadow them as a solo researcher, I would have hindered both their working pattern and consequently their income. I would also have been placed in great danger once they had secured a client, as the area where the women regularly worked from is one that is particularly isolated and ill-lit, holds a bad reputation for street crime and backs on to a dark wooded park where local gangs tend to ‘hang-out’.

Instead of participant observation, the qualitative life-history interviews I carried out adopted what Smiricich (1983) terms ‘empathetic ethnography’. Through using ‘empathetic ethnography’ the researcher is able to view the social world from the participant’s perspective, representing this as clearly as possible, without becoming a total insider. This ‘ethnographic attitude’ can, according to Haraway (1997), be adopted in any kind of research enquiry and was taken forward within my own research when exploring respondent’s accounts of their personal life experiences and their individual journeys.

The women I interviewed were very private individuals who valued their personal lives; I believe that the method I chose to employ ensured those involved kept their privacy and ultimately placed them in a position of power, whereby they only disclosed what they felt comfortable with on their own terms. The interviews provided women with a safe space to disclose personal information without fear of being ‘outed’ or the stress of having to explain my presence to the significant others in their lives.

Sanders (2005a: 33) spoke of how she was ‘Tina from the office’ when introduced to her respondents partners and family members, playing an active part in the ‘double-life’ process. Utilising life-history interviews instead of ethnography relieved my participants of any stress that may have been caused from my continued presence in their lives, and perhaps allowed them to enjoy the interview interaction more so than had they seen me on a regular basis.

The method of in-depth life-history interviews effectively answered my research questions and explored key areas of women’s lives. Identity was a central concept within this research, concerned with how women manage other roles that they may have with the stigmatised identity of ‘the prostitute’. By engaging in life-history interviews with my respondents it gave the research a reflective element whereby women were able to look back through their journeys and explore their identities and the interplay between them in a way that could not have been captured utilising other qualitative data collection techniques. It allowed women to provide a *whole* picture and highlight key transitions and turning-points in their lives. I therefore concur that using this method effectively met my research objectives and proved a useful tool for eliciting relevant information from participants that addressed the research questions and concepts.

The next part of this chapter discusses the method by which I identified and gained access to the women who participated in this research before considering any ethical and safety concerns.

**Identifying and Accessing Participants**

Accessing vulnerable, marginalised or deviant groups can prove challenging given that membership in such communities is often hidden and characterised by distrust of outsiders. I was fortunate to have previously volunteered at a charitable organisation that provides support for women who are involved in, wishing to exit, or at risk of becoming involved in, sex work. I volunteered for three years prior to deciding on this doctoral research project.

I initially had an informal meeting with the management at the organisation, who proved to be key gatekeepers during fieldwork. During this meeting I informed those present of my research and asked for their permission to recruit participants who utilised the projects services. After they had agreed, and the University of Sheffield’s ethics committee had granted me full ethical approval, I drew up a participant information sheet (See Appendix Two) that I provided to all staff members, gate-keepers to my interviewees, so they were aware of the research aims and objectives and granted them with the opportunity to ask any initial questions.

It remained imperative that this on-going negotiation is one, like the researcher-respondent relationship, based on trust. Gatekeepers control entry to certain settings and/or a particular group of individuals and have the power to block certain lines of enquiry if for example they fear how certain research will be depicted (O’Connell Davidson and Layder 1994). It was beneficial to me that I had known these informants for the three years I had volunteered at the charity and had already established a good rapport with them and their wider team. In this they could trust my researcher presence would not interfere with, or affect, either the daily activities of the project or the trusting relationships that staff had built with service users.

As a volunteer at the project for several years beforehand, switching roles from volunteer to researcher was expected to cause slight tensions. Previous researchers have commented on their difficulties in switching roles and the confusion that can occur from maintaining an insider-outsider identity (Pitcher *et al* 2008; Sanders 2006; Wahab 2003). My voluntary role, which included aiding the day-to-day running of the project and outreach services, was suspended several months before my research began and whilst the research was ongoing.

During my research, I was only present at the project’s premises when conducting interviews. However, this proved a little confusing not only to clients of the project but also to less senior members of staff who were perhaps not so well informed about my research. As Sanders *et al* (2009) point out; affiliation with a local support project may be beneficial as a method of introduction to respondents but may also influence the responses given by participants as they may view the researcher as inextricably linked to the organisation and tailor their interview reactions accordingly. In an attempt to overcome some of these issues a team meeting (which possible participants were also welcome at) was held where I was able to state my role as researcher as independent from the support project and provide clarification and answer any questions or queries. Subsequently there were no further issues regarding my participation in the volunteer activities and my respondent rate actually increased as a result as staff members now fully understood my research role and were able to answer any queries that possible interviewees had about taking part in the interview if I was not present.

The women who attended the project on a regular basis and whom I had already established a good rapport with were receptive to the idea of being interviewed about their life. I interviewed five of these women (Sophie, Georgia, Annie, Tracey and Ellie) in the first month of my fieldwork. However, soon after traffic became increasingly slow at the organisation with clients not returning to the premises to access services for weeks at a time due to the recent ‘crack-down’ on prostitution/sex work.

In an effort to increase my fieldwork pace, I decided to contact a sauna that I had visited on a monthly basis during outreach when in my volunteer role who welcomed the idea of me dropping in some participant information sheets. This effort provided me with a further interviewee (Tessa) whom was happy to take part in the interview as she trusted the charity which I was affiliated with.

After almost three months of attending the project on a regular basis I still had only six respondents. I had not anticipated that the response rate to be as slow as it was proving to be, as I knew of specific women who previously attended the premises, but had not done so for weeks. The staff at the organisation informed me that there had been yet another police operation on reducing street prostitution whereby the vice squad were out on ‘the beat’ in full force and as a result some women had chosen to stay away for a while. As this passed the regular attendees slowly retreated back to the project for their regular supply of condoms and health screenings. However, due to the women’s busy and often chaotic lifestyles they were often in a hurry and had little time to spare for an interview.

Over the coming few weeks I gained a further three interviewees, but was still surprised as to how difficult it was becoming to interview the working women. However, I remained patient and understanding of the fact that that they had other concerns and duties (such as childcare) that took priority over an interview with me. In an attempt to (re)generate interest, a well trusted support worker sent a mass text message from the projects mobile telephone offering hot food and a ‘goodie bag’ (which consisted of toiletries and confectionary) for anyone who attended the premises that day and was interested in participating in an interview with me. To my surprise, and delight, this generated a further seven interviews. Consequently I thought it only fair to also provide those who had already given me their time to be interviewed with a ‘goodie bag’ and to give any further interviewees one also so as to avoid any possible grievance.

As mentioned in the opening paragraph above, deviant, vulnerable or marginalised groups often manifest secrecy and thus it becomes difficult to assess the size and boundaries of such groups and the representativeness of subsequent samples. However, I in no way claim that the twenty women who took part in this research represent a homogenous group or a ‘typical’ sex worker – who arguably does not even exist – but rather represent a group who sell sex from a particular area (the Midlands) at a particular time.

I utilised ‘snowball sampling’ to gain access to this sample of working women and although considered a useful strategy when researching hard-to-reach groups, snowball sampling ‘when the sample emerges through a process of reference from one person to the next’ (Denscombe 2003: 16), is often considered risky, particularly when the sample is small.

One of the central drawbacks of snowball sampling is that it risks the sample becoming too alike and consequently biased and unrepresentative. In an attempt to overcome this as best I could, I broke the chain of informants in several places and then restarted the snowball. In addition to this, as I was also conscious that recruiting participants from only the support agency may also risk producing a limited sample, I intentionally chose to include women who sold sex from a variety of places and spaces in an attempt to reflect the diversity of the industry, rather than only including sex workers from one particular stratum and risk an inaccurate portrayal of the Midlands sex worker population (See Agustin 2007).

This being said, given the diversity of the sex industry and those who work within it, it is unlikely that a sample of twenty female sex workers will reflect the population as a whole (Sanders *et al* 2009). My work however is not seeking to define generic characteristics of sex workers but explore the little understood process through which some women come to work that many others would find abhorrent. There is no assumption at the outset that such processes maybe similar between subjects.

It took a total of twelve months (Dec 2013 - Dec 2014) to generate all twenty interviews with women who worked from a variety of places and spaces ranging from street sex work to escorting and internet work. The table below highlights the range of sex work stratum, locations whereby services are provided and key characteristics of the twenty female respondents.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name** | **Age** | **Age of Entry** | **Ethnicity\*** | **Strata’s of Sex Work** | **Working****Locations** |
| Rose | 33 | 17 | White British | StreetPhoneOut-callsCrack House | Nottingham |
| Polly | 30 | 24 | Black British | StreetPhoneOwn Home | NottinghamAberdeen |
| Tessa | 41 | 40 | White British | SaunaWorking Flat | NottinghamNorthampton |
| Amber | 31 | 16 | Black Caribbean | StreetCrack House | Nottingham |
| Kate | 21 | 18 | White British | EscortOwn HomeOut-callsInternet | NottinghamBirminghamLeicesterLondon |
| Ellie | 37 | 16 | White British | StreetPhone | Nottingham |
| Tia | 39 | 18 | White British | SaunaStreetEscortClubs | NottinghamCoventryLeicester  |
| Tracey | 38 | 19 | White British | StreetWorking Flat | NottinghamEast Midlands |
| Elsa | 22 | 18 | Black Caribbean | SaunaWorking Flat | Nottingham |
| Lauren | 36 | 13 | White British | StreetCrack House | Nottingham |
| Sophie | 28 | 18 | White British | SaunaWorking FlatStreetPhoneCrack House | Nottingham |
| Georgia | 32 | 17 | White British | StreetPhone | Nottingham |
| Rae | 37 | 16 | Black British | StreetPhoneSaunaWorking FlatEscort | NottinghamLondon |
| Annie | 31 | 16 | Black Caribbean | StreetPhoneEscort | NottinghamLondon |
| Jenny | 33 | 9 | Mixed British | StreetEscortPhone | NottinghamEast MidlandsLondon |
| Kim | 35 | 16 | White British | PhoneOwn HomeOut-callsStreet | NottinghamCoventry |
| Darcy | 31 | 13 | White British | StreetPhoneEscort Pole-dancingWorking Flat | NottinghamLiverpoolLondonBrighton |
| Kara | 36 | 23 | White British | Working FlatOwn HomeSaunaPhoneEscortInternet | NottinghamLondonLeicester |
| Alice | 34 | 32 | White British | Working FlatPhoneStreetOwn HomeStreet | Nottingham |
| Natalie | 33 | 21 | White British | Working FlatSaunaEscortInternetPhone | NottinghamLeicesterSheffieldDublin |

\*Self-defined

As the table above illustrates, although the women all currently sell sex from the Midlands, the majority also have experience of selling sex from multiple locations across the UK including Dublin (Natalie), Aberdeen (Polly) and Brighton (Darcy). The range of markets the women work from is varied and diverse. Fifteen participants sell sex from the street, with the remaining five women (Tessa, Kate, Elsa, Kara and Natalie) working from multiple indoor locations including working flats, their own homes and sauna’s. Tia, who works from both indoor and outdoor locations, is the only participant to also provide sexual services from clubs and Darcy, who also works across both the indoor and outdoor markets, is the only woman who reports pole-dancing. All twenty participants work across multiple markets simultaneously; seven women (Tessa, Amber, Ellie, Tracey, Elsa, Lauren, and Georgia) provide sexual services across two stratums, with Kara currently working across six markets (working flat, own home, sauna, phone, escort and the internet).

The amount of time the women have spent selling sex varies considerably. Tessa, a forty-one year old indoor worker has been providing sexual services for less than one year, whereas Jenny, Tia and Ellie have been sex working for over twenty years. Fourteen participants entered the sex industry when they were aged eighteen or under. Jenny, who has been working for twenty-four years, was only nine years old when she first engaged in sex work. Lauren and Darcy were also very young at only thirteen. Other participants began engaging in sex work during later life such as Tessa, who began working when she was forty and Alice who entered the industry when she was thirty-two. Conditions surrounding entry is discussed in detail in Chapters Seven to Nine.

As the table above highlights. the sample consists of predominantly white British women (fourteen participants), with two women identifying as black British, three as black Caribbean and one woman defining herself as mixed British. It is now widely acknowledged that the migrant sex worker population in the UK has increased in the last two decades (Platt *et al* 2011) with women from parts of Europe, Africa, South-East Asia, the Caribbean and South America entering the UK to sell sex (Dibb *et al* 2006; Jackson *et al* 2010; Mai 2009). Although this is not reflected in my sample due to access limitations and time constraints and does not aim to reflect the UK sex worker population as a whole, the participants in my research offer varied and diverse working lives permitting a unique exploration of the lives of women who sell sex from the Midlands.

**Ethical Concerns: Issues of Consent, Confidentiality, Harm and Safety**

Criminological field research unavoidably entangles those who practice it in complex and ambiguous relations to subjects and situations of study, to issues of personal and social responsibility, and to law and legality (Ferrell 1998: 25).

It is important to recognise that individuals or groups that engage in ‘deviant’ or criminal activities are often vulnerable and suffer marginalisation or exclusion because wider society deems their behaviour unacceptable or immoral. Therefore, these populations must be researched in a sensitive manner to ensure they do not receive any further stigmatisation.

Since this thesis centres on the experiences of women who engage in a traditionally ‘deviant’ activity there are a number of ethical considerations that need to be taken into account. Firstly, the issue of consent needs to be considered. Guidelines of The Social Research Association state, ‘…in conducting research with vulnerable populations, extra care must be taken to protect their rights and ensure that their compliance is freely entered into’ (SRA 2003: 31). The principle behind the idea of ‘informed consent’ is that researchers should inform potential participants of the nature and purpose of their research, the research boundaries, and obtain their permission to be subject to participation (Bryman 2008).

The women involved in this research study were all over the age of eighteen (the youngest being twenty-two) and the overt nature of the research aided in minimising issues of deception. Deception, although more prominent in covert research, can still factor in overt study. Researchers can manipulate information regarding their investigation, and lie or withhold truths from participants in order to maintain confidentiality or protect other friends and informants (Burgess 1984). However, every effort was made to be honest and open with the respondents involved in my research: they were all provided with a detailed project information sheet (that was approved beforehand by the University of Sheffield’s research ethics committee) which I went through with them giving them an opportunity to ask questions or for clarification.

Some respondents had several weeks to look over the research information sheet (see appendix 2) before they gave their consent to participate in the research. This document contained details regarding the nature and purpose of the investigation to give participants enough information whereby they could make an informed choice as to whether they wished to participate in the study. The text also included my contact details should they wish to ask any questions prior to or after the interview, and contacts details for my supervisor and the University should they have and queries or complaints.

This document was handed to interviewees a second time (on the day of the interview) for them to take home with them once the formal interaction was complete. The research information sheet also provided interviewees with details regarding additional support services in a further attempt to minimise any harm to participants.

In addition to the participant information sheet, respondents were asked to give written consent by signing a consent form prior to any interview recording (see appendix), which all interviewees were happy to comply with. This document outlined how the data would be stored and that all interviewees would be guaranteed anonymity, whereby I would remove all personal and/or identifying information from the transcription and employ the use of pseudonyms.

This document also granted me written permission to transcribe the interview and use direct quotes from the audio taping. At the beginning of each interview respondents were again reminded that they were free to bypass any question or topic that they did not feel comfortable discussing, could terminate the interview at any time, and also withdraw from the research if they wished. No questions were bypassed and no interviews were discontinued, with the exception of Sophie who took part in two shorter interviews.

Some of the women who took part in the interviews were already known to me through my capacity as a former volunteer at the charity. In these instances I had an established rapport and friendly relationship with them. However, it was made explicitly clear that they were not under any obligation to take part in the research and that my research was separate from the services offered at the project.

During the initial meetings with possible respondents the gatekeepers (the manager and support workers of the organisations) were present which assisted with recruitment as they were able to provide informal references attesting to my character and trustworthiness. It is also important to note that in no circumstance was any interview conducted if I did not feel that the participant was totally coherent, in that they appeared consistent in their thought and speech and were not presenting any obvious signs of intoxication.

As Francis Shaver (2005) accurately highlights, privacy is of paramount importance when conducting research with individuals who engage in socially stigmatised or illegal behaviour. The issue of confidentiality is something every researcher needs to consider before commencing fieldwork, and a decision has to be made whether to pledge full confidentiality, partial confidentiality, or no confidentiality at all. There is a great ethical responsibility to ensure that participants of research do not suffer from the intrusion into their lives and their privacy is respected in the process. Therefore, where one stands with confidentiality needs to be made explicitly clear from the outset, and if information sharing with a third party will take place, participants need to know what exactly will be disclosed (Lowman and Palys 1999).

Before commencing my fieldwork, ethical approval was granted by the University of Sheffield’s research ethics committee, where issues of confidentiality were addressed within my ethics application. I agreed with each participant before the interview began that all information shared would remain private and confidential with the exceptions of child protection issues, admissions of committing serious violence or murder, or the expression of intent to cause serious harm to another person.

Confidentiality issues continue during, but also after, the completion of the interview interaction itself. As noted, when transcribing the twenty interviews, interviewees were given a pseudonym and any identifying information was removed to uphold their privacy. It is also important to note that as well as guaranteeing total anonymity to the twenty women who participated in this research, it was also extended to the charitable organisation that granted initial access to my sample of respondents. This was done due to the small size of the project in an extra attempt to protect all identities and the precarious legal situations of those who chose to be involved.

The storage of the interviews also adhered to strict confidentiality guidelines whereby the transcripts of the interviews are kept on a password protected USB stick and the names of the interviewees were in no way connected to the interview transcripts. Once the audio recordings were transcribed they were removed from the dictaphone and all sound files were deleted from the computer on which they were transcribed.

Prior to any interview, immediate concern was given to the possibility of psychological distress that the participants may feel from telling their stories. As Plummer (2001: 403) notes, ‘subjects may be severely traumatised’ recalling their stories and experiences to a researcher. In order to address this, I informed participants in advance of the broad topics that the interview was likely to cover and as discussed earlier, it was made explicitly clear, both in written and verbal format, that participants were free to bypass any question/subject that they were not comfortable discussing and could terminate the interview and withdraw their participation at any time, even after the completion of the interview.

Precautions were taken to minimise the risk of harm and ensure the safety of, not only those taking part in the research, but also myself as the researcher. The majority of interviews were conducted at the premises of the voluntary organisation and thus staff members were always aware of my whereabouts. For interviews that were carried out in other locations, whether public or private, I informed a close personal contact as well as a member of staff at the project as to when and where interviews were being conducted and roughly how long they were expected to last. Should the interview take longer than anticipated, I was to update my contacts by telephone to inform them of this, and contact them again once the interview has been completed. In the unlikely event that I did not make contact, and if I was not contactable an hour after the expected end-time of the interview, the elected individual would have the required information should authorities need to be notified.

The next segment of this chapter provides a description of the data collection process before highlighting the importance of emotion in researching sensitive areas such as sex work.

**Data Collection: A Life-History Approach, ‘Complete Observer’ and Field Notes**

I chose interviewing as my main method of data collection and utilised both feminist and traditional qualitative values and techniques in the process. In an attempt to gain a deeper appreciation and sense of understanding for the lives and realities of the participants I chose to employ a life-history approach to the interview. Whilst life-history interviews may not be the most common method of data collection due to the large amounts of data such methods can encompass, I felt it most useful and appropriate as they inevitably encourage thick and detailed descriptions of an individual’s life over a significant period of time. Although not expected to relay their entire life story in a one-to-two hour interview, the full-length presentation of an individual’s life is given in their own words enabling the respondents to have a voice and tell their stories in their own way, without being so confined to limited questions and/or subjects.

These principles closely resemble those articulated by Mason (1996) which characterise life-histories as informal, topic-centred conversations undertaken in an unstructured manner. These interviews were conducted at a location of the participants choosing (usually at the project premises) in the context a mutual trusting and respectful relationship. The women were able to discuss significant life events that shaped their experiences and identities as the life-history approach to the interview elicited information on how ‘identities, values and motivations are shaped within and across a variety of social contexts’ (Crewe 2006: 353).

There are two common views to life course perspectives: chronological presentations and principal ‘turning points’ in a person’s life (Robson: 1993: 382). Although the interviews took a chronological approach and began with the interviewees telling me about what they remember from their childhoods, the majority of the interviews became focused on the significant ‘turnings’ in their life, for example becoming pregnant, using drugs and engaging in sex work. This allowed me to capture individuals’ subjective realities and better understand how they perceive and experience the social world of which they are a part. Also, this approach ultimately ensured that the same relevant information was collected, and similar key life events were explored, with each interviewee.

Prior to the fieldwork process I decided to break the interview into three main areas taking a chronological approach: childhood and early life, entry into sex work, and experiences whilst working in the sex industry. These areas were intended to form a loose structure which the interviews would follow with enough flexibility to allow participants to discuss experiences that they felt significant within their own lives. Two pilot interviews were then organised in order to gauge the effectiveness of this data generation structure.

After examination of, and reflection on, the pilot interviews it became evident that key themes were emerging within each of these three life-course segments. These included, but were not exclusive to, familial backgrounds, education and employment, involvement in criminal activities, drug use, violence and abuse, trauma and loss, experiences of stigma and issues relating to identity. These were then noted into an ‘interview guide’ that I would read before each interview to re-familiarise with key themes to explore. This visual aid proved useful in allowing me to regain focus when participant’s narrative accounts were presented in an often confused and illogical manner jumping from one life event to another.

Due to the vast amounts of data collected from one individual using a life-history approach, it was particularly appropriate that the sample of female sex workers participating in the study was not too large. The interviews ranged from twenty minutes (one of the three interviews conducted with Sophie) to one hour fifty seven minutes. All but one of the twenty interviewees were formally interviewed once, with Sophie being the only exception. I re-interviewed Sophie several times (three in total), as she was unable to concentrate for the amount of time required to conduct the interview in full due to the chaotic nature of her lifestyle. Therefore, the interview was broken down into three segments which proved successful as the information given was deeper, thicker and provided in her own time which may not have been achieved if she had attempted to complete the interview in one session.

In addition to carrying out qualitative life-history interviews with the twenty female participants I also undertook the role of ‘complete observer’ (Gold 1958) whereby I remained external to the group, observed from a distance, and did not engage in any group activities or sustained interaction (Burgess 1984).

Observation is noted by researchers such as Becker (1963) to create a better understanding of the population under study by observing them in their own environment going about their usual everyday activities. Participant observation, as Avril Taylor (1993) found when studying female drug-users, is seen to expose greater details regarding the lives and realities of the research subjects. However, to employ participant observation in its purest form as the main research tool for this investigation would not have been suitable the reasons previously discussed in this chapter.

First, the lives of sex workers are often chaotic and unpredictable and may involve risk and elements of danger that come with participation in illegal activity. Therefore to observe the lives of sex workers as a participant may have placed both myself and the participants at risk (Venkatesh 2008).

Second, participant observation can also create issues of mistrust as individuals who regularly experience some form of police involvement may view the researchers as a possible covert police informant, and as a result may create a hostile relationship between the researched and the researcher making it difficult to build a rapport. However, as a ‘complete observer’ occasional observation of the day to day activities and routines of sex workers was to be expected as interview locations, times of day, and other environmental factors were subject to the women’s working lives and commitments. This ultimately shed light on the realities and everyday experiences of those who sell sex and allows for some contextualisation of the interview material.

In addition to recording the interview itself (see segment below for a more detailed discussion), I also utilised note taking to complement my other methods of data gathering. Loftland (1971) describes three types of note taking: ‘mental notes’ of events and in what circumstance they occur; ‘jotted notes’ comprising of key words and phrases; and ‘full field notes’ to provide full details of events and conversations. I employed all three methods of note taking and kept a research journal where I undertook my ‘full field notes’.

After each interview it was in my research journal that I made my notes which proved invaluable to the process as whole. It was here I was able to reflect on the experience and it also gave me a safe place to describe the emotions that the interviews invoked within me as a person.

Within academia there appears to be a stigma attached to emotion, it seems to have been instilled in scholarly thought that feeling is somehow wrong; that it can be harmful to the research process, but it is in fact natural to feel. When to discuss matters of rape and sexual abuse with another person and watch them relive the discomfort whilst remaining desensitised is perhaps the most unnatural thing to do. I found that the respondents I interviewed fed off my emotion and it only strengthened our rapport. They looked at me in response to what they had said, if something they confessed was funny and they were laughing, I too, would share in the laughter. Similarly, if something they were recalling was upsetting to them, I would share in that also. I believe that if I had been cold and emotionless throughout the interview process the participants would not have been so open and have shared so many of their personal and heartfelt experiences with me, experiences that only added to the richness and originality of the research data.

**The Importance of Gender and Emotion**

A focus on experience in method does not mean a rejection of the need to be critical, rigorous and accurate (Gelsthorpe 1992b: 214).

Gender is a key component in this research and it would be ignorant to disregard the gender dynamics of the qualitative interview itself. Being a woman interviewing only women contributed to the depth and validity of the research data, in that women were more likely to discuss sensitive matters with me as we shared the same gender and could therefore relate to similar gendered experiences. A variation in these gender dynamics may have altered the conduct and direction of the interview data; certain topics may have been easier to discuss with me as a female than if the interviewer was male.

I found this particularly apparent when discussing incidents of sexual assault and rape whereby the interviewees appeared to open up to me in great detail. It felt like a natural and relaxed process as they often used the phrase, *‘you know what I mean’*, during the conversations as we shared gendered commonalities. Also, throughout the interviews comments were made by several of the respondents when discussing sensitive issues; for example, *‘only a woman can understand what it’s really like for a woman to be raped’* or similarly, *‘only a woman can relate to the idea of being raped by a man’*. This further demonstrates how if the researcher were male, the women may not have felt able to open up about their experiences of a sensitive or personal nature for fear that the male interviewer would not be able to understand or appreciate the depth of the emotion that was created.

Issues concerning gender therefore come in to play from the very start of research including analysing and contextualising the research data. Although it is important to recognise that some dimensions of my identity, such as age and ethnic background, may have differed from that of the women involved and ultimately affected the research process (Harding 1990; Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1996), as a woman, it was easy for me to relate to *some* experiences that the women had encountered and when interviewees recalled some painful experiences it was only natural for me to feel some kind of emotion.

Transcription was also an emotional process, as I had time to fully absorb the interview data and reflect on what was discussed. One comment in particular caused me great emotional discomfort:

*…I just think I’d rather they [men] come to me and pay me for sex rather than go and rape somebody, you know, everybody’s got sexual urges I suppose, but I’d rather them rape me than rape a nice girl like you (Georgia).*

The statement, ‘I’d rather they rape me than rape a nice girl like you’, aroused a sense of sadness but also a feeling of guilt. I felt guilty that Georgia, who I found to be an extremely sweet and friendly thirty-two year old woman, felt it more appropriate that she was raped than I – a *nice* girl. It became apparent during the interview and the transcription process that Georgia had low self-esteem and by referring to me as ‘nice’, and ultimately different from herself, implied that she did not hold herself in particularly high regard.

I have since seen Georgia at the project’s premises whilst conducting interviews with other respondents and have continued to engage in conversation with her about everyday activities. And as previously discussed in the first section of this chapter, although I would not consider my interviewees as ‘friends’, I continued to be on *friendly* terms with them if ever I came into contact with them again.

Natural scientists, regard feeling as unscientific as emotion is often associated with irrationality and compromising the objectivity of research. Women, particularly, are branded irrational as they ‘are characterised as sensitive, intuitive, incapable of objectivity and emotional detachment and as immersed in the business of making and sustaining personal relationships’ (Oakley 1990: 38). However, in recent years some sociologists have described emotion as ‘necessary for knowledge’ as it adds ‘power in understanding, analysis and interpretation’ (Holland 2007: 195). Emotions are ‘embodied experiences’ (Denzin 1984), that according to Williams and Bendelow (1996: 145-53):

…have fundamental implications for a range of pertinent sociological themes and issues including social action, agency and identity; social structure; gender, sexuality and intimacy; the embodiment of emotions across the life-course (from childhood to old age); health and illness; and the social organisation of emotions in the workplace (formal and informal).

However, in order for emotional implications to be recognised there needs to be an increased awareness of how emotions impact on research as a *whole*. Some commentators now suggest that emotion is essential in the pursuit of knowledge but there is often a lack of emphasis on the emotional effects that the research process has on the researcher themselves (See Maynard and Purvis 1999 for a discussion).

Interviews in particular may bring difficult past experiences to the surface and may cause the interviewer distress or in some cases trauma (Hubbard et al 2001). For example, Liebling and Stanko (2001: 421) discuss the ‘moral turmoil’ they felt from witnessing the violence and harm in participants lives, with other researchers also noting the potential emotional impacts when researching groups who have experienced violence, abuse, and distressing events (O’Neill 2001; Pearce et al 2002; Sanders 2005a).

Shaver (2005: 207) also highlights how ‘the researcher’s emotions can have effects at the personal and professional levels, in relation to their understanding of their self and identity, and their capacity to perform in a fashion that they would themselves regard as professional, and these effects can be long term’. Researchers such as Ramsay (1996) have found their research emotionally exhausting often having to engage in ‘surface acting’ (Hochschild 1983) to manage their feelings when conducting fieldwork. Other researchers have become both emotionally and physically ill by attempting to suppress or ignore their emotions (Shaver 2005).

Personally, I regard completing this thesis as one of the most rewarding times of my life, but also consider it one of the most difficult. Through carrying out this research I was forced to confront my own life, past experiences and aspects of my identity that I had perhaps otherwise overlooked.

As already mentioned, I had spent a considerable amount of time as a volunteer at the organisation where the majority of my participants were affiliated with previous to the start of this research, and therefore had been exposed to issues surrounding the area and did not consider myself naïve to the field. However, certain topics participants chose discuss evoked powerful emotions within me as a woman, particularly surrounding issues of daughterhood and motherhood.

During the fieldwork process I experienced periods of poor sleep, emotional upsets, and anxiety. I found it extremely difficult to relax and ‘switch-off’ from my research, even during my leave of absence. I felt disturbed by certain things participants had chosen to confide to me and felt a deep sense of guilt that they had experienced this alone without a solid support system around them.

However, it is imperative to recognise that while the emotions of the interviewer are of significant importance to the research process, the research interactions are likely to be far more emotional and distressing for the interviewees themselves and efforts (such as those discussed earlier) must be taken to best minimise these.

The following part of this chapter details the data recording and transcription process before closing with a description of how the research data was coded and analysed.

**Data Recording and Transcription**

The location and environment where the interview is conducted is crucial to the clarity and quality of the interview and its data. It was also important for the research participants to feel as comfortable and relaxed as possible in order to enhance the production of rich and valid data. Noisy and/or busy public places for example, a coffee shop or restaurant would not only have been loud and could have jeopardised the audio recording, but could also cause participants to become intimidated and therefore unwilling to open up during the interview as privacy would have been limited (King and Horrocks 2010).

All twenty interviewees chose an interview location that they felt comfortable with, and were given the option to participate in the interview at the projects premises or at another location that they felt best suited them. All twenty women chose to be interviewed in the environment in which I first came into contact with them; the voluntary organisation, a sauna, their own home, or a working flat. I believe this freedom of choice allowed the participants to feel comfortable in their familiar surroundings before the interview began.

All interviews were audio recorded using a small dictaphone which all respondents gave consent to before the interviews began. The women were informed prior to the commencement of the interview that if they did not wish for their interview to be taped and would rather notes were made instead that this option was sufficient. However, all were happy to have their interview recorded and transcribed afterwards, which, as previously mentioned, they gave written consent to. This was extremely beneficial as it meant that I could focus solely on the interviewee and could be unconditionally responsive rather than preoccupied with writing notes for fear of missing valuable information.

There is always a small risk with audio recording that the interviewee could feel less relaxed and limit their responses for fear of being held to account. Although I do feel certain that all twenty respondents felt comfortable being recorded and gave a wealth of information knowing that they could request the dictaphone to be switched off, or withdraw from the interview and research at any time.

Before the interviews formally began small talk was made with each participant: topics ranged from what they had planned for the rest of the day to them discussing their hobbies and general interests. I believe that this ‘broke the ice’ and made them feel more relaxed and comfortable in the presence of a researcher which allowed the ‘conversation with a purpose’ (Merriman 2009) to develop naturally.

The use of the dictaphone permitted the full transcription of all interviews. Each interaction was transcribed by myself, and although it was a lengthy and often tiresome process, I felt this best and most appropriate to the research as a whole due to the sensitivity of the data. To relinquish control over the interview data to another person would have been concerning, as the little remarks that may seem unimportant to a transciber, may have in fact been extremely important to the data analysis. When transcribing the interviews I was able to relive the experience and make further notes, as well as referring back to my research journal. It was here that it became apparent that many little remarks, that may have seemed minor at the time, actually had a heavy impact on the research analysis.

As Bryman (2001) confirms, a one hour interview can take up to six hours to transcribe. Although this process was extremely lengthy I felt that it enabled me to develop an intimacy with my data. As Noaks and Wincup (2004: 129) state:

…this (length of transcription time) can be balanced against the fact that researchers transcribing their own work will have the opportunity to enhance their familiarity with the piece and to become steeped in the nuances of the interview.

The interviews were transcribed as soon after the interview as possible and data from previous interviews proved to be very useful for further interactions as I was able to identify key themes and central issues that were explored with subsequent interviewees. This process also allowed me to ascertain if any significant information was missing and to follow up as soon as possible with the respondent. Transcribing the interviews on to a word document enabled me to highlight and code specific sections of each interview that was found to be particularly interesting. It was then possible to compare and contrast each interview and identify common themes or pick out stark differences. Data transcription allowed for the coding and analytical stage of the research process, which will now be discussed.

**Data Coding and Analysis: A ‘Grounded’ Thematic Approach**

A ‘theory-constructing’ approach was utilised within my research whereby my fieldwork was undertaken with little in the way of preconceived theoretical ideas (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). This ‘grounded’ approach allows theory to emerge directly from the data gathered to ensure a closer link between the two, rather than attempting to test out or verify existing theory.

Through grounded theory the ‘meanings, intentions and actions’ of research respondents are organised in a way that can create a new theory (Charmaz 1995: 32). The developmental nature of grounded research is still challenged with the same methodological issues confronting traditional theory-testing investigation. Like theory-testing study, conceptual categories need to be identified from the empirical evidence which is then used to illustrate the concepts (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Generating theory is a process and allows the researcher to develop an emergent theory through the stepped procedure of data analysis and its construction of key concepts and categories. Relationships between these categories can then be analysed and compared which consequently leads to a greater understanding of the lived experiences of the research participants (Charmaz 1990).

Initial analysis began during the fieldwork whereby I would note interesting concepts and ideas when transcribing data and writing up field notes. After I had undertaken five interviews and transcribed the subsequent data I spent a significant amount of time using Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) ‘constant comparative’ method whereby I re-read notes, tested out provisional hypotheses and systematically compared the transcripts.

Central themes became apparent and I then began a more formalised process of analysis whereby I coded each interview (with coloured highlighters), into the following ‘meaning units’ (Charmaz 1995):

* Normality of Family
* Early motherhood and/or unexpected pregnancy
* Client relationships and requests
* Sex working routines
* Entry into sex work
* Drug and alcohol misuse
* Trauma and loss
* Criminality and risky activities

The coded meaning units were then grouped into conceptual categories as follows:

* Childhood and family relationships
* Trauma
* Pregnancy and motherhood
* Deviant and criminal experiences

Three main categories emerged from conceptual development:

* Early life
* Transition period
* Sex working life

I do admit that certain themes immediately stood out as I was very familiar with existing sex work literature. I did however strive to maintain a sense of objectivity during this process and believe that the large amount of time I spent with my data allowed me to become submerged in it.

Although there are software packages available such as NVivo to aid the analytical stage of qualitative research, I decided not to utilise these. Although a time-consuming activity, by doing the coding myself by hand I believe I developed a deep familiarity with my data. There is concern that using software packages results in researchers becoming distant and unfamiliar with their own data (Dey 1993; May 2001). Noaks and Wincup (2004) agree that using software programmes in the data analysis process ultimately reduces the researcher’s intimate knowledge of the data:

Such activity [transcription and coding of data] should not merely be seen as a mechanical process but as an opportunity for further reflection and thought on the part of the researcher regarding the messages that are emerging from the data (p.130).

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) put forward the view that coding should be regarded as a method of managing one’s data, and by organising the data into themes and sub-themes creates a clear view for the researcher and provides a sharper focus for further research. This also ultimately aids the final objective of analysing the relationships between categories. I was fortunate that the time frame of my study allowed me to indulge in my data during its transcription and analysis stage. This permitted time for important connections and relationships to be made with existing literature and research.

Overlapping themes was a frequent occurrence, as is often the case with discourse. The example given below demonstrates how there can be a combining number of themes present in one paragraph of dialogue:

*I was about 24, I just had my second son and I started suffering like post-natal depression, and then like, instead of my mum helping me with the baby she took my oldest son, whereas I wanted her to take the baby because the baby wouldn’t sleep or anything so I had really bad post-natal depression, and like then like I started going out at the weekends, and then my friend introduced me to drugs and it just went from there, I used to like take it once every so often, even though before then it’s not like I never tried drugs before in my life, I tried E’s once or twice back in the day when I used to go out with my friends when I was about eighteen, but it was nothing major, just like normal girls I suppose, then like because I was feeling the way I was I started going out more and I tried crack, like I used to smoke crack say once every so often and then it went to weekly and then just from there, it took away my bad feelings, for a while, I could just forget and block it out, I didn’t feel sad anymore and it helped me, I obviously wish I’d never started taking it now…like someone told my mum that I was using it and she took my kids, and then I started using daily, and then like after about a year I went to Aberdeen with some friends and that’s when I started sex working* *(Polly).*

Here, Polly talks about her family relationships, motherhood, experiences with drugs and entry into sex work when asked how she began sex working. After the initial coding and identification of key themes the data was further organised into tables under the headings: family relationships; experiences of motherhood/pregnancy; trauma and loss; entry into sex work; criminal histories; and alcohol and/or drug (mis)use. This provided me with a reference table and proved useful as an overview of participant characteristics and relationships with key issues.

Although interview analysis ultimately fragments personal narratives through the asking of questions and interruptions, with the coding process risking further fragmentation of individual stories, personal accounts are fragmented by nature, and it would be naïve to assume that a one to two hour interview could capture an individual’s complete life history (Plummer 2001).

After coding all interviews and reference tables and timelines were complete, I also collated documents in Microsoft word using ‘cut and paste’ to arrange segments of each transcript relevant to the central themes and ideas. This proved useful in organising the data analysis chapters (though I did not know this at the time). It is important to acknowledge here that both coding and interpretation of empirical data is somewhat subjective, and what one person emphasises, another may not. This being said, I had a fellow PhD student double code two of my transcripts as a reliability check and found similar results. I do admit that I was perhaps overwhelmed by the large amount of data I had collated throughout the twelve months I spent undergoing fieldwork, but by breaking the analysis process down into manageable proportions and beginning with an ‘open’ stage of analysis (O’Connell Davidson and Layder 1994: 179), I was able to enjoy the course of data analysis.

**Conclusion**

At the beginning of this chapter I situate my own research methods in the context of feminist epistemology, qualitative methodology and existing sex work research providing a discussion as to why I chose life-history interviews. I also give a detailed description of the research process including gaining access to participants, ethical considerations and recording, transcribing and analysing the research data. I also emphasise the notion of voice, and discuss the importance of emotion, a harm-reduction focus, and reflexivity throughout this chapter.

The following chapter presents the case study of one participant (Polly) in detail to illustrate the types of stories that were articulated to me throughout the twenty interviews. Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine present the findings of the twenty interviews.

**Chapter Six**

Polly: A Case Study of an ‘Ordinary Girl’

*I was an ordinary girl...I still feel like an ordinary girl, but I suppose I’m not now, not to other people anyway, but that’s not who I am…I come from a normal family, had a good job, I’m actually quite clever you know, I’m not stupid, people probably think I am because they don’t know me, when they look at me they probably just think ‘oh she’s just a prostitute and a bad mum who puts drugs before her kids’, but that’s not true, not true at all...I’m still the same as I always was, just ordinary really.*

This chapter compliments Chapter Five by highlighting the data coding and analysis process discussed previously through exploring the story of one participant: Polly. Polly is a thirty year old black woman who chooses to sell sex (and other services which are discussed in more detail in Chapter Nine), and has done so for over six years. Polly entered the sex industry when she was twenty-four years of age shortly after the birth of her second son with whom she suffered severe post-natal depression, and that ultimately became the catalyst into a lifestyle that she did not anticipate. Despite displaying a ‘normal’ familial background, great ambition and a strong work ethic, Polly found herself enduring times of deep trauma, loss and hardship. This chapter displays Polly’s journey to the sex industry, the roles and identities that she manages alongside that of ‘prostitute’/‘sex worker’ and how these interplay with one another and continue to inform her self-identity.

I chose to present Polly’s story, rather than any of the other nineteen I was privileged to (although equally as valuable and important), to emphasise from the outset how complex the life histories of women who engage in sex work are. As will be discussed in this chapter, Polly’s journey is not linear; she has experienced periods of pure happiness and total distress, her participation in the sex industry has been fragmented and her engagement with illicit drugs problematic. In anticipation of the following three data analysis chapters, it is important for the reader to appreciate the complicated nature of the lives of the women in this research beginning with Polly.

Polly’s life story is presented in a chronological format to highlight the types of experiences she, and the remaining nineteen women, articulated to me during the time we spent together. Each interview followed the life history experiences of the women: early life; adolescence to young adulthood and lives in sex work with key themes emerging linked to these, not necessarily discrete, phases. Polly’s story is used as an important signpost to the varied analytical themes that emerged during the data analysis of the twenty qualitative life-history interviews. These analytical themes, which helped structure the following findings chapters and emerged in many but not all interviews, fall under the broader umbrellas of: *trauma and loss* which addresses difficult early life experiences that heavily impact on self-identity; *pregnancy and motherhood* which explores issues of adolescent pregnancy, post-natal depression and mother-identities; and *criminality and offending;* which explores ‘deviant’ behaviour, coping strategies and issues of control. The case study of Polly’s life described in this chapter details the analytical process undertaken of each interview to produce the themed chapters which follow. It also serves further methodological functions as it draws on informal conversations and observations gathered during the fieldwork process, contextualising information that may have otherwise been missed.

**When Lucy Met Polly**

As the opening quotation states, Polly describes herself as an *‘ordinary girl’,* however, Polly is by no means ‘ordinary’, she is a remarkable young woman who displays great strength and hope despite experiencing some particularly difficult and distressing times. To look at, Polly is a conventionally pretty woman with a petite frame which is emphasised by her model like height. She has dark skin and black shoulder-length hair. Although she is known to the project where I previously held the role of volunteer, I had never met Polly before, and staff seemed surprised when she displayed an interest in talking to me. Polly was described to me by her support worker as ‘quiet’ who expected her not to ‘say much’.

The day I met Polly the project where I recruited my initial participants from was particularly, and unusually, busy from what I had experienced during my previous visits. For that reason I cannot help but think that Polly, the reserved ‘quiet’ girl, partly agreed to be interviewed as a way of escaping the hustle and bustle of the organisation, its loud service users and lively support workers. Once Polly and I had entered a quiet room located a safe distance from the main drop-in and the activities that were unfolding within it, she appeared more assertive and shook my hand, informing me that she felt uncomfortable when the project was busy as she was ‘naturally quite shy’.

We chatted informally for a few minutes discussing how busy the drop-in was, how long she had been coming to the project, and how we were surprised we had never encountered each other before. As explained in the previous chapter, I then took the opportunity to discuss my research with Polly, also giving her some time to read over the participant information sheet before going through it again with her to make sure she was fully informed as to the nature of the research before continuing with the interaction. Polly was then happy to sign the consent form and share her story with me.

The remainder of this chapter presents Polly’s life chronologically highlighting the key experiences, transitions and ‘turnings’ that have impacted on, and continue to inform, her sense of self before providing a discussion on how her identities and roles are managed whilst situating her experiences into wider literature.

**Childhood and Family Relations**

Polly was born in an area located close to the centre of a bustling Midlands city that now houses a large ethnic minority population. Polly lived with her mother and father, as well as her older brother and sister, up until the age of seven when her father left her mother, and the family home, after having an affair with another woman. She describes her childhood as *‘good’,* recalling happy memories of playing outside with children from the local community. Community was something Polly stressed when discussing where she grew up:

*It was the type of place where everyone knew you, it was really friendly, really nice, it was actually a lovely place to live back then, all the kids would play outside together and all the mums would chat and stuff, it was just really nice.*

Religion was an important value in Polly’s community and she attended her local Church of England primary school. Polly spoke fondly of her time at primary school and her childhood ambitions:

*When I was at primary school I used to want to be a solicitor, well I wanted to be a nurse at first and then I wanted to be a police officer, because we used to have police officers doing the local beat sort of thing, and I used to walk round with them every day after school (laughs)…and then yeah I wanted to be a solicitor, I just wanted to help people I think, and make a difference, I always wanted an important job.*

Polly’s sweet and caring nature was evident throughout the interview; she spoke with genuine emotion which translated through her tone of voice and facial expressions. Polly explained that her family were well respected in the area in which they lived, her father particularly, and that she felt her neighbours were envious of how *‘perfect’* her family appeared. As mentioned, Polly’s father left the family home after having an affair, which she states did not affect her *‘too much’,* as her family kept this information private and chose not to disclose it with their neighbours and friends.

Polly’s father was a *‘successful man’* whom she held in high regard, particularly when it came to his business acumen; *‘he was really intelligent, earned a lot of money, knew what he was doing you know, he always told us [his children] that he had high hopes for us too’.* Polly explained that she had always planned to make her father proud, and continued to work hard to achieve this, but temporarily *‘lost focus’* when her mother made the decision to send her to a private all girls’ senior school:

*I liked school until I went to senior school, always worked hard and I enjoyed it, it came easy to me until I went to an all girls school, it was my mum’s choice and my sister went there but I didn’t want to go there, I wanted to go to the school all my friends went to, so like, that was the start of things going wrong sort of thing.*

*LB: What do you mean by things going wrong?*

*Well, I started going out more, because I went to this private school I missed my friends and so I just started going out more after school, I wasn’t happy and I didn’t enjoy it anymore, and then I met my son’s father, but I wasn’t with him that long …and then obviously things changed with my family because I got pregnant and it just wasn’t a good time.*

Polly maintains that her family were *‘very close’* up until her mother and father’s relationship broke down, and that they remained that way until she announced the news of her pregnancy at age fourteen when her father and brother *‘disowned’* her after they felt she brought shame upon their family for falling pregnant at such a young age with a boy who was known as a *‘thug’* in the local community (who went to prison before Polly gave birth and who she has had very minimal contact with since).

However, she remains exceptionally close to her mother, in contact with her sister (who now lives in London), but has minimal sporadic contact with her brother, and has had no sustained contact with her father since she became a mother herself.

**Adolescent Pregnancy: A Change in Family Dynamics**

As mentioned, Polly first fell pregnant when she was fourteen years of age and gave birth to a baby boy who is now sixteen years old, and who she credits as her *‘pride and joy’.* For Polly her pregnancy was fraught with tension, difficulty and changing family dynamics as the news of her adolescent pregnancy caused *‘trouble and upset’* within her family. Polly’s father felt that he lost the respect of his community when it became known that his youngest daughter was expecting a child. Polly states that he was *‘embarrassed’* by this but that his disappointment deepened to a point where he would no longer have any contact with her.

When recalling the time she was confirmed as pregnant Polly recollects how she felt, and how her immediate family reacted to the news:

*When I got pregnant, I remember, because I was so young and I knew, I just knew that it wasn’t right, like nobody ever got pregnant at my school or anything, and I didn’t know anyone who was my age and pregnant or had any kids…I remember when I found out, I was so scared, I was scared that my family would kill me, especially my Dad, I knew he’d be so disappointed and mad at me, and yeah, oh he was so mad…my Mum though, she was so strong, I mean she cried at first, but because I was crying I guess she felt sorry for me, she just cuddled me, told me that it would be ok…my sister, she was ok I suppose, she didn’t say much about it, and my brother, he’s like my dad, he wasn’t happy at all, I remember it made me so sad, I still felt like a kid, I was a kid really wasn’t I, I didn’t mean for it to happen it just did.*

As stated above, Polly *‘still felt like a kid’* and longed for her family to accept her choice to continue with her pregnancy. However, only her mother, who she describes as her *‘backbone’* supported this decision and by doing so their relationship, unlike those she had with other family members, was strengthened:

*We were always close, like really close, I was the closest to her, even when I was little, I’ve always been stuck to her, by her side, I’d go everywhere with her, help her with cooking and that, she’s my best friend, even when I was younger she was, I mean, don’t get me wrong we can argue too, obviously, like I suppose all mums and daughters do, but when I got pregnant that’s when we became like really, really close, because she was the only one that stuck by me really, you know, because she’s my mum I suppose.*

Polly attached great significance to her relationship with her mother and continually praised her throughout the interview for her unconditional support during such a transitional stage in her life:

*My mum helped me a lot, she was so amazing, she never passed judgement on me, I mean, don’t get me wrong I’m sure she didn’t want me to have a baby then but she never hurt my feelings or anything, she was just there for me, she made me feel like I wasn’t on my own, I love her so much for that.*

Although her father ceased communication with her for falling pregnant Polly goes on to describe how she still wanted, and hoped, to make him proud even though they were no longer in contact:

*Because my dad wasn’t living with me it kind of made it easier but it also made it worse…like, I didn’t have to see him all the time so I didn’t have to have him telling me off, but he just stopped talking to me, it was like he couldn’t even look at me, I was close to him before as well, I always wanted to make him proud, get a good job and you know, make him proud, and I still tried after I had my son, I still stayed at school and went to college, it’s not like I just dropped out and went on benefits or anything, I still tried, and I did well you know.*

As Polly states, despite becoming pregnant at fourteen she finished school with good GCSE results and continued on to college and then on to university where she gained a degree in management. She spoke proudly of her qualifications and achievements, particularly of the fact that she followed in her father’s footsteps with her career choice, although he is still yet to acknowledge her, or any of her accomplishments.

Polly was keen to point out her commitment to paid work and emphasised her engagement in formal employment from a young age crediting her strong work ethic to her father, who she claims instilled it in her when she was *‘a little girl’.* She continued to live with her mother and son until she was eighteen years of age when she moved into her own house on the same street as her mothers. After finishing university Polly became a bar manager as well as gaining her British Institute of Innkeeping (BII) Licence. Polly regarded herself as a *‘successful’* woman and very proud mother; it was the birth of her second son when Polly claims *‘everything changed’.*

**Motherhood, Post-Natal Depression and Disappointment**

Polly was twenty-four years of age and working as the manager of a popular city bar when she fell pregnant with her second son, now almost seven. Her second pregnancy, like her first, was unplanned but Polly recalls feeling *‘excited and prepared’* for the arrival of her second child and enjoyed the course of her pregnancy. However, shortly after the birth of her second little boy Polly remembers feeling distinctly different:

*It all happened so fast, everything just happened at once, one minute I had a good job, a son, a house, pregnant with my second baby, and then everything just went wrong at once…when he was born, I don’t know what happened, everything just changed, I felt like I was stuck... I had a brand new beautiful baby and I didn’t understand why I felt so sad, like I mean really sad, I just couldn’t feel happy, I just felt so depressed, couldn’t motivate myself... I mean, he did cry all the time, and I had no sleep but that’s just a normal baby isn’t it, my first son did that but this time it was different...I didn’t know what was wrong with me really, I didn’t even know what post-natal depression was, I hadn’t even really heard of it, I didn’t ask for help though I suppose...it brought back so many memories, not good ones, like I was fourteen again, I couldn’t stop thinking about my Dad and I don’t even know why…I just felt like a little girl again you know, sounds strange because I was doing well for myself, but I just felt fourteen again.*

The birth of her second son was an event that brought back difficult memories for Polly, she *‘felt like a little girl again’,* reminded of a time that caused her great distress; her father ‘disowning’ her when she fell pregnant with her first child*.* Polly mentions that she did not ask for help when she first began suffering post-natal depression as she did not fully understand why she was feeling *‘really sad’.* She goes on to inform me that it was her mother that first noticed a change in her, and thought it would help if she *‘took’* her eldest son to stay with her, giving Polly time to bond with her newborn, as she believed lack of quality time to be the reason why Polly was acting differently.

However, Polly claims that this event actually only further isolated her:

*I’m extremely close to my eldest son and I didn’t want her to take him, I mean, I obviously still saw him all the time, I still do now, but I missed him so much...he’s my happiness and when my mum took him I was left alone, well I wasn’t, but I felt alone, even though they were still only up the road I felt so alone you know.*

Polly credits her mother for attempting to help, and although she still saw her on a daily basis and their close relationships remained strong, she felt intense sadness for reasons she could not understand, particularly as she was *‘doing well’* in her life.

The feelings of isolation, depression and being *‘fourteen again’* that Polly was experiencing resulted in her socialising and drinking more that she usually would. As Polly was previously a bar manager she was well known in the local night-time economy and had met many friends and regular party-goers through the industry. Although *‘not really interested’* in the drinking culture prior to the birth of her second son, Polly claims that this became a pleasurable activity for her as she was able to *‘forget and block out’* how low she was feeling. This method of escaping her reality gradually led to Polly using illicit drugs on a regular basis:

*I tried Es once or twice back in the day when I used to go out with my friends when I was about like eighteen, but it was nothing major, just like normal people I suppose, then like because I was feeling the way I was I started going out more and I tried crack…I only started by smoking it say, once every so often, and then it went to weekly and then just from there…it took away my bad feelings for a while, I could just forget and block it out, I didn’t feel sad anymore and it helped me.*

When Polly started smoking crack cocaine she began to distance herself from her usual group of friends and instead surrounded herself with people known to be associated with drug-taking within her local community. News of Polly’s new habit reached her mother who responded by also *‘taking’* her youngest son to live with her and Polly’s eldest son. Polly recalls this being a particularly traumatic time for her:

*When my Mum took my youngest too it was horrible, it broke my heart, even though they were only at my Mum’s up the road, and my eldest was already staying there anyway, it just broke me, I felt like a complete failure, I’d failed everyone again, my boys, myself, my family, everyone, I was just broken…when they both lived with her I felt even more alone than I did before and I just started smoking more, and then it got worse and worse, I didn’t know what to do… I still saw my sons, it wasn’t like I didn’t see them or anything because I did, but I just felt like I was rubbish, a rubbish mum, and I kept how much I was using [drugs] a secret from my Mum, but then people started telling her, it wasn’t a good time.*

Polly became worried that her mother would, like her father did when she was fourteen, ‘disown’ her for developing a drug habit and felt like she had *‘failed everyone again’.* However, Polly’s mother remained in support of her daughter, urging her to stop using drugs:

*My Mum was still there for me, like she wanted me to get better but I just didn’t know how, I couldn’t stop using because I was addicted, but it’s not like I didn’t want my sons because I did, I wanted them more than anything but I just didn’t know what to do…my Mum, she only took them to try and help me, it wasn’t like she stopped talking to me or anything, she just wanted me to concentrate on getting better and obviously she wanted to make sure the boys were alright, you know.*

Polly recalls her mother *‘forcing’* her to go to the doctors about her growing drug problem. It was then that she was diagnosed with post-natal depression and social services became involved giving Polly’s mother parental rights over her two sons. It was recommended that Polly attend counselling sessions in an attempt to move on from past issues but she decided they were *‘not really working’* for her and cancelled this course of treatment. Polly deemed counselling too difficult as she felt unable to face the feelings of hurt, failure and rejection she was experiencing. Instead, Polly used illicit drugs as a way of simultaneously managing her memories of previous traumatic events and emotions with new emerging feelings of ‘failure’, before shortly entering the sex industry and using her involvement as a method of regaining a sense of control within her life.

**Criminality as a Coping Mechanism: Drug-Use and Sex Work**

The trauma of losing parental rights over her two children had a profound effect on Polly’s life as her narrative recollections suggest, she struggled with feelings of intense sadness, often spending *‘days in bed’* and consequently increased her drug habit as a method of numbing some of her pain. Polly soon progressed from crack cocaine to heroin and quickly developed an expensive drug habit which ultimately resulted in her losing her home. Polly looks back on this event as a time when she again felt that she had *‘let everyone down’:*

*I remember when I lost my house, I was embarrassed, I can’t even believe I let it happen, I mean, what the hell was I thinking, I know it’s not an excuse but I was so messed up then, I couldn’t control my habit and obviously I was messed up about losing my kids, I let everyone down again.*

When discussing this time in her life, Polly again recalls memories of her father and emphasises how *‘ashamed’* he would have been of her:

*My Dad doesn’t even acknowledge the fact that I use drugs, I’m sure he knows, and he will obviously know that I lost my house, and my kids, and been so ashamed of me, again…I bet he’s glad he doesn’t talk to me anymore now.*

After losing her home Polly began residing with her drug-taking ‘friends’ and travelled with a group of them to Aberdeen where they were going to *‘sell some gear’.* Polly remembers how some of these women would go out to *‘work the streets’,* and one evening, feeling far from home, Polly found herself accompanying a group of women to the local red-light area where she first sold sex.

When back in the Midlands Polly continued to sell sex from various spaces and places where sex-working became a method for her to regain a degree of control:

*I started smoking more after I lost my house and kids and I had no control over anything in my life, the only thing that I could control was going to work, I could control that...when I went to work, how long I worked for, who I saw... it was the only thing that made me feel half normal again, even though I know it’s not a normal job like I had before is it, but it made me feel better… I was able to control some part of my life again, I could make decisions instead of others making them for me and I suppose that’s why I keep doing it.*

Her narrative above suggests that Polly views sex-work as something positive for her as it makes her *‘feel better’.*  When asked why she chooses to sex-work Polly again suggests that she feels the stigma of other events and experiences in her life, and that selling sex actually helps alleviate multiple voids:

*Obviously I do it to make money, but I don’t know it’s weird, it just gives me routine I suppose, like I know where I am with that, like I mean, I know what I’m doing and that feels good to me...I know that people do think prostitutes are the lowest of the low and that we’re all the same but I don’t even see it, do you know what I mean, it’s like I don’t really care…well, I’m more bothered about my sons and coming off drugs, I feel a lot more ashamed of that than working, working on the streets or wherever is the only thing in my life I can actually make decisions about so I don’t really care what other people think about that, it is what it is.*

Since working in the sex industry Polly has spent time in prison and was subject to an anti-social behaviour order (ASBO), she has also given birth to a further two sons, now two and four years old, both of which were unplanned (she has four sons in total). The fathers of her two youngest sons are unknown as Polly claims she *‘can’t remember’* who they are, only knowing that they were clients who paid her for sex. Her four year old son lives with her mother and her two eldest sons, but her youngest has recently been placed for adoption, which Polly is obviously *‘devastated’* about:

*I was devastated when they told me they’d put an adoption order in for him, I don’t know why he can’t go to my Mum with his brother’s, they said she was too old or something, but she’s not, she’s only fifty-six and she has my other three so I don’t see why she can’t let him be with the rest of his brothers...it’s just made everything worse again, like I was trying my best to get my sons back you know, but now this is happening I’m a mess.*

However, although Polly has experienced some particularly distressing events such as those described above, she spends considerable time stressing her future plans hoping to *‘get well’*, *‘get a nice house’* and most importantly work on regaining care of, and rights over, her children. Polly acknowledges the fact that she can no longer have contact with her youngest son, but states she strives to *‘be a proper mum again’* to her three eldest children. Throughout the interview Polly discusses her relationship issues between her and her father and continues to do this until the interview comes to a close:

*I would love to be close to my dad again you know…I mean, I would love it if I could just erase everything I’ve done that’s made him so ashamed of me, obviously not my son though, I just wish I could have just made him proud, that’s what I was trying to do and then it just all went wrong and he would never forgive me now, I mean he probably wouldn’t have spoken to me again anyway, but now, no, now he definitely won’t want to speak to me again, no way, too much has happened… I miss my family, I miss them a lot.*

The final section of this chapter provides a discussion of Polly’s key life events, ‘turnings’ and transitions that have been presented thus far, situating her experiences into wider literature and debates.

**Discussion**

It is clear that Polly’s journey, and the life story in which it is embedded, does not fit neatly within the conventional explanatory models that attempt to explain why some women enter the sex industry and others do not (see Chapter Four for a discussion). Polly does not adhere to the classical profile of ‘the prostitute’; she does not come from a home with ‘low moral standards’ with parents of ‘low mentality’ who exercise ‘unintelligent disciplinary standards’ (Glueck and Glueck 1934: 299). On the contrary, Polly’s family were well respected within their community, practicing Christians and ran a well organised strict household. So much so that Polly becoming pregnant at just fourteen years of age proved to be a ‘destructive event’ (Mansson and Hedin 1999: 71) and resulted in her father and older brother ‘disowning’ her for causing them deep embarrassment.

This event proved to be a principal ‘turning-point’ (Robson 1993: 382; Sampson and Laub 1993: 8) that changed and influenced Polly’s journey up to the sex industry. The concepts of ‘turnings’ or ‘turning-points’ have received much attention in life course criminology, closely linked to desistance from crime (see, Moffitt 1993: Giordano *et al* 2002; Robson 1993; Sampson and Laub 1993; 2005 and Uggen and Wakefield 2008 for examples), but may be utilised in this research to help us understand how subjective changes in identities resulting from such ‘turning-points’ can alter life course behaviour.

This adolescent pregnancy which resulted in her father ‘disowning’ her caused Polly to experience traumatic emotions and ultimately led her to internalise her daughter role into a ‘bad-daughter’ identity, one which continued to inform and influence her self-identity throughout her life course. Her ‘bad-daughter’ identity became Polly’s ‘primary identity’ (Castells 2010: 7); her central source of meaning and experience, that framed all other identities and one that was prioritised in her salience hierarchy. As her narrative accounts display, Polly persistently attempted to ‘correct’ the stigma of this by continuing with her education and entering a respectable career industry in an effort to make her father proud, but more importantly acknowledge her. Polly therefore provides her father with the power to change her ‘spoiled’ (Goffman 1963) identity and by doing so limits her own control and ultimately becomes powerless to her ‘bad-daughter’ identity.

Polly’s feelings of abandonment resurfaced when she gave birth for a second time aged twenty-four, which combined with experiencing severe post-natal depression, led her to a lifestyle that she had not anticipated and she began using illicit drugs. Polly’s role as a mother became strained when her eldest son was ‘taken’ to live with her mother and Polly was left in a state of confusion and isolation. After Polly’s ‘drug-taker’ role was *‘outed’* to her mother who then ‘*took’* her newborn baby into her care, and later gained parental rights over them both, Polly internalised both her mother role into a ‘void-mother’ identity, and her role as a drug-user into a ‘drug-addict’ identity. These two events served as transitioning periods before Polly decided to first sell sex in Aberdeen and continue to provide sexual services to men when back in the Midlands.

Polly describes her sex worker role as one that provides her with a feeling of control, and whilst she acknowledges that mainstream society may stigmatise those who choose to sell sex, she does not internalise her role and therefore does not adopt a sex worker identity. Importantly, this case study reveals how sex work *itself* can function as a coping strategy for managing other ‘spoiled’ identities such as ‘bad-daughter’, ‘void-mother’ or ‘drug-addict’ and that these identities can be given prominence over, and internalised to a much greater degree, than that of the ‘whore stigma’ (Pheterson 1986).

In sum, this chapter presents the complexity of one participant’s journey towards entry into the UK sex industry, the identities and roles that they manage alongside that of ‘prostitute’/’sex worker’, and how these interplay to ultimately affect ones sense of self.

Each other interview was analysed similarly as a single participant’s story. The key themes were identified in each case and the range of individual experiences were collated into themes to form the data presentation chapters. The themes that emerged from Polly’s interview provide a broad range of analytical hooks to explore the experiences of the remaining nineteen women who participated in this research. Not all nineteen women presented identical issues to Polly, but rather shared key experiences, ‘turnings’ and commonalities that enabled them to enter the sex industry. This will now be the focus of the following three findings chapters.

**Chapter Seven**

Life before Sex Work: Family, Trauma and Loss

*I had a really good upbringing; I lived with my mum, dad and my brothers in a really nice house, a nice area too… Dad worked hard, I had a lovely childhood, really happy…I was really close to all my family, my mum and dad adored us all, we were all close to each other and I always felt like I was really lucky to have a family like that…I was the only girl so I don’t want to say I got favoured but I was treated slightly differently I think, they were all protective over me, maybe, you know that’s why it was such a shock when I turned out the way I did (Darcy).*

A ‘*lovely childhood’*, described above by Darcy, is not a characteristic frequently reported in research that examines those who work within the global sex industry. As discussed in Chapter Four, existing literature describes backgrounds of abuse, low educational attainment, drug addiction, instability, and experiences of institutions and how such factors can facilitate a woman’s entry into the sex economy.

Although pathways into prostitution/sex work have been researched by scholars internationally, little detail has been captured on childhood memories and experiences of women who work in the UK sex industry today. This chapter provides a unique insight into the twenty participant’s early experiences of daughterhood and family dynamics to begin addressing two of the key questions of this research;

* How do women come to enter prostitution/commercial sex?
* Do women who sell sex, particularly from the outdoor market, still report damaged backgrounds? And if so, what constitutes ‘damaged’ today?

The data presented here reveals that contrary to previous research ‘good’, *‘lovely’* and *‘happy’* were adjectives frequently used by (street-based) sex working women when recalling early personal memories. Participants reported experiencing a ‘normal’ early life until a significant trauma transpired. Such trauma (whether sustained or acute) left these women as young girls feeling rejected and isolated, consequently increasing their vulnerability to risky and illicit behaviour such as drug taking, criminality and sex work, which will be discussed in detail in Chapters Eight and Nine.

**Happy Childhoods and being a ‘Good’ Daughter**

As mentioned in Chapter Five (Research Methods) interviews with participants took a chronological life-history approach and consequently interviewees spent considerable time recalling memories from their childhoods and significant early life experiences. Exploring Polly’s story in the previous chapter, revealed the significance women placed on their family relationships and emphasised how, despite what previous literature reports, (street-based) sex workers can, and do, come from ‘normal’ and happy backgrounds.

After general introductions, outlining administrative details and everyday small-talk, I began all twenty interviews with the same question, ‘can you tell me a bit about your childhood and what you remember about growing up?’ This allowed the women to recall memories that clearly bought them much happiness and joy, yet also proved a gateway to a world of trauma, shame, and loss which will be discussed throughout this chapter.

Fifteen women (75 percent) experienced living in a two-parent household at some point during childhood and contrary to research suggesting two thirds of sex workers experience unhappy childhoods (May *et al* 2001), describe the majority of their early life positively recalling some very happy memories:

*I had a good childhood, I was happy when I was little…I always remember doing loads of fun stuff, I used to do dancing, tap and that…my mum and dad, and sometimes even my brother would come and watch me, I got quite good at it I did exams in it…we also used to go to my aunties on the weekends and I’d play with my cousins and that and then the next weekend they’d come to our house and we’d play charades and stupid games like that…sounds a bit gay doesn’t it (laughs) but I used to have a really good time, it was just really nice everyone being together and that (Sophie).*

*When I was young I used to think we were just like the families you see in all the American films…we used to sit round the table every night, my mum and dad loved each other and all that…everything was good and everyone got along…my mum and dad always came to school plays and things, my dad always came to sports day and we did the egg and spoon race and that one where you tie your legs together (Darcy).*

*Yeah it was great, just the usual family stuff, holidays, dinners together every night, some really great Christmases and we used to have epic parties…not even just birthdays, but like street parties for new years eves and stuff (Amber).*

Whilst sharing stories of their childhoods with me participants would make reference to their childhoods being ‘*different’* to what people would expect:

*I mean, it was a long time ago and it was nice to be loved like that, and I totally get that I wasn’t meant to take this turn in my life, this isn’t normal, I know that my mum and dad wanted different for me and didn’t want me to end up like who I am I’m not naive to it I know this lifestyle isn’t normal now and people probably expect me to have always been like this and that but it wasn’t always like this, I’ve just had some shit in my life that’s all (Rose).*

*I get that I’m not like normal now, but I was, back then* (Amber).

*People probably wouldn’t expect me to say I had a good childhood would they, but it actually was, I used to be normal you know, I wasn’t always like this (Kara).*

The women were keen to inform me early on in the interviews that they *‘weren’t always like this’,* to which I asked them to clarify:

*…this messed up (Rae).*

*…a right state (Rose).*

 *…you know, a proper mess (Georgia).*

In the extract below, Rose goes on to expand on what she means by a *‘right state’*:

*…I’m not stupid, I know I look a state, I mean look at my teeth, this is what drugs do, I used to be a looker you know (laughs), back in the day I was actually quite pretty you know…I look at others like me, on the crack and that, and I know they look a state too, it’s not like I think that this is normal, not for me, but life gets messy doesn’t it and then people get messy too I suppose…yeah, yeah all a mess isn’t it really…life, me.*

Like Rose not one participant responded to this in relation to their prostitute/sex worker status and instead referred to their general ‘state’ of well-being, emotional and physical, suggesting from the outset that these women did not hold their prostitute/sex worker role/identity central to their sense of self.

Interviewees (see the extracts below) directly linked their own sense of personal disappointment with their familial expectations of the type of daughter/woman they should be:

*Well it’s not normal to be like this is it, I mean, what father wants their daughter to get knocked up really (Georgia).*

*I bet if they knew I was going to be like this they would never have had me (laughs), can you imagine, soz guys but here’s your future druggie fucked up daughter (Rose).*

*It’s not great is it, having someone like me for a daughter…a drugged up tramp, they wanted a doctor or a lawyer or something and they got this… my brother has a good job and they’re proper proud of him but not me (Sophie).*

Initial conversations around family made it apparent that status and community standing was an important factor for the majority of the women and was significant to how they felt they had *‘failed’* (Rae) and *‘embarrassed’* (Polly) their families. Familial backgrounds and social class has traditionally been a key separating factor between indoor/specialised and street-based sex workers. Although more recent research acknowledges that some sex working women, primarily exotic dancers and private escorts, report well educated middle/upper class backgrounds (Betzer *et al* 2015; Roberts *et al* 2012*;* 2010), women who sell sex from the street are still assumed to be of low/working class ‘troubled’ and/or ‘damaged’ backgrounds (Pereda 2015).

For the women in this research (where 15 participants regularly worked from the street) social class was specifically tied to their fathers and measured by their social standing and status within their communities. Rae recalls how her father’s heavy involvement in the management of her community church made her feel ‘*watched’* needing to *‘make him look good’* to the parishioners:

*…we all had to go to church when we were kids, my mum sung in the choir and my dad had a lot to do with it, we had to go to Sunday school and that, go to people’s houses from church for dinner…it wasn’t a church where you just went on Sundays, my dad was there all the time, everyone knew my dad because of the church so we had to make him look good…they knew who me and my brothers were because they knew my dad, like neighbourhood watch it was.*

For Tia it was her father being a governor at her school that increased the pressure to be *‘good’*:

….*where I’m from every man and his dog knew my dad, he was just one of them people, you know, who everyone in the area knows so it was like if I ever did anything my dad always found out… it was like I was always being watched… by everyone, the people on our street, even my teachers and that because he was one of the governors, so he was literally involved in my life all the time.*

Being a ‘good’ daughter, particularly for their fathers, was something participants placed significant emphasis on when discussing their childhood and family relationships:

*My dad was always the one I wanted to impress… I tried harder at school for him, and my mum too obviously, but I, when he said well done, or took an interest it meant more and I felt happy when he took notice like that and I knew I’d made him happy (Alice).*

*He used to take me fishing, not that I was ever very good, or that I even liked it because I didn’t, but I tried and I was with my dad so it was special and it was our time just us, it was always really peaceful and you had to be really quiet so you didn’t scare the fish…if you spoke too loud the other guys would get annoyed so even though we couldn’t speak that much it was still nice to just do something the two of us you know (Sophie).*

*We always did stuff as a family; we used to go to Skeg all the time in the holidays and that, dad used to go on all the rides with me it was so good, I loved the chips and all the rock, those rock dummies you used to get…I was a proper daddy’s girl back then, miss goody goody two shoes and that, I proper love how that felt… like you know I know I was a good girl and he loved that (Rose).*

Expectations of relationships with their fathers clearly differed to expectations of their relationships with mothers which saw the women valuing quality time with their male figures engaging in bonding activities such as those mentioned in the extracts above. Way and Gillman (2000) highlight how it is common for daughters to seek more time and attention from their fathers and want to partake in activities rather than intimate experiences such as heart to heart conversations that girls may have with their mothers (Apter 1993). Although the women felt a deep connection with their mothers, which will be explored later in this chapter, they spent significantly more time recalling happy childhood memories tied to their fathers, which can be understood in relation to the loss of connection they felt during adolescence, which is a key theme throughout both data presentation chapters.

**Family Trauma and Loss**

Both trauma and loss during childhood and adolescence *prior* to any engagement in the sex industry emerged strongly in the women’s narratives with ninety percent (18 women) recalling difficult, and often painful, early life experiences. Amongst these eighteen women, detailed description of traumatic life events included the death of a parent or other family member, the homicide of a sibling, the death of their own child, the realisation of abuse, discovery of deceit and family breakdown.

Backgrounds of dysfunction and familial upset are common factors reported on the personal histories of those who sex work (Bagley and Young 1987; Dalla 2001; 2003; 2004; El Bassel *et al* 2001; Nixon *et al* 2002; Pereda 2015; Silbert and Pines 1982). However, sustained abuse, traumatic by nature and despite being regarded as a baseline experience of prostitute women, featured only in the childhoods of four women; three women (fifteen percent) recalled experiences of suffering sexual abuse and one woman (five percent) experienced physical abuse. To do justice to these women and their stories and not discount them from such research it is important to acknowledge these women here.

Abuse, particularly sexual abuse, during childhood is thought to overwhelmingly increase the likelihood of deviant, illicit and risky behaviour, including prostitution (Medrano *et al* 2003; Siegel and Williams 2003; Wilson and Widom 2008). Previous studies reporting on the backgrounds of women who sell sex have focused heavily on experiences of sexual abuse claiming victims who experience this in childhood are between 1.5 and 2.5 times more likely to become involved in prostitution during adulthood than are non-victims. (Cunningham *et al* 1994; Lalor and McElvaney 2010; Paolucci *et al* 2001; Wilson and Widom 2010).

Stories of sexual abuse were relayed to me by three of the women. Jenny, Rose and Ellie all experienced sexual abuse at some point during childhood. Jenny recalls being ‘*pimped out’* by her mother from the age of nine:

*My mum used to offer me round her friends*

*LB: What do you mean by ‘offer’?*

*Like, to have sex, basically she used to pimp me out…let her friends, well, they weren’t even friends just people she knew and hung about with I suppose, dealers as well, she let them have sex with me and they’d pay her or give her drugs…sick really…what perv wants to have sex with a nine year old, dirty bastards.*

This ultimately led to Jenny being taken into care by social services at *‘around thirteen [years old]’* where she then decided to begin engaging in sex work of her own accord:

*I was bored in there, there wasn’t much to do and I wanted some money, so I used to sneak out at night and go up the beat, other girls did it…and we’d have sex with the lads in there for stuff as well, everyone was at it, even the staff were dodgy, used to give this one man blowjobs for fags.*

Ellie was also placed into care after being sexually abused by two of her mother’s partners:

*I can’t remember how old I was, young, I had my first son at 16 and it was before that… it wasn’t like my mum didn’t know, I told her, I told her and, I don’t know she either didn’t believe me or something or just didn’t care because she never did anything about it, she never split up with them or anything…and then after the one went the next one was exactly the same anyway, maybe she thought I was just making it up because there was two of them that did it or something.*

Although she never experienced social care institutions, Rose recalls being sexually abused by her uncle from the age of six until she moved out of Nottinghamshire at fifteen:

*My mum and dad didn’t know, nobody knew about it, they do now, but I didn’t tell them until I was about, about 23…don’t think they had any idea…he used to touch me when I was asleep and then I woke up once and then it just got worse…he would make me do stuff to him and then had sex with me, wasn’t until I moved to my grandparents that it all stopped, and that was only because it was hours away and I didn’t see him anymore.*

Kim spoke a great deal about her experience being in the care system and described her life as *‘in and out of it’* as she was placed in care immediately from birth and continued to spend periods in *‘children’s homes’* and with foster families until she was sixteen years old:

*I grew up in care, my mum had proper issues, like mental issues so she wasn’t allowed to look after me, I still saw her she just couldn’t look after me, so I was always in and out of different places, children’s homes, getting moved around with different people…and now my kids are in care, that really upsets me because I know what it’s like, it’s not somewhere I’d want my kids to be but at least they don’t get moved about like I did, you know.*

During her time spent in *‘children’s homes’* and foster care Kim spoke describes being *‘beaten black and blue’* by two members of a foster family she spent several months with:

*Yeah it wasn’t great, most of them were ok but this one family, the mum, she was proper sweet she was lovely, proper mum type, made pies and that, but the older lads were right ones, they used to treat me like a piece of shit…it started with just like pushing and kicking and that but this one time they beat me black and blue like but luckily I wasn’t there long after…there was no point in saying anything because it just would have made things worse for me and I knew I wasn’t gonna be there that long so I just took it for a bit before I was moved.*

These women were extremely vulnerable as young girls and experienced what is widely regarded as the most tragic and damaging childhood trauma (Kearney 1999). Although these women did not report happy childhoods like the majority of participants, they share other significant experiences and critical turnings with the remaining women, the most poignant of which is falling pregnant during their adolescent years, which is explored later in this chapter.

Four women experienced a bereavement of a loved one during childhood which brought them much pain and sadness. Amber encountered a particularly traumatic time which began at fourteen years old when her brother was brutally murdered when he was just seventeen:

*My brother was murdered by a gang not too far from round here actually…they stabbed him in his chest, back, stomach, it was horrible and proper, proper shocking, he wasn’t even a bad lad and it proper shook my family up, my mum went to absolute bits, me and my little sisters were a mess, my dad got really angry it was so bad…I didn’t know what to do, I didn’t want to go to school and I was scared to go anywhere but my house to be honest, it was proper, proper scary everything about that time was horrible…they never even went to prison you know, it was bullshit, bull, it did, it caused so many problems for my mum and dad, it was horrible I hate them who did it, I hate them so much, you’d think we’d be over it or not over it just used to it now, not hate them as much but I don’t, I still hate them, I want them to rot for what they did, but they won’t though because the justice system is shit.*

After further conversation Amber goes on to describe how shortly following her brothers murder she found out she was pregnant:

*It just messed everything up, everything was different, my mum and dad were always arguing, not normal arguing, like slanging matches in the middle of the night type of arguing, my little sisters were always crying, I only had a couple of friends from school to talk to and I used to go round their house after school anyways and one day I just had sex with my mates brother, we only did it twice altogether and then I found out I was pregnant after that, fucking shit timing that was.*

Amber also experienced the separation of her parents around the same time as the birth of her first child and believes that her pregnancy contributed to her parents divorce:

*I just felt like it was all my fault, it put so much pressure on them all at once, they were still messed up about my brothers death and then me getting pregnant just made things a million times worse…I think because my mum was kinda like on my side and my dad wasn’t so it kinda just pulled them apart I guess, I dunno, I just felt, and still feel really that I was the reason they ended up splitting up.*

Like Amber, six further women encountered family breakdown and parental separation which left them feeling *‘confused’* (Elsa), *‘traumatised’* (Natalie*), ‘lost’* (Kara) and *‘unwanted’* (Rae):

*When my dad left it was awful, it still makes me cry now, I remember being sat in front of the front door, I wouldn’t let him out…he didn’t even say anything, I clung to his legs and everything, I kept saying please don’t go, please don’t go, I was literally hysterical, my mum was trying to pull me away but I dug my nails in his legs and everything…I didn’t know what I was meant to do because you just get used to always being with them, living with them I mean and then it’s like all weird and you feel like, like lost or something (Kara).*

*Well at first I didn’t think that much of it I suppose, but then he stopped phoning and then he stopped coming over, and then it just got less and less and less and I don’t know, I guess he was more interested in his new family, he left to be with his secretary you see, cliché or what (laughs)…and he had the little boy he always wanted with her, so I guess that he just lost interest in me and because of everything that was going on with me…but I do find it funny how he stopped speaking to me because of a baby but then he went and had one of his own not even that long after (Georgia).*

*I always used to think I don’t know why people say they get affected when their parents get divorced, two birthday presents, two Christmas presents, two bedrooms and I’m sure they feel guilty and buy you more stuff and let you get away with things that you’d normally get a smack for but then when your parents actually get divorced its different isn’t it, its sad, like things change, even though they say they’re not going to they do… I obviously didn’t live with my dad, he left, he didn’t even ask if I wanted to go, it was just assumed I would stay with my mum, I thought we were closer than that, I thought he would want me to go with him, obviously not (Rae).*

Separation from their complete family unit resulted in the women *‘going off the rails’* (Natalie), hanging around with a *‘bad crowd’* (Rae) and engaging in activities they wouldn’t usually have taken part in such as smoking cigarettes and *‘getting wasted’* (Kara).

Amongst such losses, Ellie and Tracey experienced the death of their fathers during their early lives with Ellie being the one to find her father deceased in the living room of their family home when she was only eight years old:

*I was the one who found him, he was just lying there on the living room floor one morning, it was a Tuesday because he was meant to take me to breakfast club at school, I always went on Tuesdays… I had never seen a dead person before I just came downstairs after getting my book bag and he was just laid there I thought it was a joke or something and he was going to jump back up and yell ‘gotcha’ but he didn’t and I just started screaming and crying until my mum came down it was by far the worst thing I’ve ever seen.*

Ellie speaks of how *‘heartbroken’* she was and how she was *‘never the same’ after* she lost her father:

*It’s something that haunts you that, it’s horrendous, I can still see his face now, his body and how he was just laid there…broken, I was broken, heartbroken for years and years…everything was different, changed for, just one day can change everything you know, and what’s going on in your life just changes and it’s never the same, not even now and I’m an adult…life was shit after that.*

After the death of her father, Ellie’s life changed dramatically, her mother entered into ‘*random’* intimate relationships, two of which sexually abused her which, as mentioned above, lead to her being placed into social care. Shortly after entering the care system Ellie, like twelve of the other women in this research, discovered she was expecting her first child at a young age.

**Falling Pregnant as a Young Girl**

Pregnancy, for any woman, is an intimate and vulnerable experience but for young women it can be a particularly scary and traumatic period made increasingly difficult by the biological, psychological and social changes that characterise adolescence. When a female becomes pregnant during her teenage years the psychological adjustment of pregnancy is added to the challenges of the transition from childhood to adulthood, which can make parenting during this period extremely problematic (Littleton and Engebretson 2005).

For the women in this research, falling pregnant was a dramatic and immediate ‘turning point’ in their lives (Sampson and Laub 1993: 8) which saw the confirmation of their pregnancies shift their entire family dynamic and remarkably change relationships with their fathers forever. Fifteen of the twenty women who took part in this research have children, thirteen of which share the non-normative event of giving birth under the age of eighteen. These fifteen women have fifty-four children between them, with one woman (Lauren) having given birth eight times. Lauren has seven surviving children and cannot remember exactly how old she was when she first gave birth but thinks she was around thirteen years of age:

*I dunno exactly, I can’t really remember because it was such a long time ago…I reckon I was about thirteen, maybe fourteen, no, no definitely not fourteen, I must have been thirteen then… My son came first, I had six boys and only two girls, but I always remember my first son, I can’t ever forget him, my baby, god it seems so long ago now…my last son, the one I gave birth to last year, he died…he had a hole in his heart, it was fucking horrible, I knew I wasn’t going to be allowed to keep him and that anyway but I didn’t expect him to die or anything, and it wasn’t because of me either…the drugs and that, they didn’t cause the hole in his heart, the doctors said it definitely wasn’t the drugs.*

All seven children were removed from her care at birth and placed for adoption; as a result she has no contact with any of her children:

*Yeah I don’t see none of my kids, none of them…I used to be sad about it, like when I was only young myself I was so fucking upset about it and I couldn’t understand why they wouldn’t let me even try and look after my kids...it sounds horrible but you get used to it after a bit, not having them, having them taken away as soon as you have them…people probably think I’m stupid for having more of them, not that I plan on it but, I dunno I must actually want one or something, maybe, I hope I’ll be allowed to keep one but really I know I won’t ever be…but after my last son died that’s it, I can’t have that again so I think I’m just going to go and get my tubes tied or whatever it’s called.*

Tracey also shares in the experience of losing a child shortly after birth when she was just seventeen years old:

*My son died in my arms [he was nine weeks old], it was the most heartbreaking moment of my entire life… I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy it kills me to even think about it, it actually makes me shake, look… he was perfect there was nothing obvious wrong with him, cot death they said, cot death, he just died, nothing at all even wrong with him, they say it’s one of them things that just happens but I’ll never ever forgive myself…I must have done something, I think about it all the time, what I did, maybe I didn’t put him down right and that.*

Thirteen women first became mothers during adolescence (before the age of nineteen) with Lauren being the youngest, having her first child at thirteen, and Tia being the eldest having their first children at seventeen. Some women had several children before they reached the age of twenty (Tracey had given birth three times; Rae had two children by the age of sixteen; Georgia and Tia had three children; Kim and Amber had two children and Lauren had four).

Only two of the fifteen mothers in this sample currently have all their children residing with them, Tessa and Natalie, both indoor-based sex workers who first began offering services when they were over the age of twenty-one. The children of the remaining thirteen women have either been adopted, live with their biological father or another immediate family member. For the thirteen mothers whose children do not reside in their care, they internalised a sense of failure for not being in a position to provide a stable home, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Children were a central theme in all of the (fifteen) women’s accounts regardless of whether they were in their care or not and it was apparent early on in the dialogue that the identification as a mother was a role/identity that woman held central to their sense of self. It has been documented that relationships between mothers and their own parents can negatively influence self-perceptions of parenting, especially in the absence of a strong support network (Clemmens 2003; Dalla 2003; Dodsworth 2012a; Logsdon and Davis 2003), which correlates to the women in this research and will be explored in Chapter Eight.

Parenting teenagers have not had time to resolve their own stages of role identity and intimacy and this places them at increased risk of social and emotional delay (Hurlbut and McDonald 1997). Academics have reported that this may lead to future criminality (Hoghughi and Speight 1998). Thus combining adolescence and parenthood, which are both times of developmental crisis, may result in negative consequences for the mother and child (Culp *et al* 1991; Jarrett 1982; Mercer 1980; Musick 1993; Ruff 1990).

In contemporary Britain teenage pregnancies are accepted as a social problem (Duncan 2007), with teen mothers often branded as deviants for defying the laws of patriarchal society which defines childrearing as two heterosexual consenting adults united in a two-person household (Anleu: 1999; Crook *et al*: 1992; Higginson: 1998; Knoll: 1998). For the women in this research, they were first labelled (sexual) deviants by their own fathers first for disobeying and disrespecting family values and what was expected of them as daughters and women more generally.

From falling pregnant at such a young age, the shifting family dynamics and the deep abandonment felt by the participants meant that, for them, the perinatal period was fraught with confusion, distress and deep sadness. As explored in Polly’s story previously, post-natal depression was an illness that featured in the narratives of several women, with two women (Natalie and Georgia) only coming to the realisation that they had encountered the condition during the interview:

*Come to think of it I probably had post-natal depression didn’t I… yeah, I would have had it wouldn’t I, I mean it was a shitty time anyways but I definitely felt a lot worse after, I just put it down to everything else that was going on but I bet I had that too didn’t I don’t you think (Georgia).*

*Oh yeah it wasn’t a great time when they’re little its’ hard, I love my kid and it’s literally the best thing I’ve ever done but it was a really tough time like when people say you get no sleep they mean in (laughs) it’s so much worse when you’re shattered I mean even when you don’t have a kid and you’re tired you’re more emotional and that aren’t you…but I suppose this was a different kind of emotional, I was very down, what do they call it, the baby blues or something isn’t it, I think I had them, yeah, yeah I had them (Natalie).*

Tia, who gave birth to twins, spoke openly about how she *‘loves them to bits’* but how it was hard for her to *‘bond proper’* with her sons:

*Because I was young myself, even though I was eighteen I was still a baby you know, I think that played a part in it, it all just happened so fast and I wasn’t used to it was I because, well, you know, I just wasn’t I hadn’t had much to do with babies and then suddenly I had two of my own like what, you know it was proper tough and looking back now, with being older and that I should have been given help shouldn’t I, I know I had that post-natal depression thing but it’s not surprising really is it because of how young I was and how sudden it was and that…I honestly didn’t know what to do with them, I’d never changed a nappy or anything before and I’d just stare at them, and they cried a lot, all the time, and there was to of them so I just wanted them, it sounds horrible but I just wanted them to shut up and me go back to being young free and single again, god that sounds awful doesn’t it, but it was hard to bond proper with them and I do think that was because I wasn’t ready.*

Like Tia, Sophie also thought she was *‘too young’* to *‘cope’* with the pressures of being such a young mother with such little support:

*You know what I can say I was too young and that, I know I was too young and I definitely had that depression thing, definitely, but I didn’t know about stuff like that, but I definitely had it, I was a wreck, and emotional wreck and I couldn’t cope with it all it was fucking awful mate.*

As the above extracts highlight the way the women were feeling around the time of the birth of their children was worsened by their sudden change in family dynamics and their support networks, which will now be the focus of the next section of this chapter.

**Paternal Absence and Rejection**

Falling pregnant during adolescence proved to be a critical moment in the women’s lives that both shaped them as individuals and altered their relationships with significant others, both at that time and still continues to do so today. Connections with their mothers and fathers were ‘*changed forever*’ (Polly), and family dynamics saw a considerable shift.

Whether it be because of a shared gendered experience or a stronger parental bond, the majority of the women grew closer to their mothers during pregnancy and after the birth of their children:

*My mum was amazing you know, I can honestly say it made me respect her so much more, she was amazing, so amazing, I just love her for it, and she never left me, like she would just come round with food shopping for me and that, she thought of stuff I never would have so that made it a bit easier, not much like because at the end of the day you’re all alone aren’t you, it’s nobody else’s responsibility, it’s all on you (Natalie).*

*Well I had my mum, bless her, she tried her best to help me and she was great with me, and him, but obviously it was fucking heartbreaking when he died, like I was on the floor and she didn’t know what to do with me, but she was there and in some kinda weird way it did bring us closer (Tracey).*

*I just wouldn’t have known what to do, if she hadn’t been there I don’t know what I would have done, I just wouldn’t have known what the hell to do so I leaned on her…it’s so hard, I feel bad for how much of a little shit I was to her now (laughs) and everything I put her through when I was growing up…it’s hard man and I’m thankful she was there (Amber).*

Relationships with fathers however, dramatically deteriorated. In addition to the trauma previously experienced before confirming their pregnancies that saw some women’s relationships with their fathers begin to decrease and become distant, announcing their teen pregnancies was a monumental life event, a key turning point in any woman’s life, that was plagued by rejection and that caused their fathers great shame. Consequently the women experienced deep pain, sadness and feelings of unworthiness that heightened extremely low self-esteem.

Continuing social and economic change in western societies that has seen the reassessment of gender roles within the home, a shift in the division of labour, and an increase in single-mother households has aroused interest in the roles of parents within the household, with particular focus on mother-father differences in relationships with children and adolescents (Crouter *et al* 1993; Hetherington 1972; Larson and Richards 1994; Parke 1996) Most recently, research on paternal involvement and/or absence and what effects this has for children and adolescents has increased, following previous concern with mother-child, particularly mother-father relationships (Bryd-Craven *et al* 2012; East *et al* 2006; 2007*;* Lopez and Corona 2012; Mitchell *et al* 2009).

The parent-adolescent relationship is better characterised as four separate dyads: mother-daughter, mother-son, father-daughter, father-son (Russell and Saebel 1997; Steinberg 1990), with the father-daughter dyad the most distinct because of its definitive sense of difference and distance (Belenky *et al* 1986). Previous research confirms that fathers play a significant role in their daughter’s life, particularly during adolescence, with the quality of the father-daughter relationships closely associated with future relationships and life histories (Bryd-Craven *et al* 2007).

Paternal behaviours have been proven to have developmental consequences for adolescent daughters (Flinn 1992; 2011; Geary 2000; Geary and Flinn 2001) with research advocating strong correlation between paternal involvement during adolescence and good psychological and emotional health in later life (Flouir and Buchanan 2001). Growing up in a father-absent household places daughters vulnerable to risks such as school drop-out (Lang and Zagorsky 2001; Painter and Levine 2000), depression (Mitchell *et al* 2009), substance use and other anti-social behaviour (Carlson 1999; 2006; Comanor and Phillips 2002; Harper and McKanahan 2004; Matsueda and Heimer 1987). It has also been documented that growing up in father-absent households leaves daughters vulnerable to early and risky sexual activity, relationship problems and teenage pregnancy (Bowling and Werner-Wilson 2000; Ellis *et al* 2003; McLanahan and Bumpass 1988).

This may help to explain and understand why the sample of women in this study, who currently sex work in the Midlands area of the UK, *may* have chosen pathways, activities, and lifestyles that they *may not* have if they had experienced positive and continuous paternal care and involvement throughout their life-course. Of course this is speculative, but the data is highly suggestive.

When recalling feelings and experiences around the time participants discovered they were pregnant, fathers featured heavily in narratives and continued to do so throughout the majority of the interviews (with the exceptions of Tracey and Ellie who experienced the sudden death of their fathers at a young age). The reactions of fathers to the news of their daughters’ adolescent pregnancies varied slightly but general reactions centered on shame, anger and deep disappointment:

*When I told my mum and dad I was pregnant they were both mad, they didn’t live together then so I told them when my dad came to pick me and my sister up one day, well she told them actually, I just stood there because I was too scared to tell them, anyway, you should have seen their faces, I’ve never felt so, like, so, I felt like I’d just shot them, it was horrible and then my mum she came and hugged me because I was crying, and then my sister started crying because I was, but my dad stormed off and he’s never been the same with me since, said he was ashamed of me and that I was a tart, a tart, I didn’t know what a tart was then (Georgia).*

As Polly revealed in Chapter Six, falling pregnant as a teenager was unacceptable to their fathers and caused many to simply cut all contact with their daughters:

*I remember he walked out…I thought it would just blow over to be honest, I mean I knew I had done something bad but not that bad you know what I mean, like I didn’t think it was that bad you know (Rose).*

Like Rose, Natalie recalls how her father took the news of her pregnancy by leaving for a while:

*He just left, didn’t see him for a bit, when I say a bit we’re probably talking like a week you know, I suppose it was just his way of dealing with it…did a runner, he probably had a good drink or something, he probably went to my uncles to calm down or something, I don’t know to be honest, but when he did come back he wasn’t best pleased, he couldn’t even stand the sight of me, I thought he’d have calmed down and come round to it but nope and it just got worse when I actually started showing and then before I knew it, I was outta there.*

The women unable to comprehend the severity of their fathers reaction to the news was common:

*I didn’t think he would actually just not wanna know me anymore (Lauren).*

*I mean, come on, it was a baby I hadn’t committed murder…you’d think he’d be able to see past it because stuff like that does happen in life doesn’t it, you’d think he would have been able to just support me, I did anyway, I didn’t expect him to be the way he was (Amber).*

Rae, who gave birth to her first son when she was fifteen years old (became pregnant at fourteen) recalls how her father, whom she had previously *‘idolised’* wouldn’t ‘*even look*’ at her and how he still ‘*won’t acknowledge*’ her ‘*the way he used to*’:

*He said I bought shame upon him, on our family you know…I suppose it’s a black thing, like shame on the family, I think because we went to church he was worried what people at church would say…now I’m not that religious or anything, never have been but I remember thinking, I’m sure you’re meant to forgive, forgiveness and all that, like, don’t judge and all that, it was a baby, I hadn’t murdered anyone, they way he was going on it was like I’d done something really bad you know, so then that made me feel like it was a massive deal, that I had done something really bad…so yeah he just wont acknowledge me anymore, not the way he used to.*

Non-acknowledgement is regarded as typical paternal behaviour during conflict situations with fathers often ‘stonewalling’ their daughters when they find arguments with them too stressful (Apter 2004). However, Natalie describes how her father made her feel ‘*disgusted*’ with herself after informing her family she was pregnant:

*When I told them, my mum, dad and sister, I just wanted to get it out there, it was making me feel so alone keeping it to myself, so I just said it you know, like really blunt, probably came across like I didn’t care or something…well my mum and sister started crying, but they’re like that anyway, they cry at anything, but my dad didn’t take it well at all, he didn’t cry or anything, he stared down at me, like stared at me like I was, well, like he didn’t know who I was or something… it was horrible, the way he looked at me made me feel disgusted with myself, like I’d just ruined, like I mean, I don’t know, like he knew I wasn’t sweet and innocent anymore, do you know what I mean, like it made me feel like I’d taken his little girl away from him or something.*

These feelings of self-blame were frequently expressed when discussing how the announcement of them becoming pregnant altered their family dynamics and their father-daughter bonds, with the women feeling guilty for causing their fathers such discomfort. Unlike relationships with their mothers where status negotiation is common, daughters often feel they have no choice but to adapt to their fathers expectations to maintain a relationship (Apter 2004), which may explain why some participants expressed such feelings of guilt. Georgia even went as far as to suggest she would have considered terminating her pregnancy if her father had ‘*expected*’ her to:

*He never asked me to get rid of the baby, he never even spoke about an abortion or anything so he can’t have expected me to, maybe if he had I would have, I don’t know that sounds horrible doesn’t it, obviously I don’t regret it but, I don’t know, I’d rather him have said something, something that, you know, if he had told me what to do to make it better and make him like me again and everything go back to normal you know.*

Feelings of anger and frustration were also apparent:

*He couldn’t even look at me, I felt so disgusting he looked at me like I was dirt on the bottom of his shoe, you know when someone does that thing where they look you up and down with a nasty face, like girls do to each other sometimes, well it was like that you know…but I was still the same person, I was still his daughter and I don’t think he should have done that to me or anything (Tia).*

*I was still a baby myself wasn’t I, I needed help not for him to blow up on me like he did, I’d never ever do that to my child, well, I hope I wouldn’t anyway…you couldn’t just abandon them for one mess up, I mean come on you’d do anything for your kids wouldn’t you, you’re meant to anyway aren’t you, I thought that was just what you did (Amber).*

However, making excuses for their fathers’ actions and emotions was also common:

*I don’t know maybe it’s different because I’m a mum; maybe it’s different for dads (Natalie).*

*I don’t hate my dad or anything, I still love him, I wish he would talk to me it’s been a long time now, he was always stubborn I suppose, men (Sophie).*

*I know he’s not a bad man though, that’s the thing, like if you met him you’d think he was lovely (Polly).*

This mirrors the findings of Way and Gillman (2000) who report that early adolescent girls, although from low-income and ethnic minority families which does not reflect the sample of women in this study, feel protective over their fathers, acknowledging but accepting, their imperfections viewing them as ‘teachers’, authority figures and security providers. Fathers are seen to provide a life-long sense of security for their children ultimately aiding personal development and promoting feelings of contentment (Apter 2004; Black 1998; Morgan and Wilcox 1998).

However, fathers of the participants in this research only served as protectors and providing a sense of security for part of their childhood, and little to none of their adult lives, which may help us to understand why some of the women later report experiencing feelings of intense loneliness and displayed little confidence during late teenage and early adult life (which will be discussed in the following chapter).

Despite some women experiencing anger and frustration at how their fathers reacted to the news of their pregnancies, and their absence and lack of connection since, they display a longing-sadness for a paternal bond hoping for future reconciliation and re-establishment of a father-daughter relationship:

*I just hope one day, after I’m off the drugs and that, that we can you know, at least try and be, like, I just would like to be able to talk to him and for us to be in the same room, I mean that would be a start wouldn’t it (Amber).*

*Even now I compare men I meet to my dad, like boyfriends and that, is that strange, I don’t mean in a weird way or anything, I just would like someone who was like he was, hard worker and that, do you know* what I mean *(Polly).*

*I just wish I could go back and, I don’t know, I just wish we could be like we used to and I could be like everyone else, I know some people never know their dads but I lived with mine and it was all fine, I just want it to be like that again (Rae).*

Researchers on child and adolescent development conclude that for optimum social and emotional development children require a continuous experience of care from key caregivers, including fathers (Black 1998). Father absence from the household can, and which is the case here, result in some daughters feeling ‘unloved’ and deeming themselves ‘unworthy’ (East e*t al* 2006; 2007; Radina 2003; Rohner *et al* 2009).

The paternal rejection the women experienced in childhood, and the continued absence of their fathers from their adult lives, undoubtedly left them with a void and an emotional scar that has never healed. Participants continually referred back to memories of their fathers particularly during times of hardship, struggle and significant life events. Those with living fathers have hope for reconciliation and have made efforts (such as finishing school, attending college, securing employment and moving out of the family home) in attempt to ‘*prove him wrong’* (Polly) for ever thinking they would not ‘*amount to anything’* (Georgia) after the birth of their children during adolescence.

**Summary**

The data presented in this chapter reveals that the early lives of the participants in this research, women who sell sex today, were for the most part characterised by ‘normality’ and happiness. However, despite such an ‘ordinary’ start each of these lives were buffeted in one way or another with a sudden occurrence, event or ‘turning-point’ causing them to change course producing effects that cascaded through their later lives.

The adversities they faced in their early lives, prior to entry into sex work, included bereavement, multiple forms of loss, becoming a teenage mother and experiencing abuse. The participants were wounded as children through conflicted, neglectful and/or abusive relationships with their fathers who ‘othered’ them, and labelled them ‘deviant’, when they became pregnant. Pregnancy proved to be a critical ‘turning-point’ (Sampson and Laub 1993: 8) in the women’s lives that shaped their identities, choices and experiences in later life, which will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

The majority of the women lacked a secure and protective family environment once they disclosed their pregnancies to their families, with their fathers becoming distant and unresponsive to them as children. The breakdown of the father-daughter relationship led the women to believe they were ‘bad’ daughters, undeserving of nurture and care as they had brought shame and embarrassment to their households and wider communities by transgressing acceptable standards or respectability.

The storiesof the women reflected in this chapter display how the family acts as moral system governing (young, female) bodies. The women crossed boundaries of what was deemed (by their fathers) as acceptable standards of normal behaviour and were consequently ostracised and shamed. They were deemed immoral and as a result they lost their ‘good-daughter’ status and their identity was transformed into another meaning.

Thus we find in the lives of these women the effects of power and discourse described by Foucault and discussed – at theoretical level – in Chapter Three. Here, images of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ girls, the disciplining effects of language and even wider Foucauldian ideas of capillary and networked power find their practical and real manifestations. The fathers of the women, for example, who were so important in these young women’s lives and yet who power of rejection exacted such cruelling impacts on their sense of self worth and esteem, these fathers clearly too caught with dynamics of power and normative discourses – of the good family, the church going family, the capable father – that their daughters pregnancies so disrupted.

I argued in Chapter Four that little is known about the early histories of contemporary British sex workers who work from outdoor markets and whether the issues and experiences that once dominated ‘prostitute’ women are still applicable to streetwalking women today. This chapter provides a unique insight into the childhoods and early lives of women who sell sex in the Midlands today highlighting how what has been traditionally viewed as ‘damaged’ has developed to include a multitude of other forms of emotional turmoil such as teenage pregnancy, parental divorce, bereavement and paternal abandonment.

As discussed, abuse and neglect (usually in childhood) is a background factor commonly reported in previous literature that examines entry into prostitution. However, paternal rejection resulting from teenage pregnancy as an early damaging experience has received no detailed attention in relation to increasing the likelihood of women’s involvement in sex work. In this chapter I have developed a further understanding of how unresolved childhood trauma (not only sexual abuse) may impact on the choices women make in adulthood (including engaging in sex work), which will be revealed in the following two chapters.

Thus being said, it is important to emphasise again that although the women experienced high levels of trauma and adversity in early life they also relayed happy memories, joyous experiences and positive family relationships during their childhoods and adolescence. Therefore, in contrast to previous research (see Pereda 2015) that portrays the backgrounds of those who sell sex from the street as dark and tortured, women who sell sex can, and do, report happy childhoods if only for part of it.

The next chapter explores in-depth how the experiences discussed in this chapter increased the women’s vulnerability to risky and illicit activities, which influenced and impacted their journeys into commercial sex.

**Chapter Eight**

Identity: Motherhood and Substance Misuse

*I mean, I know it’s no excuse, I’m not stupid, I know having a baby isn’t a good enough reason to just start using drugs but when you’re struggling like I was and you feel that alone it’s like you panic you know, it’s scary, you panic about how much your life has changed and you have no idea what you’re gonna do, or what to do even, so yeah, for me I started using for some kind of a break…it was a break, a relief from being inside my own head really, I had a baby and nobody to help me anymore, I wasn’t prepared for that at all, so using, it just made things that bit easier (Rose).*

In the previous chapter I discussed the participants’ early lives to outline how, despite reporting ‘normal’ backgrounds and recalling some very happy memories, their childhoods were also fraught with difficulties and experiences of loss and rejection, largely as a result of the critical turning that was falling pregnant at a young age. This chapter explores in-depth how those experiences increased the women’s vulnerability to risky and illicit activities, particularly drug taking, which influenced and impacted their journeys into commercial sex, further addressing the question;

* How do women come to enter prostitution/commercial sex?

The data presented here reveals that for the majority of the women becoming a young mother was, as Rose describes above, a *‘scary’* time filled with *‘panic’* and intense loneliness. Participants reported feeling overwhelmed and unable to manage the strain of young motherhood with very little, or no, emotional or practical support and began misusing substances as a way to cope with such demands. Drug taking provided participants with *‘relief’* from the distress they felt as a result of paternal abandonment and their new experiences as mothers. Contrary to previous research, funding their drug habits was not described by the majority of the women as a motivation for engaging in sex work, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Nine.

**Becoming a Young Mother**

As discussed in the previous chapter, thirteen women fell pregnant at a young age, an experience that shaped not only their self-identities, but for ten women saw the cessation of contact with their fathers. This left them feeling rejected and isolated at a critical point in their lives, where they needed intense family support.

Having a baby proved to be an extremely difficult time for twelve of the thirteen adolescent mothers:

*It was hard because I didn’t have anyone to help me really, obviously I had my mum but that was it and she obviously had to go to work and that, nobody else helped me it was really hard… and I didn’t understand just how hard it was actually going to be…I’d just left school so I couldn’t go to college like I was going to, I had no friends left anymore because they still all went to college and obviously didn’t want to hang about with me and a newborn, it was really lonely (Georgia).*

*To be honest, I don’t regret it because both my boys are amazing, but if I could go back and change it I would because it was horrible raising two babies on my own, I mean if I could change the timing not make them not be here or anything…my mum and dad both disowned me, didn’t want nothing to do with me, I had to find somewhere to live and then when I found out I was having twins it nearly broke me (Tia).*

*Nobody tells you how hard it is looking after a baby, it’s a massive struggle and I obviously wasn’t very good at it, never have been, because I was so young it was worse for me I think and it was just me the [baby’s] dad didn’t want to know, and it caused so many problems with my family, mainly because I was thirteen I think, but I really didn’t cope well at all…I used to cry all day (Lauren).*

*Your whole life just changes overnight, literally over night…and you become this fat mess with this screaming kid…it’s really hard, really hard, especially for a teenager to have to deal with that…I wasn’t myself anymore, it made me poorly trying to do it on my own (Rae).*

Young motherhood was *‘lonely’* (Sophie), *‘hard’* (Georgia) and clearly caused the women great emotional strain. As the extracts below highlight, the women accredited much of this angst to not having a strong support system in place that they could rely on to help them with their babies, or to support them as the young women they were:

*Like I said, it was just me, my mum was always at work my sister had moved in with her boyfriend and I was just at home all the time trying to learn how to look after a baby…I didn’t even have anywhere to go to, my gran lived in Wales at the time and my dad didn’t want to know me anymore did he so I didn’t even have anyone to talk to until my mum came home from work and then she’d usually go off with her boyfriend…I really missed us all being together then, me my sister my mum and dad in the same house, I think if it was like that I would have been much happier, it would have been easier and I would have been a better mum probably (Georgia).*

*Some girls are lucky aren’t they because they get pregnant dead young they have nice rich families who all help bring the baby up don’t they but when your mum and dad hate each other it’s a bit hard (laughs)…and because my dad didn’t even want to know me anymore that was never gonna happen anyway so I didn’t have much…it was really scary for me (Amber).*

*I feel for anyone who raises a baby on their own never mind being a kid yourself…hard times in general, no money, no mates, no boyfriend or husband to help, no family to help you, you literally just become a mum to your kid, you’re not anyone else anymore that’s all you think about and all you do is look after your kid…nothing changed for them [her family], my mum yeah she was there for me but she still had her life, my sister was a kid so was always out with her mates and my dad never spoke to me, he would come and pick my sister up on a weekend but he never came in, never saw his granddaughter, never came to her birthdays or anything, he literally couldn’t stand me, it was horrible (Natalie).*

Having a baby was particularly traumatic for Tracey who gave birth to a *‘beautiful perfect baby boy’* who died of cot death (as discussed in the previous chapter) when he was just nine weeks old. For Tracey this was a time she needed her father:

*My dad didn’t even speak to me then you know, how disgusting is that…he couldn’t even be man enough to forgive me [for getting pregnant] when I had just lost my son, all I wanted was a fucking cuddle, for him to cuddle me and tell me he loved me, but he couldn’t even do that, no even when his, his grandson died, it was disgusting.*

The remaining three women who fell pregnant during their teenage years (Ellie, Jenny and Kim) had no contact with their fathers prior to falling pregnant. As discussed in the previous chapter, Ellie found her father dead in their living room aged eight which she describes as *‘horrendous’* and ‘*the worst thing’* she’s *‘ever seen’*. Jenny and Kim had not known their fathers before they fell pregnant as Jenny only *‘found out’* who her father was five years ago and Kim has never known who her father is as she states her mother *‘would never tell’* her.

For the women whose fathers ostracised them after they revealed their pregnancies, being a new mother deepened feelings of abandonment, as once their babies were born they *‘couldn’t imagine not wanting them’* (Tia) and felt confused as to how their own fathers could reject them in the way that they did:

*It just would have been nice to have some help you know, well not help like that, but you know, it would have been a lot different if my mum and dad would have both been there supporting me with everything…I just felt on the back foot from the start, like, my dad stopped speaking to me, didn’t want anything to do with me, so it was like I had already got it wrong before I’d even really become a mum…the feeling you have for your own flesh and blood is unreal, it’s like nothing you could imagine, I didn’t think I’d feel like that but you just feel like that little person is your whole world and you can’t imagine not having them, like you don’t remember life properly without them…I couldn’t imagine ever not wanting them anymore, if my daughter got pregnant, even if she was like twelve I would still want her, I’d still be there, I’d never ever just stop wanting to know her…so yeah it just made me feel even worse to be honest, like what did I do really to make someone who is meant to love me like that not want me anymore (Sophie).*

*It was just sad you know, I just felt all alone, well, you know, I just didn’t feel myself and that, nothing in myself or my life was normal…it was all just sad, when it was meant to be a happy thing you know, I never got to have that time, I couldn’t share it with anyone, not really because it was like a bad thing not a good thing…having a baby, I just felt like it was this really bad thing I’d done and that I only had myself to blame that I didn’t have my family round me for that…like if I was twenty or something it would have been different wouldn’t it but, oh, I don’t know it was just a dark time I suppose…lonely is one way to describe it, very lonely and on my own (Georgia).*

The extracts above illustrate how the women also blamed their fathers, and lack of family unit and support system more generally, for them being unable to enjoy their first moments with their newborn children. However, as I showed in Chapter Seven the respondents defended their father’s actions and choices repeatedly, looking to social norms in an attempt to justify their actions once again:

*Maybe it’s different for men, like dads aren’t as attached to their kids as mum are, are they, babies are meant to be with their mums more than their dads so maybe you know it’s not as much of a big deal if a man doesn’t want to see his kid anymore or something, maybe (Rae).*

*I think women are just different aren’t they, like made up different or something to just be really attached to their own babies aren’t they, so for guys I guess it’s not the like that and they can just walk away, maybe it’s just easier for dads to do that (Natalie).*

*Well it must just be totally different for men…the connection, the bond must just not be as strong, and I suppose that’s ok because children are just supposed to be more about their mums aren’t they, like they’re supposed to be bonded to their mum more and that, so mums are gonna spend more time with them aren’t they (Amber).*

**Substance Misuse**

Given the prevalence of trauma, loss and disconnection in their early lives after such a sudden occurrence, event or experience, drug and alcohol (mis)use featured heavily in the women’s narratives. The majority of women used substances as a method to ‘*escape’* (Sophie) painful memories, and manage lonely and difficult realities. Substance misuse has been linked to lack of ability to problem solve (Platt and Hermalin 1989), and as a method of coping with life stresses and negative emotions (Alexander and Hadaway 1982), particularly in adolescence (Piko 2001; Johnson and Padina 2009).

Shortly after giving birth, and unable to cope with the pressures of parenting at such a young age whilst feeling isolated and alone, and without family support eleven women began using substances as a way to *‘cope’* (Rose), *‘handle’* (Lauren) and *‘help’* (Rae) them with their everyday tasks of being mothers and young girls:

*It was all just too much, I couldn’t cope it was like a bell was going off in my head all the time, ringing and ringing and I couldn’t even hear myself think so one day I just got some weed off someone I knew on my street and started smoking it, then it was everyday just feel sane and keep me calm, and then I started smoking crack instead because weed just didn’t do it for me anymore (Sophie).*

*Well at first I just thought it would be a one off kinda thing but because I thought it helped me handle things better and chilled me out a bit I just kept doing it [smoking cannabis] and don’t get me wrong it did work for a bit like and I did feel like I was doing better…and then I tried smoking heroin with one of the lads I used to smoke weed with down the field sometimes and it just got worse from there and I went on to a bit of everything and now I just can’t get off the stuff (Lauren).*

*I just needed something to help me with everything…I felt like I could manage better when I would use so I kept at it (Rae).*

*I’d never tried anything before, not even a fag and one day I tried crack… It was horrible for me and I could cope with shit after I’d had a rock you know, it just helped with everything that was going on (Georgia).*

For Tracey, a new mum who had tragically lost her newborn son, the months following his death were an incredibly painful time for her and she too turned to drink and drugs for comfort:

*It was drink first…I started doing a few shifts in a bar in town so would drink quite a lot and then just get off my face in my flat when I wasn’t at work…then I started taking fet [amphetamines] when I was at work…then I started smoking crack and then I tried a snowball [crack cocaine and heroin] and after that I would literally use anything I could get hold of.*

As Tracey states above, she started using ‘*fet’* when she was working behind a bar in her local town centre and was able to purchase drugs fairly easily as she *‘knew the guy who dealt in the bar and the club next door’*. For participants who had no established connection to drug subcultures sourcing drugs was surprisingly easy. Georgia and Ellie recall how they went to ‘*bad areas of town’* and *‘just asked around’*:

*Well I know the bad areas of town, I actually live there now, but back then I knew where you could probably find drugs if you wanted to so I just went down, it wasn’t even difficult…I remember I was a bit nervous because I’ve never been the most confident person anyway but as weird as it sounds I just started watching people on the street and there was this shop that people kind of hung outside of so I just went over there and I just asked these lads and that was it, I got crack, I still get my gear off one of them even now (Georgia).*

*This feeling just came over me one day, I was literally pulling my own hair out and I kept getting drunk just to stop that feeling and I just needed more, like I just needed to completely zone out and not think anymore so I just thought I’d try it…I think everyone knows where to get stuff from if they wanted don’t they, like I’d never used it before but I knew whereabouts I could find it you know what I mean, I can’t remember exactly how, but I think I just went out and just asked around (Ellie).*

Sophie and Rose recollect how they were able to purchase cannabis without difficulty and how they utilised the connections of their cannabis *‘dealers’* when they wanted to progress onto injecting drugs:

*One day I just got some weed off someone I knew on my street and started smoking it...I just messaged him and then he dropped it off for me that day, I knew him and his mates smoked it so I just asked him for it…he told me where to get harder stuff from when I wanted it too (Sophie).*

*I was already smoking weed so I just asked my dealer where I could get some other stuff from and he hooked me up…I got weed from a guy who used to supply someone I went to school with who lived up the road (Rose).*

As discussed in the previous chapter pregnancy was a time plagued with pain and isolation and is therefore perhaps unsurprising that the women sought relief from such distress so early in their motherhood journeys:

*Not long (laughs)…I dunno about, like, I’d say like a week, something like that, not long at all…after everything that I’d been through it was just too much, it was the cherry on top of the cake kinda thing (Tia)*

*Ermmmm…probably, well, probably the first time I ever did it, like ever, was a few weeks after and I was fine then and it was just weed then, but then obviously I started needing more and then using [crack cocaine and heroin] (Sophie).*

*About a month, it felt longer though, god was it only a month, I think it was when she was about five, six weeks or something, but let me tell you, being on your own with a baby for that long felt like a year or something (Kim).*

As with their pregnancies, when relaying their accounts of how, and in what context, the women began using illegal substances they also gave reflection to what their fathers would think of them and their *‘disgusting’* habit (Rose):

*Jesus Christ I think the one thing worse than having a baby, for my dad, is being a druggie…he would have died seeing me use…or he would have killed me himself with his own bare hands (Georgia).*

*My dad wasn’t speaking to me by then anyway but I think me being an addict would have done that anyway, he hates drugs and now he hates me soooo…(Lauren).*

*Well I started doing some stuff before I got pregnant and he kinda knew about that I think but that was only weed, if everything would have been fine and one day he found out he would have beaten the shit out of me I think…I don’t know if he even cares now though to be honest, he doesn’t want to know me now anyway…he would think I’m a disgrace (Amber).*

**Drug Use and Mothering**

Involvement in drug cultures is traditionally viewed as a masculine activity and deemed inappropriate behaviour for women, particularly women with children (Ivor 2004; Taylor 1993). Drug use is considered unfeminine and typified as ‘selfish, deviant and criminal’ (Henderson 1990: 12). Mothers who use drugs deviate from their traditional gender roles and are constructed as ‘unfit’ and assumed to pose a risk to their children, failing to protect them from harm (Boyd 1999). The women in this research felt that using drugs enabled them to remain *‘sane’* (Rae) and enhanced their ability to parent in the short-term:

*I felt like I could manage better when I would use so I kept at it…it was like I could chill out and calm down, I was so overwhelmed I just couldn’t cope and it calmed me, it kept me sane sometimes, I genuinely thought it was helping at first (Rae).*

*It made it bearable…my life, it made my life bearable, I was just crying all the time and I couldn’t do anything and it stopped all that (Kim).*

*I was able to just stop, my thoughts would stop, I wouldn’t over think as much and that because I’d just sit in my flat and think about everything and it was just me on my own, it drove me crazy trying to figure out what to do and babies just don’t stop do they, they need something all the time so it just helped me with that because I wasn’t thinking, it’s like you become like a robot, I could get stuff done without feeling and thinking too much (Amber).*

Ten of the women who began using hard drugs shortly after they gave birth had heavy involvement with child protection agencies. As Ellie, Jenny and Kim were living in children’s residential homes when they discovered they were pregnant they had social care involvement prior to the birth of their babies:

*I got pregnant when I was in care, I obviously didn’t plan it or anything and they found out and then they took him not long after he was born because I had a bit of a mental breakdown, I could see him for a bit, but then he went to live with his dad and his mum though (Ellie).*

*I was allowed to keep her in a mother and baby unit kinda thing with other girls and their babies which was ok but I wasn’t in there very long until I wasn’t allowed to look after her anymore (Kim).*

*I wasn’t allowed to just look after him on my own, I had to be watched and it just wasn’t working, it pissed me off they were all horrible in there and it pissed me off big time having them watching me all the time, telling me what to do and then he went and lived with his dads family (Jenny).*

Within two years of giving birth Lauren, Sophie, Georgia and Tia had also had their children removed from their care:

*He was about nine months I think, he wasn’t one I remember that because I never got to see him on his birthday or nothing…I was only young wasn’t I, I had no idea what I was doing and I was a mess myself but they shouldn’t have just took him, my mum was helping me look after him at the start but they should have helped me more…so after that is when I started using more and more of the heavier stuff [crack and heroin] (Lauren).*

*They took my daughter because they said I can’t look after her, she’s still with my mum, apparently my drug habit is too bad now for me to be a good mum which is shit because I do look after her but whatever…I don’t see why I can’t still have her it’s not like I give her drugs or anything and I am trying to stop using but it’s not that easy (Sophie).*

*None of them live with me…they live with their dad and have done for most of their lives, my first son went to live with his dad because social services made me let him have him when he was still a baby because he isn’t a [drug] user and I am (Georgia).*

*My boys were put in care when they were six months, it was horrible, I was trying my best but there were two of them and it was damn hard work…I tried, I started taking coke as well to stay awake, but it just got a bit out of hand and I wasn’t coping everything just went to shit and six months later they were put into care (Tia).*

As the narratives above illustrate, drug misuse was the main reason given for losing custody of their children. Like Polly (see Chapter Six), once the women did not have their children *‘to look after’,* or felt overwhelmed by child protection agency involvement, they sought ways to manage the painful voids, feelings of intense sadness and cope with the escalating pressure, by increasing their drug use and eventually entering the sex industry:

*I just started using more; it became the first thing I’d think about when I woke up, I had nothing else to do so I just focused on that and that was pretty much all I did to be honest (Sophie).*

*I was a heavy user after they [social care] took my sons…I was a proper addict then, I’d say before that I was addicted yeah but not like hooked proper, like I didn’t do it no where near as much then compared to after they went (Tia).*

*I blame that [losing custody of her daughter] for me ending up on crack, I don’t think I’d have gone as far as I did if that hadn’t have happened (Kim).*

Substance misuse, as discussed in Chapter Four, is considered a common situational factor for women who engage in street-based sex work with much literature suggesting women enter the outdoor sex-economy as a method to fund heavy habits. Seventeen participants expressed (mis)using drugs (ranging from heroin to amphetamines) and although thirteen of the participants used crack cocaine daily, with eleven of those also using heroin, only one woman (Darcy) claimed that she sold sell to *‘pay for drugs’*. Twelve women, although admitting to using some of their earnings to purchase substances, spoke about sex work being about *‘more than money’ (*Rae) which is discussed in more detail in Chapter Nine.

**Identity: Being a Bad-Daughter, Failed-Mother and Drug-Addict**

As the data presented above illustrates, and as Chapter Seven revealed previously, teenage pregnancy and motherhood proved to be a significantly difficult period in the participants’ lives that saw them engage in drug taking subcultures as a method to manage the struggles of parenthood and feelings of loneliness and abandonment that followed the announcement of their pregnancies.

Given the heavy focus the women paid to their experiences arounddaughterhood and motherhood throughout the time I spent with them, it is unsurprising that these early-life experiences impacted heavily on their self-identities. Their roles as daughters and mothers were recurring themes throughout the interviews, with the women holding these central to their sense of self.

Their fathers ‘*disowning’* (Polly) and *‘leaving’* (Amber) the women because they failed to meet his expectations for the role of daughter caused the participants to experience traumatic emotions and ultimately led them to internalise their lost ‘good-daughter’ role into a ‘bad-daughter’ identity. This continued to inform and influence their self-identity throughout their life course, with participants continually reflecting on their fathers and what they would think of them, especially during significant life events:

*I can hear my dad now, he’d say, well what do you expect, look at yourself, what do you expect…he’d hate how I am, what’s new (Rae).*

*I shouldn’t have gotten pregnant when I did really, would have saved everyone a lot of heartache…I don’t wish they [her children] weren’t born or anything, because I do love them, I do, I do, but I shouldn’t have gotten pregnant… my life would have turned out a lot different I can tell you that… he [her father] wouldn’t have made me leave, my mum, my mum and dad would probably still be happy together and my life would be more stable, I shouldn’t have done it, it shouldn’t have happened, I should have listened…and now I have more kids and I’m still and addict he, you know, I’m still the same aren’t I, so of course he wouldn’t want to know me still, he’d still not want to know me wouldn’t he (Amber).*

*To be honest, it’s been so long I don’t even know who I am, you know, like, talking now about how I used to be and how things were when I was younger, I don’t know what happened, well, I do like, but I don’t know what the hell happened, do you know what I mean…like wow…it’s so different to how my life was meant to pan out, it’s a different world…and it all started from that one mistake, not mistake you know what I mean, babies aren’t mistakes are they, but you know, you know what I mean (Sophie).*

*He said I was ruining my life, I suppose he was right to some extent, you know with the timing and that, making it harder for myself and not being able to do the things I used to (Natalie).*

*Nobody told me then that if I kept the baby I’d lose everything else did they…I thought I was doing the right thing, I did but looking back maybe I should have taken more notice of what he said, he’d certainly have a strong opinion about some of the other stuff I’ve done too…every time I’ve had another baby I can hear him all over again (Lauren).*

Their ‘bad-daughter’ identities became their ‘primary identity’ (Castells 2010: 7); their central source of meaning and experience, locating them in the social world that framed all other identities and one that was prioritised in their salience hierarchy. Their identities as bad daughters transformed many areas of their lives, particularly motherhood with feelings of abandonment resurfacing, throughout and after having more children, further colouring their experiences of motherhood. Here, my findings correlate with those found by scholars Dodsworth (2012a) and Dalla (2003), who document that relationships between sex-working mothers and their own parents can negatively influence self-perceptions of parenting.

Narrating their experiences of daughterhood and early motherhood, drugs featured heavily in the lives of the twelve women who utilised drugs to *‘help’* (Rose), *‘escape’* (Tracey) and *‘forget about’* (Kim), the intense scrutiny from external agencies and feelings of isolation and sadness. Participants who used class-A drugs regularly absorbed the negative social constructions and cultural meanings of the ‘drug-addict’ and acknowledge that society regards *‘druggies’* (Amber) as deviant and ‘other’:

*Yeah like I said, I know what people think of addicts, like when you have a habit people think you’re shit, scum and I don’t blame them, it is disgusting but then it’s the only thing that really helps, you know, it’s hard to explain really* (Rose).

*I used to think, when I was young, yeah I used to think that druggies like me, like they were outcasts and just floated about the streets, my family, we would never have associated with them, ever* (Amber).

*Everyone thinks when you got a habit you’re dirty or something don’t they* (Tia).

Whilst describing what they believe ‘people’ think of those who use drugs the women self-stigmatised by identifying and labelling themselves as *‘users’* (Georgia):

*…I’m a user aren’t I (Georgia).*

*…people must think I’m a druggie scroat (Tracey).*

*…I never wanted to end up a junkie; I know what people think of them, people like me (Sophie).*

Despite this, *‘hate’* (Tia) was used frequently to describe how the women feel about their injecting drug use:

*I hate that I still use, it’s fucked up, it cost me my kids and it’s ruined my life, I hate it…I’ve tried [to get clean] but I always end up using again, I just can’t face shit anymore I just want to close my eyes and go to sleep wake up and everything be back how it was before [using drugs] (Tia).*

*I’m ashamed of myself…I really want to stop and get well, I’ve been to detox and rehab quite a lot but I never seem to stick it out for long enough, it makes me so sick it’s horrible, it’s actually painful, it’s fucking horrible honestly it makes you so sick…but I just really do want to get well, I wish I could do it, I fucking hate it [being addicted to drugs] (Lauren).*

*Because I’m always around it, it’s horrible and I hate feeling the way I do, the feeling you wake up with and the wanting it all day long, like you actually need it to function you don’t get high or anything anymore you just need it to feel normal, it’s a horrible feeling (Tracey).*

*Probably about six bags a day but god I fucking hate it, I can’t stand it, this life, its no life…using is fucking horrible (Darcy)*

Their hatred for their drug use was linked to losing custody of their children, a central reason they felt reduced them to a *‘failed’* (Georgia) mother:

*I wish I’d never tried it because then I wouldn’t be like this and I’d definitely still have my kids it’s like I know I won’t ever get them back whilst I’m still using but I still do it even though all I want is my kids (Tia).*

*My daughter is living with my mum because of them [drugs]…if I was clean she’d still be with me, it’s sick, it’s sick that I can’t stop myself from using (Sophie).*

*I have no idea where my kids are and it’s all because of being like this you know, that’s why social services took them, because their mum is a junkie (Lauren).*

The women endured judgements of maternal absence and inadequacy as a direct result of their injecting drug use. Good mother discourse places high expectations on all women, demanding all encompassing unconditional love and ultimate dedication (Breheny and Stephens 2007; May 2008), and for the women who had their children removed from their care this was extremely hard to comprehend.

As a result of their ‘bad-daughter’ identities which they acquired through their adolescent pregnancies, motherhoodfeatured prominently in their identity narratives; women who fail to meet normative expectations of the role are positioned as ‘other’ and considered to be a *‘failed’* (Georgia) mother:

*I failed at it…I don’t have any of my kids* (Georgia).

*They live with someone I don’t even know, that’s heartbreaking, you know (Lauren).*

*Well I’m obviously a shit mum aren’t I, I can’t even be trusted to look after my own child (Sophie)*

*Well I hope they’re being looked after, because I obviously couldn’t do it (Tracey).*

As the extracts above suggest, their perceived ‘failings’ as mothers were directly tied to losing parental rights over their children, which accumulated through their heavy drug use. Self-concept is based on ‘our observations of ourselves and the set of meanings we hold for ourselves when we look at ourselves, on how others act toward us and our evaluations’ of ourselves’ (Stets and Burke 2000: 5). What my participants ‘know’ about themselves is derived from their fathers and external official agencies; they were bad daughters because of their adolescent pregnancies and bad mothers because they had their children taken away because of their heavy drug use.

The majority of mothers (thirteen of fifteen) in this research felt they were *‘bad’* (Lauren) mothers, not because they did not love or desire to care for their children, but because they had had them removed from their primary care:

*I want nothing more than to have all my kids with me full-time, but it’s hard you know, I’m such a mess, I’m so shit, and I miss them so much, it kills me, it really does, but what am I suppose to do really, they won’t let me have them all the time because of the drugs and that but I just can’t stop using (Rae).*

*I wish I wasn’t such a bad mum…I wish I could have them all the time (Lauren).*

*I know it’s better for them that they’re with a family who can give them all the thing I can’t, I know that, but I want to you know, I wanted to be that kind of mum to them, I just couldn’t, obviously (Tia).*

Thirteen women internalised their roles as daughters and mothers to take on ‘bad-daughter’ and ‘failed-mother’ identities as part of their lives that they are unable to separate from their personal self.

**Summary**

Adolescent pregnancy proved to be principal ‘turning-point’ (Sampson and Laub 1993: 8) which changed and influenced the journeys of the majority of the participants. As discussed in Chapter Seven, for their fathers’ the discovery of their daughters’ pregnancies led them to ‘other’ them, labelling them ‘bad’ daughters and cutting contact with them indefinitely, leaving them frightened and lonely.

Teenage motherhood proved extremely difficult and isolating, so much so the women as young girls turned to drugs and alcohol as a way of coping with such distress, self-medicating to relieve the pain of abandonment, rejection and sadness. Previous research notes that the experience of psychological trauma, especially in childhood, can lead to the development of mental health problems which can also increase the risk of substance use (El Bassel 2009; Jonas *et al* 2011; Klee and Reid 1998; Rado 1957). For my participants their drug use can be seen as a result of their experiences of abandonment, marginalisation and exclusion within the family. Struggling with their new experiences and continuously reflecting on their bad-daughter status’ the women also identified themselves as failed-mothers for being unable to provide a stable home, understanding their drug-user roles as central to their failed-mother identities.

The data depicted in this chapter suggests a connection between unresolved childhood trauma and young motherhood and extensive drug misuse, which may impact on the choices they make in adulthood (including sex work). As discussed, sustaining their drug use was not the women’s motivation for engaging in sex work (with the exception of Darcy), the transition from drug use to sex work is explored in the next chapter.

**Chapter Nine**

Working Lives: Criminality, Stigma and Autonomy

 *I know what people probably think of working girls, but what do they know really, they’ve never been here or taken time to ask why I’m here, how I got here, or who I am, the work I do takes a lot…I have to manage a lot of other stuff in my life, I have a lot of shit going on and other people’s opinions of what I do don’t factor high on my list…there’s more to it, it’s not like people think, the girls aren’t all like people think and they need to realise that before they judge me or anyone else doing it because it’s just bloody ignorant (Jenny).*

As Jenny states above, sex workers are not one-dimensional they *‘have to manage a lot of other stuff’*; they are daughters, mothers and friends. They occupy various roles and embody multiple identities, *one* of which is sex worker. My research provides those who sell sex with a platform to tell their own stories, about their *whole* life not only their sex working experiences, to permit a better understanding of the complex journey’s women take up to the sex industry and how *they* perceive their experiences whilst working within in.

In the previous chapter I discussed how participants (mis)used substances to manage the emotional anguish of paternal rejection and abandonment alongside the challenging demands of being a young mother. This chapter further explores the women’s early lives, their motivations for, and experiences of, selling sex to further address the question:

* How do women come to enter prostitution/commercial sex?

The data presented in this chapter also reveals how sex work itself can function as a coping mechanism for other forms of marginalisation and ‘spoiled’ identities (Goffman 1963). For the women in this research, sex work alleviated various voids in their lives caused by the unresolved childhood trauma discussed in the previous two chapters. This chapter also addresses two of the key questions of this thesis:

* How do women who sell sex feel about the activities that they engage in and how do they feel they are perceived by wider society?
* Do women who work within the UK sex industry today feel stigmatised and/or marginalised by the label ‘prostitute’/‘sex worker’, and to what extent?

**Selling Sex**

As the previous chapter revealed, the majority of participants who had experienced a significant trauma, particularly those that had given birth during their teenage years, utilised substances as a coping strategy during times of extreme emotional distress in an attempt to manage escalating pressure and painful voids. Their drug use often increased when child protection agencies became involved in their lives and/or removed children from their care. Substance misuse, as discussed in Chapter Four, is considered a common situational factor for women who engage in street-based sex work with research suggesting women enter the sex industry as a method to fund heavy drug habits (Epele 2001; May *et al* 2000; Pearce *et al* 2002).

The binary of drug takers as either problematic or recreational deems sex workers as chaotic and dependent, rather than functional and tolerated ‘leisure’ (drug) users (Askew 2016; Henderson 1997). Seventeen participants spoke openly about (mis)using drugs and/or alcohol and although thirteen women used crack cocaine daily, with eleven of those also using heroin, only one woman (Darcy) claimed that she sold sell to *‘pay for drugs’*. Twelve women, although reported using some of their earnings to purchase substances, described their motivation for engaging in sex work as being about *‘more than money’* (Rae):

*Obviously you need money to live don’t you but I didn’t start it just to pay for drugs, it wasn’t like that (Kim).*

*I don’t know you know, I know most of the girls do it just so they can buy gear don’t they and it’s just like, get a punter then go score, get a punter then go score, you know, but I don’t know it’s not really like that for me, I mean obviously I buy it [heroin] too but it’s different, it’s not so much working just so I can go use, I work because I want to and it also allows me to pay for my gear too, does that make sense (Georgia).*

*Well I would say, ermmm, I would say, yeah, I would say that I just do it because I want to, simple really, I want to do it, like nobody is forcing me and it’s not like I couldn’t get money without it is it, I just want to do this, it’s alright, I like it sometimes, it’s like any job some days you like it, some days you can’t be bothered but you get on with it don’t you (Ellie).*

The extracts above highlight how financial need was not considered the primary reason participants chose to sell sex. However this was different for the women working from only indoor markets where engagement in the sex industry was purely an economic decision as the potential earning power of sex work was greater than other available options:

*It’s purely about the money, I just need to make some money and save until I’m back on my feet with everything again…it’s just, you can make a lot of money because you can work as much as you want, so I’m working a lot, like I said, I won’t be doing it that much longer now, I’m just saving everything I get (Tessa).*

*I need the money and a student job won’t pay me as well as this does, it’s only short-term, but the money is the only reason I’ve chosen to do this, if it didn’t pay as well and I couldn’t make as much money from it I wouldn’t be doing it, it’s the money (Elsa).*

*Obviously the main reason I do it is for the money, I don’t mind it, but the money is the actual main reason why I do it (Natalie).*

*The money, that’s the only reason, I could never earn what I earn doing this doing something else right now, it just wouldn’t be possible (Kate).*

For twelve of the thirteen women (all outdoor-based sex workers) who consider themselves as drug dependent (using crack cocaine and heroin daily), their transition from drug subcultures into sex work was not predetermined:

*I was on drugs for, yeah, for quite a while before I started it [selling sex], it wasn’t like I just started it because I was on drugs, I hate using drugs, but working is good for me, my head, it’s good for my mind and that, sounds stupid but it takes my mind off them [drugs] (Tia).*

*I mean, it wasn’t like one day I started taking drugs and the next day I started giving blow jobs, it wasn’t like that, I was in such a dark place with everything and when I decided to start working it wasn’t about the drugs or booze or anything…I was smoking drugs and drinking long before I decided I wanted to work (Tracey).*

When recounting their experiences (mis)using substances the women spoke about how engaging in sex work actually reduces the amount of drugs that they use:

*Working gives me something to focus on, I’m always really busy, I like to be busy…I’m quite good with my money, I don’t use it all for drugs, that’s separate to what I do for work, I didn’t start it for that, I like it and it helps, since working I don’t use nowhere near what I was when it was just me sat in all day (Rae).*

*I knew some girls who worked the beat just so they could score but that’s not why I started, I actually don’t see myself like that, I like working from the beat and yeah I smoke some crack but I don’t work just so I can smoke, working actually makes me smoke less (Kim).*

*I’ll tell you what, if I didn’t ever work I’d be a lot worse, it gives you something to do that you actually enjoy, like, I would use more if I had nothing to do and had time to think, working stops me from thinking about all the shit that’s going on for a bit, using does that too but obviously that just numbs you out a bit, working is something I like, it helps me feel a bit normal again and I actually leave my house and I don’t use as much when I’m out doing that (Sophie).*

When narrating their first experiences of selling sex Ellie and Kim recall how they first began having sex with older men for money whilst they were residing in children’s homes:

*It wasn’t a nice place, people did allsorts in there, you got some right scum, like proper rotters…it didn’t seem a big deal or anything because it’s just what people did…so when my son was taken off me I would just go out with some of the girls in there…just sex, well, not proper sex because it didn’t last very long (laughs), it was all over dead quick and afterwards you’re just like, is that it (Ellie).*

*I did it when the girl I was friends with told me she did it, we used to do it together sometimes and just split the money, I think a lot of people did it where I was and to be honest it isn’t as scary as you think (Kim).*

Jenny, who was *‘pimped out’* by her mother from the age of nine, recalls how for her selling sex was *‘no big deal’*:

*I was used to it wasn’t I so it was no big deal to me, except this time I actually got money and got to keep it instead of my mum using it or using me for drugs and that…I had nothing else to do at that point and because I knew what to do I just kept doing it.*

As the narrative above suggests, for the majority of the women their first experience of selling sex was *‘no big deal’*. This is continued below:

*Just did it one day (Sophie).*

*I didn’t think anything of it to be honest, is that bad? (Georgia).*

*Well it just kinda happened really…yeah, just happened one day and that was that (Annie).*

*I remember it, I don’t look back and think oh my god that was horrible or anything, the guy was a bit of a dick but it wasn’t anything terrible he was just a bit rude to me but it didn’t phase me or anything (Rae).*

*It’s not scary, it’s really not a big deal you know, well, it is I suppose, but it’s not, do you know what I mean (Alice).*

*Just did it really, went out one day just to see and ended up doing it…got picked up by a punter on the beat, don’t really remember much about it but just started doing it all the time from there…I’m used to it now, like, I’ve been doing it most of my life haven’t I, but even back then it wasn’t bad for me, you get used to it (Rose).*

For these women their first experience of selling sex was street-based. Of the twenty women interviewed for this research thirteen (65%) regularly (at least once every two weeks) worked (sold sexual services) from the street (outdoor public place), with a further two women reporting working from the street sporadically or occasionally. Only five (25%) interviewees claimed not to provide any sexual services from outdoor locations.

For the women who worked from only indoor locations, their first experience of selling sex also proved *‘surprisingly easy’* (Kate):

*I first started in a sauna before I got the flat…I just rang up and asked, they said I could go down so I did, to have a look around and see what it was like and I was actually surprised at how normal everyone was and I saw clients there too and it just seemed so normal…my first day, I was a bit nervous about it but not in a bad way, probably because I’d already met some of the girls that worked there, it didn’t seem a big deal once I was there (Elsa).*

*I just placed an ad in the local paper, it surprisingly easy…just got a second phone, placed the ad with the number on and that was it…home, just home at first, I felt safe doing it first at my house…it wasn’t as bad as you’d think, afterwards it was a bit like, oh, is that it, it wasn’t even a massive deal if I’m honest (Kate).*

*Years ago I knew this lady who used to come in the pub and everyone used to say she did it…so I knew places like this [the sauna] existed so I decided to find one not in the same area where I live…just phoned them and then went down later that day and started working the day after that…I’m a big girl and I’ve seen a lot of things in my time and met a lot of people, it didn’t even phase me (Tessa).*

The women spoke openly about working from various spaces and places, often simultaneously, but referred to the street as ‘*easier’* (Sophie):

*It’s just really easy to work the beat, you can go out when you feel like it, come back if it’s slow you don’t have to answer to anyone, yeah it’s a bit shit when it’s raining and you’re freezing your tits off and there’s four or five other girls out too but I’d rather be there than having to be told who I’m seeing next and when I’m down to work and that (Rose).*

*I think working from the streets is way easier than doing the sauna’s and flats, I tried it and do the odd day sometimes but it’s annoying, you have to wear lingerie all day and make a proper effort because that’s what the other girls do and obviously you want the guy to pick you…whereas out here you can go out in a big coat and nobody gives a fuck, do what you want when you want and that’s more important to me (Sophie).*

*I do business from the beat but I have a lot of regulars that just ring me and I meet them somewhere and they come and pick me up, but I don’t mind the beat anyway because I know what I’m doing…when the feds are out its dead and usually I go home for a bit and then come back out when they’re gone, someone will always tell you when they’ve gone and you just get back to it, you can do what you want then, either work or not it’s up to me, depends what I wanna do (Jenny).*

*I do a few things, bit of everything really, sometimes I’ll work in a flat with another girl for a few weeks and then I’ll move on to a sauna or go back to the beat and what not, the beat is just better, easier, always a decent amount going on…I go away to work sometimes too, I’ve been to Leicester quite a lot, just move around from time to time, it’s good when you’re a new girl you get more punters (Kim).*

*Mate I’ve been everywhere, Brighton, London, went to Liverpool a couple of weeks a go too…I’ve done dancing too, but I don’t like that, too much like hard work…escorting is crap too, yeah the money is good but you have to give too much of your time up to one person and have to make more of an effort and plan it out a bit more I like to see them and ditch, can’t be doing with spending all day with them it does my head in (Darcy).*

Whilst relaying stories of working routines from the ‘beat’ it became apparent that some clients were requesting a service that required no sexual contact and little emotional investment; paying to smoke class-A drugs:

*I get some punters who don’t want anything to do with sex, they just wanna get high and smoke drugs…they pay me to get the drugs and then pay me to smoke it with them…so yeah I get paid to smoke, win win for me (Annie)*

*We usually go back to my flat to do it, can’t take them anywhere they might be seen or anything because that’s why they come to me in the first place, because they want to try it but don’t want anyone they know to find out…they’d think badly of them wouldn’t they because they’re proper posh some of them, like doctors and lawyers you know, people you would never expect who want to take drugs and obviously they can’t ever let anyone know they’re doing it so they come to me because they know I’m not part of their world (Tia).*

*The guys that don’t want sex either want to talk or use…yeah heroin or crack, some of them have never even tried it before but just want to…its people you wouldn’t expect, just normal blokes with good jobs and nice families (Tracey).*

*I much prefer those clients, the ones who want to smoke, to just sit there chatting all mellow is nice I’d take them clients all day long…we go back to my place, occasionally theirs but not very often, I had one who wanted to go to a crack house once, he was a regular though so he was okay, I wouldn’t take new ones* there (Sophie).

**Criminal Justice**

In addition to engagement in drug cultures, it is also well documented that sex workers are likely to become entangled in the criminal justice system (Burnette *et al* 2008; Gilchrist *et al* 2005). Sixteen women in this research reported being arrested, the majority for soliciting in a public place, which resulted in two women being subject to a five year ASBO, nine receiving fines, four subject to a probation order and two being electronically monitored. Nine women spoke of being incarcerated for other crimes. Darcy spent five years in prison for drug trafficking offences, Jenny, Tia, Amber, Kim had all spent time in prison for violent crimes. Annie spoke of how she had been to prison nineteen times:

*I’ve been to jail nineteen times I reckon…for all sorts, loads of breaches and that, some shoplifting, possession, just loads of random stuff…you get used to it, sometimes I’m only there a few weeks so it’s not even that long, days before if they’re [prison] full, it gives me a bit of a break (laughs), it’s no big deal to me to be honest, I don’t even see it as a big deal, it is what it is.*

Like Annie narrates about her experiences of prison above, this section has illustrated how, for the women in this research, entrance into the sex economy was also ‘*no big deal’* andwas particularly undramatic rather than a discrete phase in their lives. It has revealed how drug misuse featured heavily prior to involvement and was directly linked to a feeling of despair, the reasons given for continued engagement in both drug taking and commercial sex is explored in the remainder of this chapter.

The next section of this chapter explores how participants regard sex work positively, as an aspect of their life which they can exercise control over. It also illustrates how the women understand their own identity, how they perceive themselves and how they believe others perceive the work they do.

**Stigma and Identity: Sex Work as a Coping Mechanism**

In narrating their paths to, and through, sex work the women continued to speak about their identities as ‘bad’ daughters and ‘failed’ mothers. It is widely acknowledged that sex workers are ‘othered’, marginalised and criminalised by mainstream society, with academics previously exploring how those who adopt such a role reframe, manage and resist whore stigma. However, the women in this research were ‘othered’ *before* their involvement in commercial sex, first through the stigmatisation of their teenage pregnancy and assignment of ‘bad-daughter’ label and then by their ‘drug-addict’ and ‘failed-mother’ status.

Consequently, for these women selling sex became a way to exercise control over their lives, make decisions, manage spoiled identities (such as those mentioned above) and alleviate multiple voids. Like Polly, who claimed sex work gave her routine, engaging in commercial sex was viewed positively:

*I know that people just assume we all do it for drugs and that, but yeah, I do spend mine on them, but that isn’t why I do it really…if I just wanted money I’d get a job wouldn’t I, some girls thieve as well, but I don’t want a normal job like everyone else, I like just being able to decide what I want to do that day, if I feel like working or not, I don’t have to be somewhere at a certain time or anything, I decide and I like that part of it…I get to choose (Rose).*

*If I worked in a bar or pub again I’d just be getting told what to do, have someone else telling me what to do wouldn’t I, that’s why I stopped working in the first place because I was sick of people telling me what I should and shouldn’t do, like I’m five…I’m sick of people making decisions about my life, if I should receive this or that, where my kids should live, if I should be allowed to see them or not, whether I can even see them on my own or if I have to be fucking supervised, I’m sick of it…at least when I’m out there [the beat] I can just breathe and be alone with nobody breathing down my neck (Tracey).*

*Believe it or not I like it and I’m not just saying that, it’s not like what people say it’s like, it’s not bad, I’ve been doing it a long time now so I’m used to it…and yeah you get some shit for it but it makes me feel like I, like you know, it gives me a reason to get out of bed, working, it’s like, gives me a purpose and I’m my own boss and I do what I want and I really just want to do what I want for a change you know so because of that I actually do enjoy it, definitely more than I would any other job (Amber).*

The personal reflections above highlight how sex work functions as a way of expressing and taking care of themselves, like Polly, sex work made some women *‘feel better’*. In this respect sex work was, for the majority of the women in this research, employed as a ‘technology of the self’ (Foucault 1976); it proved an activity that allowed participants to obtain a sense of quality over their lives.

Although participating in sex commerce was *‘no big deal’* (Jenny) to the majority of my respondents, they were however acutely aware of how wider society viewed what they do. I asked all twenty participants what they thought those who do not sell sex thought about the work that they do. They unanimously acknowledged that there is a stereotypical image attached to selling sex:

*I know what people think of girls on the beat…they think we’re dirty tramps don’t they, they think we’re dirty (Rae).*

*People probably think we’re all the same, some of us just do it because we actually want to though…I get that some women are forced to do it and made to do stuff, but that’s not me, I do it because I want to, I honestly don’t mind it, it’s not as bad as people think (Amber).*

*People think prostitutes are vile cretins don’t they (laughs), funny really when they probably never even spoke to us in their whole lives, people need to wake up and realise it’s not going anywhere because men want sex and some of us like to make money that way (Ellie).*

*That we’re prostitutes who have sex with seedy men all day everyday, and that’s all we do (Kim).*

*Yeah they think it’s like what you see in the papers and in films don’t they, it’s not like that though (Jenny).*

The level of stigma women feel by adopting the role of sex worker varies, not only by indoor/outdoor as previous research has shown (See, Abel 2011; Barton 2007; Sanders 2004b; 2002; Thompson and Harred 2003, for examples). For the women who do not have children (Kate, Elsa and Kara) and consequently did not adopt or internalise a failed-mother identity, sex work was something that remained hidden from those closest to them:

*Nobody knows to be honest…I don’t want anyone to know because I won’t be doing it for long I don’t think, well, that’s the plan anyway…I just need to make some money and save it up a bit to help my mum out…I wouldn’t want her to know because she’d be mortified, she thinks I have a bar job at the uni and work a lot, it was just easier to tell her that (Elsa).*

*Yeah no-one, I don’t want anyone to find out either which is why I keep it all to myself, I can’t risk people knowing can I… it’s just not something people would expect me to do and I don’t want them to know, I’d be embarrassed and I’d probably lose a lot of my friends (Kate).*

*Yeah I only work from my flat now really, so unless somebody decided to pop in when I had a client they’d never find out, I don’t advertise my face or anything so you know, no-one will know it’s me in the pics (Kara).*

Tessa and Natalie, the only mothers in this research who currently have all their children residing in their care, also choose to only work within the indoor sex economy and work hard to ensure their roles as sex workers remain undiscovered, particularly from their children:

*I haven’t been doing it [selling sex] for very long and it’s only to tide me over whilst my business is slow so I don’t want anybody to know about it…it would damage my business, I have a catering business you see, I’m a proper business woman but because things are so slow I needed to do something else to make up for that…my kids and boyfriend think I have a job as kitchen assistant in a care home on a bank staff basis so I can just leave last minute and come do this, I’d never ever want my kids to know about this, god could you imagine, god no…sometimes I feel bad lying to them [her children] but it’s only because I want to protect them, I don’t want them thinking any less of me, they wouldn’t understand, they’re too young, but obviously when you’re a mum you’ll do anything for you kids, to provide for them and that, so this is what I’m doing at the moment, so they can still have all the nice stuff they have now, you know (Tessa).*

*I only do it when my daughter isn’t in, or she’s with friends or my mum and sister or something…I don’t even do it that much anymore really and I only see my regulars so I don’t advertise or anything like that anymore, I haven’t done in years…my mum doesn’t even know, I can’t let anyone find out because then they might turn her against me and that, maybe tell the social so I couldn’t have her anymore so I just keep it a secret and it gets us by (Natalie).*

Natalie and Tessa’s accounts above suggest that they ensure their role as sex worker remains undetected to protect their good-mother status as discovery could, for them, lead to social services involvement threatening the role they hold central to their identity.

For all five women above, significant effort was paid to successfully managing their working lives and traditional separation management techniques were utilised during their working routines. As previously recorded by scholars, physical (Abel 2011) and emotional (Warr and Pyett 1999) distancing practices were common:

*Oh god no I’d never tell them anything about myself, they don’t know my real name or anything (Natalie).*

*I’d never have proper sex with them or anything, I don’t even kiss them, like at all, like I’d never want to have sex with them because I wanted to enjoy it, do you know what I mean, I just keep it quick and make sure it’s over and done with and then they’re gone (Kate).*

*It’s just a job to me, they’re in and out (laughs), literally in and out (laughs), they don’t know me and I don’t know them and that’s how I like it (Tessa).*

*You just have to remember why you’re doing it, at the end of the day it’s a job, I go to work like anyone else, I get in my car and drive to work…that’s why I don’t work round the corner, it’s far enough away (Elsa).*

*I have certain outfits and make up and that that I use, like a dressing up box and then I go back to wearing pyjamas when I’m done (Kara).*

To successfully manage the tensions attached to such a role, these women view sex work as a performance that can be switched on and off when they engage with particular audiences at particular times. Sex work for them is an attractive economic option that allows them to provide for themselves and their families.

Contrary to findings by Benoit *et al* 2018, Gorry *et al* 2010 and Smith Marshall 2007 who report workers detailing greater levels of felt stigma are street based,the participants who sold sex form the outdoor market had already internalised their bad-daughter and failed-mother roles so intensely that participation in commercial sex was undramatic and *‘no big deal’* (Sophie):

As such, they made no attempt to hide their sex-working status:

*I don’t care who knows, what have I got to hide really…I don’t care what people think, I like what I do (Rose).*

*I literally don’t give a shit to be honest, it’s the last thing I’d be bothered about, big deal I sell sex, whoopee do, much bigger fish to fry mate (Jenny).*

*I think everyone knows what I do; I don’t care (Kim).*

*Like I said, it’s really no big deal, honestly…so why would I care (Sophie).*

**Future Hopes and Aspirations**

Just as all twenty interviews began with the same question (about their childhood), they all ended with the same one too; *what would you like to happen in the future?*

Unsurprisingly the women who had experienced having their children removed from their care spoke at length about wanting to have a positive and stable relationship with their children in the future:

*Well obviously I want my kids back, I know that probably won’t happen but that’s what I really want, they don’t even have to live with me or anything, I’d just like to see them regular and them to really know who I am and that I really do love them, I hate the thought of them thinking they aren’t with me because they weren’t wanted or anything like that because that’s not right, I’d do anything for them (Kim).*

*I want to have proper relationships with my boys, that’s all I want really, just spend proper time with them and do all the normal things mums are meant to do with their kids you know, go shopping, that kinda stuff you know, just nice family things with them (Tia).*

*I’m trying really hard to sort myself out so that my children will be able to spend more time with me…I would like to have them for longer than I do, I would like to have them living with me (Polly).*

*My kids mean everything to me, I know I don’t have any of them, but they’re everything to me, I just want them in my life again, it won’t happen I don’t think because obviously they’ve been adopted and that, but if I could have anything or wish anything to happen in the future it would be that (Lauren).*

Women who were dependent on drugs discussed ceasing their involvement in drug subcultures hoping to rebuild their lives and lead a healthier lifestyle:

*I need to stop using so I’d like to think that in five years I’d be clean and done with all that, it’s such a horrible life to lead and I hate it, I just need to sort it out (Tracey).*

*I will be off the gear, that’s what I want for the future, I want to be off it and feel well again without pumping shit into my veins everyday, just to be healthier and clean you know (Sophie).*

*I’ve been saying it for a while now and part of me thinks it’ll never actually happen but I don’t want to be using forever, so I will eventually stop I know it, it’s just so hard, but I want it so much it’s just so hard (Rose).*

*I’ll definitely be clean, one hundred percent, I see myself you know, like, being clean and got my own place, nice neighbours, cute place, no going out to score just you know, doing house stuff (Ellie).*

When speaking about their hopes for the future multiple respondents spoke about wanting to work with animals and take on a caring role:

*Maybe like, work with animals, yeah, take care of animals and care for them like at the animal shelters I think I’d like to do something like that you know, I’d enjoy that being around all the dogs and that, I like cats and rabbits and things too, not too keen on creepy crawlies like but anything with fur I love, I just them (Rose).*

*I’ve always wanted to work with animals, obviously I’m not clever enough to be a vet or anything like that but I could still do something to do with animals, look after them, maybe at a rescue place, I save all my newspapers up all year and take them to the rescue at Christmas time and that already (Jenny).*

*If I was to do anything it would definitely be working with dogs or horses or something, I’m actually quite good with animals and I used to ride when I was younger and I loved that, I just love all animals but I think it would be cool to train them and what not, I have no idea how you’d get into anything like that but it would be pretty cool to do that (Kara).*

Only two participants, Tessa and Elsa - both indoor workers, spoke about wanting to exit sex work and establish their careers:

*Well this is just a short term thing for me so I won’t be working from the Sauna anymore, like I said, it’s just short term and then I’ll be done, I’ve got my business to concentrate on after this (Tessa).*

*I hope I’m not doing this anymore, I hope that I have a job working with children, I don’t know doing what exactly yet but definitely with children, I’ve thought about maybe going into teaching, but not secondary, I don’t know, we’ll see (Elsa).*

**Summary**

The trauma, loss and paternal rejection the participants experienced during critical development periods (as discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight) had a detrimental affect on the women’s sense of self-worth, and ultimately led them to lifestyle they had not anticipated. Seventeen women spoke about their experience with, and dependence, on illegal drugs but expressed that they, in contrast to literature which reports street-based women often trapped in a work-score cycle (Jeal *et al* 2018; Jeal and Turner 2008), sold sex for reasons other than sustaining their drug habit.

Participants acknowledge the stigma wider society attaches to the act of selling sex and those who choose to provide such services, but they do not internalise these stigmas to such a degree that they adopt a sex worker identity. It does not affect their own sense of self, instead, the majority of women utilise their sex worker role as ‘technology of the self’ (Foucault 1976), a method of taking back control and as a coping strategy for other forms of marginalisation that they receive and other deviant roles and identities that they embody such as bad-daughter, failed-mother and drug-addict.

This chapter has also shown how mothers who have had their children removed from their care feel stigma differently than those who have their children living with them. Those who do not adopt a failed-mother identity pay more effort to concealing their sex worker role, whereas for the thirteen women who have lost parental rights over their children hiding their involvement did not feature highly in their lives. For these women, being labelled a failed-mother was detrimental to their self-esteem and they had little energy, or desire, to employ management strategies elsewhere.

The following and final chapter critically discusses how the data presented in Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine connects to existing literature and debate, before reflecting on the original contribution my research has made to the field of commercial sex and considering implications for policy, practice and future research.

**Chapter Ten**

Discussion

*No need to thank me, I’ve quite enjoyed it actually…talking to someone proper, like, about something other than just the sex stuff and nothing else…it’s been quite nice actually (Georgia).*

At the beginning of this thesis in Chapter One, I set out the central aims guiding this research and the various questions that this study would seek to answer. The *key* aim of this research was to explore the lives, histories, motivations and lived experiences of women who sell sex in contemporary Britain (specifically, the Midlands) today to address the question of who they are.

The aims of this research were deliberately broad in order to let the women tell their own stories in their own way. As discussed throughout this thesis, I interviewed the participants in this research as women first, sex workers second, recognising that individuals have lives, relationships and experiences outside of the sex industry, rather than setting out to examine a particular sector of the market, relationships or transactions. I believe that this approach enabled the participants to feel valued as women and permitted them to open up about events and information that they would not have shared if they had been being interviewed purely as a sex worker. This is evidenced by the wealth of information the women volunteered about their most treasured memories and heart aching experiences displayed in Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine. This approach allowed for the generation of rich material and upheld the principles of respect and appreciation which this research is centred upon.

The four central research questions encapsulating the study’s broad aims will now be addressed in respect of what my findings show, engaging with existing literature and current debate, before assessing the original contribution my research has made to the field of commercial sex research and implications for future practice and study are made.

**Women and Sex Work: A Discussion**

As a researcher I was naturally guided by the current sex work literature and popular perceptions of commercial sex, as discussed in Chapters Two and Four, and based my question framework on such assumptions expecting the women in this research to provide detailed accounts on the ‘sex’ in sex work. However, although my research was purposely designed as a life history approach to yield rich data about *who* these (sex-working) women are, I was surprised as to how much conversation centred on early-life experiences and how these have resonated throughout their adult lives impacting on their decisions they make as women today.

As discussed in Chapter Four, the childhoods of street-walking women have historically received much international academic attention with reports of abuse and sexual victimisation common, extensive experience of institutions, low educational achievement, prevalent domestic violence and runaway behaviour (see Pereda 2015 for a discussion). The majority of the women interviewed for this research contradict these traditional presentations and challenge the stereotypical images by reporting childhoods which were, for the most part, characterised by normality and happiness. The women shared memories of being ‘good’ daughters with me which brought them happiness and joy, recalling family days out, holidays and parties - all of which centred around their parents, particularly their fathers.

However, this seemingly idyllic family life was severely disrupted for ten of the women in this research when they unexpectedly discovered that they were pregnant during their adolescent years (a further three women who had no contact with their fathers also experienced teenage pregnancy). As Chapter Seven reveals, pregnancy proved to be a transitioning experience for the women, a key ‘turning-point’ (Sampson and Laub 1993: 8) that transformed many areas of their lives. They were immediately ostracised by their fathers, ‘othered’ and labelled deviant for bringing shame and embarrassment on their good social standing and were excluded from the secure, loving and protective family unit they were once part of.

Here, we can see how the families of the women functioned as ‘moral systems’ governing their young (sexual) bodies (Foucault 1976). Participants transgressed the boundaries of what was deemed (by their fathers) ‘normal’ feminine behaviour, standards that are not natural but rather the ‘effects of power’ (Foucault 1975). Consequently, the women, as young girls, were shamed and ignored ultimately shaping their self-concepts.

This literal abandonment is congruent to findings of scholars such as Dalla (2003; 2004) and Dodsworth (2012a; 2012b), who report abandonment as a key feature in the backgrounds of street-based sex workers, though the context in which the abandonment occurs differs significantly. The trauma caused by such an unexpected pregnancy resonated through the whole family; not only was it traumatic for the women carrying children but also for the fathers who suddenly ‘lost’ their ‘good’ daughters. The breakdown of their family unit left the women feeling alone and confused at a critical developmental time in their lives. This unexpected rejection proved extremely distressing for the majority of participants, as it resulted in the loss of their ‘good-daughter’ role and an internalisation of a ‘bad-daughter’ identity.

Early motherhood, a vulnerable period in any woman’s life, was a period where the women felt significant maternal stigma. Their fathers had labelled them sexually deviant for falling pregnant and through their exclusion and isolation the women felt unable to manage. That ‘failed-mother’ identity was often compounded when children were taken into social care, but also when my own interviewees’ mothers stepped in to support them and their babies. Some took over the mothering identity, which can be constitutive of feminine subjectivity, leaving their daughters mothers who did not mother. These moves by their own mothers also shifted the mother-daughter relationship into a complex space for such young women, who may have felt pushed *out* of their familiar place. Of the thirteen women who experienced an adolescent pregnancy only one woman (Natalie, an indoor-based sex worker) has her children residing in her care. For the other twelve women, having their children *‘taken’* (Tia) from them led them to internalise their void-mother role into a bad-mother identity, largely as a result of not being able to provide a stable home-life for their children.

For ten of the thirteen teenage mothers in this research, managing (or failing to manage) the role of mother (alone) at such a young age resulted in seeking escape and comfort in illegal substances. As discussed in Chapter Eight, the women utilised drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism for the psychological conflicts they were experiencing first as ‘bad-daughters’ and then as ‘failed-mothers’ before ultimately also internalising their role as ‘drug-user’. As explored in Chapter Four, drug use among street-level sex workers is common (Brown 2013; Dalla 2000; 2002; Epele 2001; Farley 2003; Hoigard and Finstad 1992; May *et al* 2000; May and Hunter 2006; Pearce *et al* 2002; William and Cluse-Tolar 2002), as is the removal of children from their care due to an inability to parent effectively (Dodsworth 2012a). Attention has since been paid to the management of the mother and sex worker roles and how incompatible these are with being able to parent successfully (Dalla 2003; 2004; Dodsworth 2012a; 2012b; McClelland and Newell 2008; Sloss *et al* 2004). The mothers in this research acknowledge that their ability to parent was taken away because of their involvement in drug-taking subcultures rather than due to sex-working. They desperately hope to *‘get well’* (Sophie), mostly for the sake of their children.

At this point in their lives the women had no anchor to traditional mainstream feminine identities or a stable and secure family. The women could be characterised as ‘disorganised drifters’ residing in a state of ‘personal isolation and social rootlessness’ (Phoenix 1999: 44). Phoenix (1999) highlights how such ‘social rootlessness’ can occur after experiencing ‘social deficiencies in early years or ‘sudden occurrences’ such as the birth of an illegitimate child which may have ‘dislodged’ her in later life’ (p.44). This aspect of the traditional explanatory social and criminal subculture model (discussed in Chapter Four) is applicable for the majority of the women in this research who experienced adverse family environments after such a ‘sudden’ and unexpected announcement of their pregnancies.

Previous research has shown that adverse family environments coupled with psychological distress, may make it more likely that some women may enter sex work (Cunningham *et al* 1994; Gibbs *et al* 2002; Pereda 2015).However, research has not directly suggested that premature mothering causes such a dramatic shift in family dynamics to promote entry into the sex-economy. Traditional scholarship has paid extensive attention to pathways into prostitution/sex work, attempting to identify common process and recurrent themes that may predict entry (Clarke *et al* 2012; Cronley *et al* 2016; Potterat *et al* 1998; Roe-Sepowitz 2012). The participants in this research entered sex work rather undramatically, perceiving their engagement as ‘*no big deal’* (Jenny and Sophie).

As discussed in Chapter Eight, and in contrast to the large majority of previous research, the participants in this study engaged in sex work for *‘more than money’* (Rae), using it as a way to *‘escape’* (Tracey) their conflicted realities. Selling sex was a way of exercising a care of the self; a ‘technology of the self’ (Foucault 1976), developing and coming to terms with a kind of self-knowledge and understanding a certain truth about what sex work can and does mean. Sex work allowed participants to obtain a sense of quality over their lives and provided some alleviation of the marginalised identities they embodied such as bad-daughter, failed-mother and drug-addict. Memories of trauma tied to such identities continually resurface and function as a source of pain and misery that drive women into finding distraction – for some this is drug use, alcohol consumption, and sex work and for others it is all of these activities.

For the women in this research ‘sex worker’ was their only valued gender identity, as other ‘normal’ feminine identities, such as daughter and mother, were removed (by their fathers) for transgressing ‘norms of identity’ (Goffman 1963), further highlighting the heteronormative impact of family on our sense of gendered self. During the interviews there was little mention of marriage or partnerships, either with their children’s father or someone else. Being in a heterosexual partnership is a key aspect of many women’s identity and confirms both their gendered and sexual value within many normalising discourses, both popular and institutional. Without a place in such normative feminine discourses my participants were able to embrace sex work positively against mainstream discourses of gender; resisting and reframing a role that has traditionally been ‘spoiled’ (Goffman 1963) to create a positive concept of themselves which they justified readily in the interviews.

For existing research, agency (i.e. one can exercise discretion over one’s working hours, conditions etc.) is frequently given as a key reason as to why some women find sex work an attractive economic option. However, the respondents here used such agency as a method of coping with, and surviving, the multiple psychological conflicts they were encountering as a result of unresolved childhood trauma. In contrast to other studies, which have found sex work for street-based workers who are also mothers to be ‘all consuming’ (see Dodsworth 2012b: 526), selling sex for the women in this research was not who they were, it was simply what they did.

This highlights that to better understand *who* sex workers are today, much focus and deep exploration must be given to women’s whole stories; before they start to sell sex. As scholars we must continue to weave the complex threads of women’s life stories together to formulate an integrated approach and theory of sex work. In particular my research suggests that focusing on moving women away from sex work, or in any way diminishing the authority they gain from the autonomy they describe, might either simply not work in better managing sex commerce or could possibly further traumatise those involved by challenging their strained sense of feminine value.

**Assessing Contribution**

Following on from the discussion above, this thesis offers an original contribution to the field of commercial sex research in the following ways:

First, this thesis highlights the importance of family when exploring women’s journey’s into sex work, particularly the father-daughter relationship. Despite reports of abusive backgrounds in other research (Pereda 2015), my data indicates that women who choose to sell sex from the streets can and do report ‘normal’ and happy histories until a significant event, which for the majority of the women in this research was teenage pregnancy, caused a dramatic shift in family dynamics. My data highlights how paternal rejection, resulting from teenage pregnancy, as an early damaging experience can increase the likelihood of women’s involvement in sex work.

Thus, I have developed a further understanding of how unresolved childhood trauma (not only sexual abuse) may impact on the choices women make in adulthood, including engaging in sex work.

Second, it reveals how sex work itself can function as a coping mechanism for managing other, more stigmatising, identities that take precedence in the lives of women who sell sex. For my interviewees their authority over what they do enables them, in Foucauldian terms, to adopt selling sex as a ‘technology of the self’ (Foucault 1976). My data illustrates how some women who are deprived of ‘normal’ feminine identities (such as daughter and mother and wife or partner), use sex work to craft a sense of self-worth to restore autonomy and a valued gendered identity that compensates for othered, missing or spoiled mainstream feminine identities in an arena where most women employ separation techniques to ‘make out’ in sex work (O’Neill 1999: 84).

Finally, my research also offers a unique insight into the histories and lived realities of today’s street working women, bringing their voices to life and reframing some academic understanding that, in recent years, has drifted away from of those who sell sex from the street. I also join a growing collection of scholars (Cheng 2013; Hail-Jares *et al* 2017; Shdaimah and Leon 2018) who draw attention to the multidimensionality of sex workers’ identities to provide greater understanding of their lives. This is essential if efforts at reforms in policy and practices are planned to improve, rather than disrupt or even destroy, sex workers subjective coherence and sense of self-value.

**Implications Going Forward**

This thesis is suggestive of several future research directions and poses considerations for both policy and practice.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, there has been a lack of in-depth contemporary critical investigative fieldwork carried out with those who sell sex from the streets, in favour of exploring new types of sex work to better inform political and legal debates. Although my research goes some way to shedding light on the economic activities now taking place in the outdoor sex-market, for example clients now paying sex workers to experiment with class-A drugs rather than to receive any sexual service (see Chapter Eight), it reveals more about the histories, subjectivities and personal experiences of some women who engage in the outdoor sex-market today than on the day to day exchanges of services for payment.

When considering future research on the outdoor sex-economy a larger and broader sample than my own, which was small and localised, would permit a fuller assessment of not only the backgrounds of sex workers, but also on the transactions and interactions taking place with clients on the streets today.

Another key area for future research includes the importance of the father-daughter relationship in determining pathways into, and experiences through, sex work. As my data highlights, fathers are central to the women’s lives and their (lack of) relationship with them proves a key factor in their journey’s, which is somewhat missing from current sex work literature. Therefore, it is my suggestion that scholars consider family arrangements, dynamics and relationships more broadly and in greater detail when exploring women’s pathways into commercial sex. The inclusion of the families themselves in research with sex workers may also provide a better assessment of the role of families in determining and influencing choices, pathways and experiences of sex work.

My research opens up interpretations to be taken into account when considering policy recommendations and practice guidelines. The data that emerged from the narrative accounts strongly indicates that women choose to sell sex specifically from the street as it provides them with greater choice and agency over their working lives. They spoke openly about how the street made them *‘feel better’* (Polly), taking enjoyment from being their *‘own boss’* (Amber) and being able to *‘breathe’* (Tracey) and make decisions for themselves instead of having their lives constructed for them through external agency involvement, which featured so prominently in their lives. As scholars we need to ensure we make every effort to take a holistic view when considering political and legal implications of our research by understanding why some women may not want to move away from sex work as it is now. If such freedom that the women experienced through street sex work were to be taken from them by legal and/or political enforcements (such as the criminalisation of clients), the women’s agency and autonomy over their sex worker roles would be lost and they would be left without *‘purpose’* (Amber), posing further risk to their mental health.

For professional practice, this thesis highlights a need to promote more effective strategies for detecting childhood abuse, trauma and neglect and also to develop early intervention programmes that would enable children and young people to recover from such experiences, instead of leaving their trauma unresolved ultimately affecting their experiences in adulthood. This would allow young people to make better informed choices, rather than make decisions that result from the distorted view they have of themselves, of others and their futures.

Teenage pregnancy is shown in this research as a missed intervention opportunity where the women felt *‘let down’* (Rae) by those around them, feeling *‘alone’* (Lauren), *‘scared’* (Tia) and *‘overwhelmed’* (Natalie) at being an adolescent mother. It is my suggestion that agencies make significant effort and have appropriate measures in place to ensure they recognise the risks (such as drug taking and sex work) the premature mothering experience may pose earlier, particularly for those without a strong support network, supporting young women to be independent and help mothers to retain care of their babies.

My research also highlights the importance of standpointism in interview contexts for future sex work research, as my data suggests a different story from the one I expected from much of the literature, history and popular culture.

It is my hope that this thesis provides introduction for larger research projects and considerations in these areas.

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Appendices

**Appendix 1**

**Ethical Approval**

Head of School

Professor Joanna Shapland

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Lucy Binch

School of Law
Bartolomé House

10 May 2013

Dear Lucy,

**PROJECT TITLE: Researching sex work in the UK**

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 9 May *2013* the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following document that you submitted for ethics review:

* University research ethics application from (4 March 2013)

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved document please inform me since written approval will be required. Please also inform me should you decide to terminate the project prematurely.

Yours sincerely

*Sarah Beedham*

*Research Support Officer*

*School of Law*

**Appendix 2**

**Participant Information Sheet**

**Research Title:** A Qualitative Research Investigation into the Lives of Women who Sell Sex

This study will be carried out by Lucy Binch, a PhD student at the University of Sheffield within the department of Law. The study is primarily about the lives and experiences of female sex workers in the UK and aims to raise understanding and awareness of the realities of contemporary sex workers in Britain today.

As a participant you will be asked a number of questions during an interview about your daily lives, both working and personal, which will last approximately one to two hours. Your responses (with your permission) will be audio taped before being later transcribed. The results from the interview will then be analysed and written up within a PhD thesis, this thesis may be read by numerous academics, printed, and stored for a number of years. Your privacy will be protected at all times as you are not required to give any personal details, and the use of a pseudo name (fake name) will be introduced to guarantee total anonymity. Any information you choose to share is in total confidence and will not be shared with any other person unless there is an issue of child protection or a threat to an individual’s immediate safety.

There is no cost to be involved in this research study, and at the same time there is no personal financial benefit either. A research ethics checklist has also been carried out and approved to ensure that there will be no personal harm to any participants. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you hold the right to withdraw your participation and information at any time. However, your participation within the study will be of great help and appreciation.

**Contact details**

Researcher: Lucy Binch (email: lmdbinch1@sheffield.ac.uk), or write to address below.

Supervisor: Maggie Wykes (Telephone: 0114 2226823 or Email: m.wykes@sheffield.ac.uk)

If you have any concerns about the research then in the first instance please contact thesupervisor. If this does not resolve the matter to your satisfaction then please write to address below and contact the School’s Research Ethics Officer.

The University of Sheffield

School of Law

Bartolome House

Sheffield, S3 7ND

**Appendix 3**

**Participant Consent Form**

I give consent to take part in the study ‘A Qualitative Research Investigation into the Lives of Women who Sell Sex’ which is being conducted by Lucy Binch, a PhD student at the University of Sheffield within the School of Law.

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet.

I understand that by signing this consent form that I am allowing Lucy Binch to conduct an interview with me that will be recorded.

I am entering into the interview under my own free will and have not been coerced to undertake the interview by Lucy Binch or any other person.

If at any time I wish to withdraw myself from the study I understand that this will be supported by Lucy Binch and staff at the charity. The interview and any personal information will then be destroyed.

**Participant**

Signed:

 Date:

Print Name:

**Researcher**

Signed:

 Date:

Print Name:

**Appendix 4**

**Interview Guide**

**Introduction**

* Purpose of research
* Confidentiality
* Sign consent form
* Any questions

**Part One - Early life**

* Family life – locations/siblings/parents/carers etc.
* Education
* Housing
* General health/well-being

**Part Two - Life before sex work**

* Formal work
* Children?
* Routines
* Relationships

**Part Three - Life after entry into sex work**

* How became involved in sex work
* Any drug or alcohol misuse
* Reasons why became involved
* Who knows about their involvement in sex work
* Types of sex work
* Daily life/routines
* Partners/relationships
* Experiences of violence
* Experiences of police involvement/prison
* Experiences of stigma/stereotyping