

WEIGHING THE CONSEQUENCES OF A DEVIANT CAREER: FACTORS LEADING TO AN EXIT FROM PROSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT: *Research on how individuals leave sex work examines this transition by focusing on either structural/economic conditions that keep them in the trade or internal changes that prompt exiting. Leaving certain roles, such as those deemed criminal and deviant, may be more challenging due to labeling, stigma, and a lack of resources. In this study, the author analyzes the particular factors that lead women to exit street prostitution via enrollment in a "helping" organization. The author finds extant theories do not fully capture how multiple factors combine to pull women off the streets. Rather, the author contends it is both internal and external factors that lead women to initially exit prostitution. This study draws on interviews with thirty-six street prostitutes from four different U.S. cities to address these concerns.*

Keywords: leaving prostitution, organizations, role exiting

Sex workers have long piqued the curiosity of both academics and the general public because their work violates prevalent social norms and therefore is often considered deviant. Prostitution,¹ one of the oldest recorded types of sex work, continues to prosper throughout the world as it has emerged in various forms, ranging from courtesans to street prostitutes. To date, there is copious research on sex workers, including their daily experiences (Pearl 1987), legal issues affecting their work (Chapkin 2000; Weitzer 2000a), and causal factors pulling women into the trade (Barton 2006; O'Neill and Barberet 2000).

Overall, there is much less academic examination of how and why women leave the trade. Within this research, there are two prevailing foci that account for this transition. First, scholars emphasize that individuals who work in prostitution are situated within particular social economic statuses that make sex work a more appealing option and preclude (or make difficult) their exits (Brock 1998; Jeffrey and MacDonald 2006; Miller 1986; Rosen and Venkatesh 2008). In this scenario, sex work is a rational decision and these broader conditions keep individuals in the trade (Rosen and Venkatesh 2008). The second approach focuses less on

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Sociological Perspectives, Vol. 53, Issue 4, pp. 527–549, ISSN 0731-1214, electronic ISSN 1533-8673.

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structurally based circumstances and more on internal factors that are linked to exits, such as having personal reasons/motivations (Dalla 2006; Sanders 2007) and turning points that cause cognitive changes (Månsson and Hedin 1999).

An alternative way to conceptualize exiting is to view prostitution as a role, associated with certain behaviors and statuses. Ebaugh (1988) refers to the process of shedding one role and adopting another as "role exiting." Research on exiting deviant roles concludes these are especially difficult to leave due to labeling, stigma, and, in some cases, the associated criminal status. In the United States, street prostitutes are typically thought of as deviants and criminals who therefore occupy a low-status position. Due to the specific socio-legal constraints placed on these individuals, where they are deviant and criminalized yet not provided many resources, leaving the trade may be both a desirable goal and more difficult to achieve single-handedly. Prostitution-helping organizations² (PHOs) can serve to facilitate this exiting process.

Building on these works, this study examines the factors that cultivate an exit from prostitution. I find structural or individual explanations do not fully capture how multiple factors combine to pull women off the streets. Rather, I contend it is *both* internal and external factors that lead women to initially exit prostitution by enrolling in a PHO. I structure my analysis according to these four factors—having reasons for leaving, experiencing turning points, learning of a PHO, and the role of bridge parties. In order to address these concerns, I draw on interviews with thirty-six U.S. female street prostitutes who engage in heterosexual sex. This sample is ideal to address this research question because these individuals were in the process of transitioning out of the trade during my fieldwork as they enrolled in PHOs. These findings hold implications for theoretical advancements in research on sex workers (prostitutes), role exiting, and deviant populations.

STREET PROSTITUTION

Prostitution is often a gendered phenomenon, where men largely purchase and women sell sexual acts. The most common reason women engage in sex work is to earn money, and researchers argue these individuals tend to have limited career options (Delacoste and Alexander 1998). Numerous scholars make the case that sex work is directly tied to structural economic factors and low-income women, in particular, consciously and rationally enter and remain in the trade (Brock 1998; Jeffrey and MacDonald 2006; Miller 1986; Rosen and Venkatesh 2008). Adding to this area, Hwang and Bedford (2004) discuss female juvenile prostitutes' motivations for remaining in the trade, which includes not only financial reasons but also emotional, drug, and identity-related factors.

Though street prostitution comprises only a small proportion of overall prostitution activities (Porter and Bonilla 2000; Raphael and Shapiro 2002), scholars suggest they are likely to be the most disadvantaged group of sex workers because of their visibility (making arrests more commonplace) and due to working in arenas of heightened violence (Weitzer 1999). Yet larger social and economic forces also contribute to these working conditions. Bernstein (2007) conducted extensive research on U.S. prostitutes and examined the relationship between structural changes and

sexual commerce. Her work uncovers the interaction of various forces (commerce, legal policy) and space (private, public) as they ultimately transform the consumer marketplace and shape the character of sex work.

These assertions beg questions pertaining to the position of sex workers: Are they oppressed victims of a patriarchal system or empowered women using their sexuality for gain? Radical feminists position any type of sex work as exploitative due to patriarchal conditions, while sex-radical feminists claim sex work subverts patriarchy as women capitalize on their sexuality and profit from it (Chapkis 1997). This debate has likewise emerged in research on prostitutes specifically, with some emphasizing the disadvantages and hardships they face (Dalla 2006; Porter and Bonilla 2000) and others highlighting the empowerment and benefits derived from the trade (Bernstein 2007; Chapkis 1997; Weitzer 1999). Recently, certain academics point out the futility of this binary and argue that sex workers, depending on their personal circumstances and working conditions, fall along a continuum ranging between these two extremes (Bernstein 1999; Weitzer 2000b).

Because many women in this sample have extensive histories with the criminal justice system, battle with drug addictions, and have experienced high levels of violence, these circumstances may make leaving prostitution more desirable for them and, perhaps, more difficult. Although I am hesitant to generalize their experiences to all street prostitutes, it is hard to discount that these prostitutes are a particularly disadvantaged and disenfranchised group of sex workers. To that end, I rely on the accounts of the women to paint an image of their circumstances and life experiences while working on the streets and the steps that led to leaving the trade.

LEAVING THE TRADE

Given the focus of this study is on the factors that result in leaving the role of prostitute, it is important to underscore the relevance of roles for individuals. Roles provide a vantage point for understanding the world around us and inform our subsequent behaviors. Individuals often take on various roles throughout their lives and transition from one role to another over the life course, which is known as role exiting. Indeed, some research asserts that role exiting is a pivotal step that subsequently enables new role acquisition (Ebaugh 1988; Howard 2006). Ebaugh's (1988) work on role exiting examines the stages individuals pass through as they leave a role: first doubts, the seeking and weighing of alternatives, turning points and their functions in the role-exit process, and establishing an ex-role identity. Many of these stages are preparatory and important components leading to role exit. With a few exceptions, most sociological research on roles focuses solely on the socialization and internalization of new roles while neglecting other aspects of the exiting process (Howard 2006). When this process is applied to roles that are deemed criminal, it can be considered desistance (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Giordano, Deines, and Cernkovich 2006). While I focus primarily on role exiting in this study, these findings also offer implications for the analogous process of desistance among street prostitutes.

Research finds individuals who attempt to leave "deviant" roles must contend with unique conditions associated with them (Sanders 2007; Snow and Anderson

1993; Uggen, Manza, and Behren 2004). Similarly, street prostitutes experience a high degree of stigma and labeling due to their visibility, involvement with the criminal justice system, and because they work in a trade that violates culturally prevalent mores and norms. As a result, many prostitutes tend to conceal their past history in the trade after exiting (Sanders 2007).

Dalla (2006) highlights the ways women exit prostitution and contends they do so through three avenues: jail, PHOs, and on their own. Her study examines the motivations for leaving, which include relational factors, restrictive factors (e.g., physical deterioration), spirituality, cumulative burdens (e.g., hitting bottom), and being in a transitional context (e.g., jail). Moreover, Sanders (2007) produced one of the most comprehensive studies on exiting prostitution when she compared indoor and outdoor sex workers and developed a typology of pathways out of sex work that consisted of reactionary exits, gradual planning, natural progression, and yo-yoing.

The ability and resources to exit prostitution though may be hampered by the socio-legal contexts in which these individuals are immersed. Brock (1998) claims the rise in Canadian legislation concerning sex work, in an effort to "contain and control" these activities, was ineffective and only shifted the workers to alternative areas. Consequently, these increasingly punitive legal changes did not decrease the number of prostitutes nor did they facilitate exiting. Månsson and Hedin (1999) conducted research on Swedish street prostitutes who left sex work, in a context that is "interventionist" in nature, and note three turning points that cultivate this transition: eye-opening events, traumatic events, and positive life events. This research was conducted within various settings, each having specific laws and values that likely influence the exiting process.

The combination of particular socio-legal contexts that criminalize prostitution, drug use, arrests and violence can create circumstances that make exiting an especially arduous task (Cusick and Hickman 2005; Sanders 2007). For instance, Cusick and Hickman (2005) point out that prostitution and drug use mutually reinforce each another, making this population especially "vulnerable" and effectively "trapping" them in the trade unless sobriety is achieved. To date, extant studies explore the motivations for leaving, turning points of change, and laws that shape exiting. Building off this body of work, this study aims to contribute by analyzing the combination of factors that result in an initial exit from street prostitution, particularly among women who utilize the services of a PHO in this endeavor.

DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

In order to gain access to prostitutes, I chose to intern and work with PHOs: non-profit programs that specifically aim to help and serve prostitutes. I located thirty-three³ PHOs across the United States, through extensive Internet searches and snowball sampling, and selected four of them where I conducted in-depth ethnographic work—New Horizons, Phoenix, Safe Place, and Seeds. I chose these four PHOs based on the following factors: modes of entrée, the organizational structure, temporality, and regional location (see Table 1). Scholars assert these factors

TABLE 1
Variation among Selected Prostitution-Helping Organizations

	<i>Modes of Entrée</i>	<i>Organization Structure</i>	<i>Temporality</i>	<i>Region</i>
New Horizons	Both	Total institution	1.5–2 years	Midwest
Phoenix	Both	Total institution	1.5–2 years	West Coast
Safe Place	Both	Quasi-total institution	3 months	Midwest
Seeds	Involuntary	Day program	2 weeks	East Coast

are important considerations, either because they had been previously neglected or proved relevant to studies on role exiting and/or desistance (Ebaugh 1988; Goffman 1961; Hanson 2002). Receiving director approval to research at these sites was another important concern in the selection process.

I completed this research between 2002 and 2006 and spent an average of three months at each site conducting participant observation and formal and informal interviews. The data in this study draw specifically on the qualitative interviews I conducted with thirty-six clients (approximately nine women per site). These women range in age from 20 to 55, with a majority in their thirties and forties. The interviews focused on the following topics: past histories in prostitution, life course events, experiences on the streets, family relationships, identity, reasons for leaving prostitution and entering the program, interactions with the criminal justice system, and future goals. I conducted the tape-recorded interviews in a private setting to ensure confidentiality and assigned each interviewee a pseudonym for protection. Throughout these interviews, the women espoused stories that contained fairly simplistic cause and effect narratives (Tilly 2006).

I did not find there to be any significant differences among these four samples, in terms of how and why women initially left prostitution, even though they were associated with four distinct PHOs. Therefore, I did not separate the women by PHO, but rather I structured the article according to the four factors attributed to their exits (reasons for leaving, turning points, learning of a PHO, and third-party bridges). Moreover, I only examined this process among U.S. prostitutes, a setting that promotes the labeling of prostitution as a deviant and criminal role. As such, issues of criminality and interactions with the criminal justice system were particularly salient for the women in this sample, and their perceptions of working in the trade and their transition out of it were colored by the laws and public responses to their work.

Although I conducted thirty-six interviews overall, I draw heavily on the accounts of ten women throughout this article, whose experiences I feel best illustrate the prevalent patterns across the sample. I do this for clarity sake for the readers, so they can follow these same individuals throughout the analysis and gain a sense of how these four components combine to facilitate an exit from prostitution. Throughout the article, I refer to the exit as “breaking with prostitution” or “initial exiting.” To be clear, I analyze the factors that ultimately lead women off the streets (out of prostitution) via enrollment in PHOs, and I do not claim that the role-exiting process is complete (or finalized) upon entry.

In terms of the frequency of prostitution activity, all the women in this sample self-reported regularly working in prostitution prior to enrolling in PHOs (with the exception of those temporarily in jail or in the hospital). These women worked an average of 11.5 years in prostitution, and 82 percent worked consistently in it for a minimum of five years. The interviewees did not provide exact measures of the frequency of their sexual transactions during their time in prostitution, but most stated these exchanges ranged from a few times per week to daily, depending on their need for money.

FACTORS LEADING TO AN EXIT

Many studies on exiting prostitution focus on one or two factors that pull women out of the trade, such as reasons for leaving (Dalla 2006; Sanders 2007), turning points (Månsson and Hedin 1999; Sanders 2007), or structural impediments (Brock 1998; Rosen and Venkatesh 2008). In this analysis of street prostitutes, I find it is a combination of both internal (reasons for leaving, turning points) and external factors (learning of a PHO, bridge parties) that lead women to initially exit prostitution as they enter PHOs.

Reasons for Leaving Prostitution

A central component associated with leaving prostitution is having reasons for exiting that can also serve as motivating factors. The respondents in this sample all provided reasons for quitting, with an average of 2.55 reasons given per woman. Dalla (2006) analyzed the motivations for exiting prostitution, which included relational factors, restrictive factors (e.g., physical deterioration), spirituality, cumulative burdens (e.g., hitting bottom), and being in a transitional context (e.g., jail). Similarly, Sanders (2007) uncovers reasons prostitutes leave (such as violence, sobriety, health issues) and connects them to a typology of pathways out of sex work. The above contributions lay important theoretical groundwork for understanding the motivations for exiting, yet at times, these accounts tend to be insufficiently contextualized by the background and life experiences of the individual. Thus, I consider how unique individual characteristics and experiences come into play as women formulate reasons for leaving the streets.

During these interviews, I asked a series of questions about how and why women left prostitution. One common theme that emerged in the responses was being raised in a religious household and a strong desire to “get right with God.” Shondra, a 41-year-old who worked in prostitution for over fifteen years, highlighted the important role a Higher Power played throughout her life, even while she worked on the streets. She explained how religion was a big part of her childhood and her faith eventually became a primary motivation to leave:

My mom was a Jehovah witness and that's the religion I was raised in. I always had faith. When I was working on the streets, I kept praying to God: This is not me. Why do I keep doing this? Why can't I stop? God help me stop. . . . He was always there knocking I just had to open up the door to allow him to come in and help me stop.

Tiffany, who was raised Baptist, also viewed her faith as an ongoing process that inspired her to quit:

It's because I actually felt the hurt that I was putting up on the Heavenly Father and Christ. That was the ultimate straw that broke the camel's back. I promised myself I would never hurt them again and that gives me all the reasons more than I'm going to stop. The other reasons I don't like it no more, like going to prison or for my kids . . . none of those worked. It is God who gives me strength to make the choice.

Another reason for leaving was witnessing and experiencing excessive violence on the streets. While violence in impoverished urban contexts tends to be heightened (Miller 2008), some prostitutes experienced more violent encounters than others, which in turn produced fears of future violence or even death. For some, these concerns emerged and intensified to become a central reason to leave the lifestyle. Shondra, in addition to having religious motivations, also pointed to the increased violence on the streets that was too much for her to bear:

Really, I thought I was going to die in the life because I didn't see anyway out no matter how much I wanted it to end. Things were getting worse on the streets day by day. I've seen about five prostitutes I knew end up dead in garbage cans.

Jenna concurred that the violence she experienced while working in prostitution for twenty-seven years was a major reason she wanted to leave:

I was almost killed by my last john and I ran for my life. I knew I needed to get help but I couldn't stop. It was bad out there . . . I was raped many times and left for dead, having people cut my face up and damage my eye.

The amount of negative experiences and fears of them seemed to grow the longer one worked on the streets. In these situations, women often discussed these fears as burdens that left them feeling exhausted and "too old" for this line of work. Barton (2006) refers to these outcomes as a "toll" sex work can take on women. Similarly, the prostitutes who referenced these reasons for leaving typically worked in the trade for a good portion of their adult lives.⁴

Amy was a 28-year-old who worked as a prostitute for thirteen years, or nearly half of her life. She claimed to feel the tangible effects of her years on the streets:

I was tired of prostituting, yeah I wanted to try and change my life, but I was having a hard time doing it anymore. . . . So I came here, to try to get out of it and off of the streets, so I could do something else because I'm getting way too old for it.

Elaine, 39 years old, who transitioned from stripping to street prostitution, felt seventeen years as a prostitute burdened her with many mental and emotional problems. She claimed to be exhausted from the work and declared that most girls who leave prostitution are also motivated by this factor: "If they are really, really ready to change their lives [and leave] mostly it's because they are tired. That's the main reason you will hear the girls give. They are just burned out by the work."

Although less commonly cited, a few women claimed their sexual orientation served as an impetus to exit prostitution as it became increasingly difficult for them to have sex with men. For instance, Debbie had a distain of sex with men because she was a lesbian. Though she said she first knew she was a lesbian at 14, she felt sleeping with men grew more despicable over time and ultimately became her motivation to leave:

I just got tired of being with different men all the time. The smells, the touches, and all that stuff . . . I'm gay. To be with a man is really fucked up to me. I'd always try to play my way out of the sex by either talking or conning people. I did that very well.

For Debbie, not being sexually attracted to men was a significant impediment in this line of work.

Many women also pointed to sobriety and the clarity that followed as a reason for leaving prostitution. In fact, numerous women stated their sobriety was a precursor to be able to identify their feelings about working in prostitution. All the women in this sample except one admitted to having a drug addiction and many stated this kept them in the trade. Accordingly, achieving a period of sobriety was integral to even formulate reasons to leave, and for some women the desire to sustain it became a motivation in itself (Cusick and Hickman 2005). Loretta, a routine user of PCP and cocaine for eleven years, said her addiction kept her in prostitution and once sober she had no need to return. She recalled:

My habit was basically what really kept me out there. So I think that when I really decided that I don't want drugs anymore that helped me with the prostitution thing. Because I don't need to go out there and sell my body because I didn't do drugs anymore and that is basically what I was doing it for. So now that I am sober I know that I can do without it.

Evette attributed her mental breakdown to drugs and claimed sobriety was paramount for her to retain her sanity. She felt working in prostitution was not compatible with her sobriety:

I never really thought about leaving before I came to the hospital, but I knew I couldn't get high no more because I would start hallucinating and all kinds of stuff . . . I was scared. I used the whole time I worked the streets. I think once I got sober I got a moment of clarity and it dawned on me at that time that that was not the way I wanted to die. Before being sober, I had never thought of leaving.

Both Loretta and Evette's statements suggest that sobriety played a crucial role in even being able to place exiting as a desirable outcome.

Another reason that emerged from women's accounts focused on salvaging relationships with their children. Approximately three-quarters of these women had children, and for many, being able to raise their children, re-claim custody, or simply fulfill their motherly duties was an utmost priority. Though Janise lost custody of her children years before, she still wanted to protect them from negative responses they may have faced because of her actions:

I started thinking about my kids and that's why I first considered leaving. They are teenagers now and I would never hang around their neighborhood or hang around their friends because I was afraid that I was going to date one of them on accident. If that happened, I feared my kids' friends would tease them—"Hey man, isn't that your mom? Your momma sucked my dick."

Rosen and Venkatesh (2008) find that engaging in sex work allows parents flexibility, time, and money to care for their children. In contrast, very few women in this study had custody of their children or even routine contact with them, and many claimed the lifestyle associated with sex work precluded them from raising their children. Thus, the desire to perform and reclaim their role as mothers served as a motivation to leave prostitution.

Other interpersonal relationships with family members, partners, or close friends likewise became a reason to get off the streets. There were two main ways that these relationships motivated women to leave the trade. First, women considered their relationships with significant others too important to lose, therefore sustaining the relationship was a prominent reason for quitting. Rosaria explained how she took her fiancée's disapproval of her lifestyle into consideration:

When my fiancée found out I was prostituting he agreed with me that I needed to change my life. He didn't like the drugs, alcohol or prostitution . . . the way I was living. So to be with him, I needed to change.

Mary similarly claimed she did not want to lose her boyfriend and father of her four children due to her involvement with prostitution and drugs because she felt he was a "good man."

The second way interpersonal relationships became a motivation to quit was when individuals served as role models to prostitutes. In these instances, women had connections to other former prostitutes who had successfully left via PHOs. Through their relationships, these role models extolled the virtues of their decision and served as living examples that such a transition was possible. One 52-year-old client stated her motivation to leave prostitution emerged after she witnessed two other women graduate from a PHO and thrive in their new lifestyles. She recounted why she wanted to leave:

I saw the evidence through my sister and another lady in my neighborhood that was out on the streets [in prostitution] and doing really bad. I saw the changes in them after they went through the program and that's what helped motivate me to want to leave.

For many sex workers, interpersonal relationships factored prominently as reasons to transition out of the trade.

I find the reasons for exiting prostitution among this group of sex workers largely correspond to the findings of previous studies on this topic that include violence, exhaustion, relationships, and religious motivations (Dalla 2006; Sanders 2007). Here, I attempt to assess personal biographies (and life experiences) in conjunction with the formulation of particular reasons because the former shapes the latter. Understanding the motivations for leaving sheds light on the internal factors

involved with this decision, but for these women simply possessing reasons does not automatically generate an exit. Extant research on this topic tends to discuss reasons for leaving as if they alone lead to exits. I contend a turning point event is equally important for bringing these reasons to center stage and subsequently prioritizing leaving.

Turning Points of Change

Beyond reasons for leaving, women also emphasized a turning point event that prompted them to place exiting as a central goal. Turning points, also an internal factor that influences exiting, can cultivate a shift within a person that brings a new set of priorities and goals to the forefront (Stark and Lofland 1965). Månsson and Hedin (1999) find turning point events were relevant to leaving street prostitution and these consisted of eye-opening events, traumatic events (e.g., violence), and positive life events (e.g., relationships, children). In a similar line of inquiry, Sanders (2007) constructed a typology of transitions out of prostitution and in doing so highlighted various turning points of change for these women, such as violent events and significant life events (e.g., pregnancy or jail). Indeed, she finds individual reasons for exiting and turning point events are frequently the same.

In this study, I find that although there is some overlap between turning point events and reasons for leaving, most women spoke of them as two distinct categories. Typically, prostitutes cite reasons for exiting that vary from their turning point event, and as a result of experiencing this event, their reasons rise in salience. The following events functioned as a turning point of change: being arrested, hospitalization, and pregnancy/childbirth.

Arrests and Jail. Given that street prostitutes are highly visible to law enforcement, it is not surprising that all the women in this study have been arrested for prostitution at some point throughout their career. This finding corroborates previous work that claims street prostitutes have among the highest arrest rates of all sex workers (Alexander 1987). As a result of these arrests, a majority of women in this study served jail/prison sentences. Those who had a history of multiple arrests and extensive criminal records spoke of their heightened fears of returning to jail and the prospect of serving long-term prison sentences. When these fears became a reality, they acted as a turning point for approximately three-quarters (twenty-seven of thirty-six) of this sample. Turning points of this nature are what Månsson and Hedin (1999) consider traumatic events that produce a change in perception. The arrests and imprisonment subsequently removed women from street environments, temporarily enforced sobriety, and provided a space for personal reflection that enabled them to reassess their priorities.

Recall that Shondra stated her reasons for getting out of prostitution consisted of religious beliefs and intense fears of experiencing violence on the streets. However, these motivations did not compel her to exit. It was only when she was rearrested and returned to jail that these motivations to quit became her priority. She explained how her imprisonment evoked a turning point moment in her life:

God finally rescued me the last time I went to jail, and it finally clicked after I was arrested that this was God's way of helping me out. I prayed for God to strengthen my faith in Him and to put Him in my life . . . to feel what I knew was right and what I was raised to believe in. I embraced that and ran with it because that was my lifeline and I knew with no doubt in my mind that if I would have kept going the way I was going I would end up dead. After I was released I went right into the program because I knew this was my one shot.

Tisha, a 20-year-old who had been working as a prostitute since she was 9 years old, had a substantial history of arrests and jail time and recently violated her parole. Though she provided multiple reasons why she wanted to leave the streets, such as escalating violence and being "burned out," her rearrest and the prospect of significant jail time elicited a turning point change in her:

I was on parole and I got busted for prostitution again. I knew I was going back to prison for a long time, so I called my parole officer and asked her to recommend me for Phoenix instead. At that point, I knew something had to change. I got lucky, instead of returning to prison, I got a chance to go there.

Similarly, Loretta, a 40-year-old who claimed sobriety was her reason to leave, did not work toward that goal until she was arrested and faced a long stint in the penitentiary. She declared:

I had a long rap sheet—from here to El Paso probably. I was arrested for drugs and prostitution. And all my misdemeanors turned into felonies. I knew I was going to do some serious time in the penitentiary . . . at least three years. I knew it was time to make a change.

These cases emphasize the relevance of arrests and imprisonment, as they served to facilitate turning points of change. This specific type of event was particularly relevant among women with substantial histories of arrests and criminal records, where they perceived the costs associated with working in prostitution as too great.

Hospitalization. Another event that cultivated a turning point for prostitutes was when they experienced extreme psychological duress that resulted in hospitalization. This event is also a traumatic turning point (Månsson and Hedin 1999). In these situations, the women attribute their change in thinking to their time spent in the hospital, where they were able to take stock of their situation and formulate alternative options. Less than one-quarter (seven of thirty-six) of the women discuss hospitalization as a turning point moment.

Even though Evette had a variety of reasons for wanting to leave prostitution, it was the time she spent in a hospital due to a "mental breakdown" that provided a catalyst for exiting. She felt her mental instability was a result of her excessive drug use, which was fueled by her work in the trade:

I never really thought about stopping [prostitution] until the drug thing really took a toll on me mentally. I started hallucinating and began losing my mind and it wasn't fun. That's when I really wanted out. When I was in the hospital I recognized that this was it—now or never. Something clicked inside me.

After this realization, she stated she could not return to prostitution.

Tiffany also suffered from mental illness, which she attributed to her intense drug addiction, and had attempted suicide. Her motivations for quitting revolved solely around having a "spiritual awakening," but it was not until she ended up in the hospital that she began to take the necessary steps to exit:

I tried to smoke myself to death, drink myself to death, and take pills and had to go to the psychiatric unit for six days. It was during this time that I had the clarity to know that I needed help. When I was released I came right to this program.

Both Evette and Tiffany cited multiple reasons for leaving prostitution, however it was only after they were hospitalized for psychiatric problems that they began to experience clarity and a change in thinking that lead them along the path to exiting. These women claimed they had too much to lose if they returned to the streets, including their sanity and well-being, and felt the only way to prevent further damage or death would be to radically alter their lifestyles by leaving prostitution.

Pregnancy and Childbirth. Pregnancy and childbirth were linked to the final turning point event but were uncommon as only two women in this sample cited them. Amy stated feelings of exhaustion made her want to leave the trade for years, yet it was pregnancy and the birth of her last son that produced a turning point in her life that altered her thinking. Shortly after giving birth, her main goal was to leave prostitution so she could be a mother to her children and especially her newborn son:

I want my kids back. I realized it was time to stop when I was pregnant with my son and I didn't want to be doing that anymore since he needed a mother. At that point, I started trying to figure out how I could leave . . . what else I could do instead.

These events corroborate previous research because they fall under the category of "positive life turning points" (Månsson and Hedin 1999).

All the women in this study experienced one of these three turning point events that in turn altered their priorities and goals. Janise stated she would never have left prostitution if she had not experienced a change of heart while in jail. Evette provided a similar account: "No, I never seriously thought of leaving prostitution and if it had not been for my going to the hospital, my social worker and the program, I would still be out there today and probably dead."

The effects of a turning point and the corresponding change in thinking spurred women to gather information about ways to leave prostitution and consider available options for help in this endeavor. Similar to reasons for leaving, turning points can be best understood by examining an individual's particular biography and experiences and are often associated with role transitions (Sampson and Laub 1993). In studies on female desistance from crime, Giordano et al. (2006) conclude that cognitive and motivational changes are central to the desistance process. For prostitutes in this study, turning points created a newfound sense of purpose and priorities, where they felt getting out of prostitution was paramount. In order for a PHO to be perceived as a viable option to exit, prostitutes first had to learn about

the program and what it offered. They acquired this information through a variety of sources, which I examine in the next section.

Learning of a PHO

In addition to internal states, external factors also shape the process of initially exiting prostitution. The first of these is having an awareness of a PHO as an avenue through which to leave. Indeed, knowing about a program and the services it provides can make leaving more appealing and appear attainable because one can expect certain provisions through this association. Research finds that marginalized and disadvantaged populations, such as the homeless, benefit the most when they are informed and utilize services that best match their perceptions and needs (Thompson, Pollio, Eyrich, Bradbury, and North 2004). In the literature on prostitution and exiting, there is little discussion or analysis of the ways through which women learn about programs that can help them transition out of the trade.

I find this group of street prostitutes possessed either short- or long-term knowledge of the existence of a local PHO. Three-quarters of these women (twenty-seven of thirty-six) had short-term awareness of a PHO (less than three months) and enrolled within this time frame. The remaining one-quarter (nine of thirty-six) retained long-term knowledge of a PHO, meaning they knew of a nearby program for longer than three months but did not enroll until a later point in time.

The women who knew about a PHO for longer periods of time acquired this information through a variety of sources: programs and services affiliated with the PHO, staff associated with affiliated institutions, family members or friends, and the media. PHOs that offered additional services—drop-in crisis shelters, street outreach, and jail outreach services—spread the word about their organization through these channels. By providing an array of services, program staff members had numerous avenues through which to disseminate information to street prostitutes and cultivate interpersonal relationships with them.

For instance, Janise first heard of New Horizons when she began using their temporary crisis shelter years earlier:

See I was just a client coming in and out of their crisis shelter, getting meals or sleeping. Because I knew that if I joined their residential program, then I'm gonna have to do the right thing. But at that time I wasn't ready to quit.

While she was not ready to quit until a few years later, during her visits to the shelter Janise acquired information about the program and its services that she later decided to pursue.

Other clients claimed they first heard of a PHO when they came across its mobile outreach unit, whose purpose was to provide condoms, information, and safety tips to street prostitutes. Evette said she first learned of the PHO when interacting with staff members working in this outreach program:

I had always known about them as far as passing out condoms and stuff . . . I even knew them on a first name basis . . . but did I go in for the help and all that? No, I did not. I even lived really close to the residential house, but I never once thought about going there because in my mind there was no help for me.

In spite of learning about the residential programs offered by some PHOs, few of these women attempted to enroll because they felt they were not yet ready to exit.

Another way the women learned of PHOs was through social workers affiliated with other institutions, such as jails or hospitals. Tiffany stated it was her hospital social worker who provided the details about Safe Place, a PHO she had never heard of previously:

I was in the hospital for eight days and the social worker, Mr. Green, came and spoke about this program. He said it was peaceful and there were counselors there an all that . . . that was about two and a half years ago, and that's how long it took me before I actually ended up here. But it was at that point that the seed was planted.

Tiffany's expression was common, as many women carried knowledge of PHOs around with them as a "seed planted" to be used at a later time.

Some women found out about PHOs through their family members or friends. Monique attributed learning about the program to her sister and a fellow prostitute, both of whom had enrolled years before:

I had seen the evidence of the program through my sister, who graduated from the program a few years back. And another lady in my neighborhood was also a prostitute and really bad off. She went to the program too and they both did well. They're now out of the life for good.

A friend in jail told Mary about Phoenix for the first time. She recalled:

I heard about it at least a year and a half ago from a friend while I was in jail. She went to that program before, but I guess she didn't do what she needed to stay out because she was back on the streets and in jail. I always kept that in mind.

For a few women, like Mary, it was the physical restrictions of incarceration that kept them from enrolling in the program until a later date.

Women also acquired information about PHOs from advertisements or articles placed in local newspapers. Around the same time she learned of the program from her friend, Mary also saw a newspaper article about it that featured the history of the program, the services they offered, and contact information. Similarly, another client came across an ad in a local paper that "stuck in her mind." She recited the title of the ad that resonated with her: "Do you want to get out of the life of prostitution?"

These women discussed a variety of sources from which they learned of PHOs, information which eventually influenced their decision to leave the streets. Awareness of PHOs did not typically engender a quick transition out of the trade, but instead it was stored away and became a "seed" planted that was acted upon at a later time. The remaining women in this study possessed short-term knowledge of PHOs, where they learned about them at the onset of their enrollment process. Whether it was a short or long period of time, learning about PHOs and considering them a viable option to exit shaped women's future trajectories and decisions

to leave the streets. In spite of the necessary internal conditions (reasons and turning points) and awareness of PHOs, third-party bridges played a significant part in initial exits from prostitution.

Third Party Bridges

The final external factor tied to exiting is based on a specific type of social network, namely third-party bridges, or individuals who connect prostitutes to PHOs. In the social network literature, this third-party bridge is referred to as a "broker," an actor that mediates exchanges between two other actors not directly linked (Fernandez and Gould 1994). When applied to the case of prostitutes, Månsson and Hedin (1999) highlight how social networks shape the pathways out of prostitution, as individuals extend emotional and practical support to these women during the transition. But social networks do more than that. In fact, I find women not only learn about programs through their social networks, but they rely on these "bridges" to facilitate their entrance into them.

Those who act as bridges have either personal or professional motivations and, in some cases, the power to grant individuals access to PHOs. Networks research distinguishes between two types of brokers—representatives and gatekeepers—where the first groups' interests are aligned with the supplier (e.g., PHOs) and the latter groups' interests are aligned with the customer (e.g., the prostitutes) (Fernandez and Gould 1994). I apply these concepts to this sample in order to differentiate the types of bridges prevalent here. The first type was comprised of individuals who acted as *professional bridges* or those who had aligned interests with PHOs, as they were largely motivated to connect prostitutes to programs based on their occupational goals and duties. The other type included individuals who became *personal bridges* and were primarily concerned with the desires of the prostitutes rather than the organizations. To date, extant research on how women leave prostitution does not explore the ways in which bridge parties serve to connect individuals to organizations that facilitate their exit.

The most common professional bridge that linked women with PHOs were individuals affiliated with the criminal justice system, such as public defense attorneys, parole officers, and the police. In fact, a little more than half of the clients (twenty of thirty-six) identified a person who worked in one of these occupations as their bridge. These bridges were especially salient for those prostitutes entangled within the criminal justice system, as they informed women about the program and, based upon their power, advocated for this sentence in lieu of imprisonment. Ultimately, the final decision is often made by a judge, but attorneys and parole officers certainly influence these outcomes. Tisha was a client who first heard about Phoenix through a chaplain while in jail and shortly thereafter asked her parole officer to plead with the judge for placement there. As a bridge party, who had significant power over her sentencing, it was up to her parole officer's discretion whether she would be able to enter the PHO. Tisha recalled the sequence of events:

I heard about the Phoenix the third time I went to jail through a chaplain who told me there are programs for prostitutes. I've never heard of one before that. At that point in time when she came to me I had no hope. Because I did a

crime—prostitution—I was on parole. I was looking at 18 months at least in jail. I didn't know if I was going to get into the program, not because they wouldn't accept me but because my parole officer wouldn't recommend it. . . . I had to go through her first. So I called my parole officer and I told her about the program. . . . I didn't know if she would recommend it for me or not. Finally, she did and I was able to enter.

Loretta also stated she learned of a nearby PHO when her defense lawyer suggested she try to get in. He set up a meeting between her and the director of the PHO to see if she would qualify and thereafter advocated for Loretta's placement in this program rather than a lengthy prison term. She explained:

When the public defender said "I know a long-term program, I'm going to give the director a call and she's going to come up here to interview you and see if you are eligible," I said okay because I was ready to quit, I was tired, and I was looking at three years in the penitentiary. Luckily, I got in and I am now a proud program graduate.

Janise, who knew of a local PHO for years, explained she finally enrolled in it because her lawyer, upon her request, pleaded for her to be placed there rather than serve prison time. She was quick to emphasize that she wanted to enter the program because she knew it was a "life threatening situation" for her, where she would likely die if she continued working on the streets. All three of these women depended on a professional bridge party to recommend and secure their placement at a PHO.

In rare instances, the police served as the bridge between street prostitutes and PHOs. Although the police had no legal authority to force a woman to enter a PHO, in circumstances where a woman was willing to accept their suggestion, they served as the effective bridge. Amy, whose last pregnancy and infant son became her turning point, was one of these individuals. She recalled:

The cops picked me up and they brought me here, and that was the first time I heard about this program. I thought the program wouldn't take me, but they did because the cops knew the director. I've been here ever since.

In Amy's case, the police officer's relationships with the program director eased this transition.

Social workers also functioned as bridges to PHOs, and they were especially instrumental for the women who experienced traumatic events and landed in the hospital. Approximately 22 percent (eight of thirty-six) of the women claimed social workers facilitated their admission into a PHO. For example, Evette emphasized the important role her social worker played in getting her into New Horizons after she wound up in a psychiatric hospital:

It was a social worker from the hospital who got me to go to the program. She asked me, "Is this the way you really want to die?" I think in the midst of that encounter I got a moment of clarity and it donned on me it was not. . . . So it was that little conversation with that social worker that finally got me here. She set it up so when I was released I came straight here.

Tiffany shared a similar story, where she was in a psychiatric hospital after she attempted suicide, and a social worker recommended Safe Place, which she had heard of years before. After receiving the suggestion and experiencing a turning point, she finally felt ready to change and allowed the social worker to orchestrate her placement into the program.

Lawyers, parole officers, police, and social workers all acted as professional bridges because they shared a mutual interest with the PHOs, which was to get the women out of prostitution and discourage further involvement with the criminal justice system. Acting as brokers between prostitutes and PHOs was beneficial for the workers professionally, as these placements can ultimately help accomplish occupational goals. As one police captain explained:

The police became an advocate for this program, not only by distributing information to the prostitutes who we were directly involved in the criminal justice system, but also to other agencies, such as courts. You know, if we could keep her from going on the street again by connect[ing] her to this program, we've not only helped her, but we've accomplished our goal for the community as well. I think it worked as a real good win/win situation for both of us.

The professional bridges have formalized relationships with their clients, as the very nature of their jobs promotes and encourages citizens to adhere to laws, remain out of crime, and be self-supporting. Thus, it is in their best interests to get women to leave the streets with the hope that many will permanently implement these lifestyle changes.

Family and friends also became bridges between prostitutes and PHOs, and approximately 14 percent (five of thirty-six) of these women mentioned them. These individuals served as personal bridges whose interests primarily aligned with the prostitutes due to their intimate interpersonal relationships. Although Monique first learned of the PHO a few years back, she only decided to actively pursue entering after she experienced a turning point in jail. Upon prioritizing an exit from the trade, she turned to her sister, who had graduated from the PHO a few years prior, for help:

I went to call my sister and asked her if they will help me. I asked her, "Will they have a spot for me?" She told me more about them, provided their number, and put in a word for me with the director. I called them and they said as soon as you get released you can come. I came right here from jail after my sentence was done because I knew I couldn't do it alone.

Likewise, Chanelle emphasized how her friend became a crucial link to Phoenix, by not only providing information about the program and describing the qualifications to be accepted but by also giving her the contact information. She explained:

Apparently, the director of the program would go to the prison and give presentations about the program, what you had to do to qualify, and so on. So a friend I had in jail saw that, kept that information, and would pass it on to other women in jail who wanted another chance at life but were serious about it. After we became friends, she told me about the program and gave me the phone

number. I called them and told them I heard about it through a woman who met the director in jail, said I sincerely wanted to quit prostitution, and asked for an interview. Once my sentence was up I came right here.

The personal bridges did not have professional motivations to connect prostitutes to PHOs, but rather their intimate relationships and desire to help these women achieve their goals fueled their actions.

Only three women in this sample claimed to have no bridge person facilitating their entrance into a PHO. These women were rare in that they were extremely motivated to seek help from a PHO and, upon learning of their existence, took all the necessary steps to secure a spot in the program. For instance, after learning about Phoenix, Mary took the initiative to enter by persistently calling and checking back with staff members until she was accepted. She described this process:

And I called and they told me that they didn't have any beds available. And two months later, she was like, "We don't have any available now but call me back in a week." And I called her back and I got one. At that time I had been out of jail since August of last year and I waited all that time, hoping to go there. Why? I was ready to change my life.

Mary was unique in that she did not rely on any bridges to help her gain access to the program but put in the footwork herself.

An overwhelming majority of the prostitutes in this sample relied on bridges to secure their enrollment in a PHO. Research suggests that social networks are important to the exiting process overall (Ebaugh 1988), and among prostitutes who leave the trade (Månsson and Hedin 1999). However, these studies focus on the emotional or practical support third parties provide after the exit. I contend bridges perform the integral function of informing women of PHOs and helping to place them in these programs prior to their exits.

Prostitute Perceptions of PHOs

Exiting with the help of PHOs is certainly not the only pathway out of street prostitution. However, given the difficulties associated with the trade, many of the women in this study claimed they would not have been able to leave if it were not for resources and support of a PHO. Debbie stated she had thought about leaving prostitution before, but it never happened until she finally entered a program:

Yes, I couldn't do it alone. I tried before but it didn't work. I started to get back on drugs. Or I'd find myself in a predicament that I couldn't handle and I needed money. Or I would be staying someplace and they would tell me that I had to get out. Where was I going to go? And the only thing I knew was to go and get money from men [through sex] and once I started doing that I started using drugs too. The program offered me a different way out. I knew they helped you get an education, a job, and maintain sobriety.

Loretta also perceived that Phoenix could teach her how to live a life outside of prostitution: "So I knew it was just time to stop and I didn't know how and I felt

that this place was definitely going to show me how. They provided me with so many tools I didn't have or couldn't get on my own. They offered me an education so I could get a job and support myself."

Evette stated that when she was ready to leave she did not know how to accomplish that goal alone and turned to New Horizons for help:

I didn't know what I wanted at the time, but I did know that I didn't want anymore of what I had been getting. I knew something about the program from the street outreach and I knew they had a structured program set up that could really help me. The structure of the program was key to teaching me some sort of responsibility so I could take care of myself without relying on prostitution.

Similarly, Monique explained she was unsure how to exit prostitution because her life was such a mess. She realized that a PHO could facilitate this transition because she had seen its success through previous clients:

I thought about leaving a million times. I just didn't know how. When my life was a total mess I knew that for me to get some type of self-worth I had to come here. Because I saw what the program did for my sister and another lady I knew, and the changes they went through, I felt it had to be doing something right. I decided to commit to this program.

In short, many of these women perceived they could not surmount the barriers to exiting prostitution on their own. Therefore, they felt utilizing the services and resources of a PHO would help make their transition easier, provide skills and structure, and ultimately improve their chances of success.

CONCLUSION

Most Americans view prostitutes as criminals and deviants, which positions them in a low-status role and bestows unto them high levels of stigma for working in the trade. Indeed, such socio-legal circumstances likely exacerbate the difficulties of working in prostitution (Sanders 2007) vis-à-vis other contexts (Månsson and Hedin 1999). Prior studies also find those who occupy deviant roles experience unique circumstances (labeling, stigma, and other hardships), which makes exiting more challenging (Brown 1991; Sanders 2007). This article contributes to the research on role exiting and prostitution by illuminating the pertinent factors that shape initial exits out of street prostitution, a particularly deviant role.

Extant research examines how individuals leave prostitution and concludes it is difficult due to structural and economic conditions that act as barriers and keep them immersed within the trade (Jeffrey and MacDonald 2006; Miller 1986; Rosen and Venkatesh 2008). Following this line of reasoning, if their socioeconomic status circumstances changed, then they may be less inclined to continue to work as prostitutes. Conversely, other studies associate internal states (and changes) with exiting prostitution (Cusick and Hickman 2005; Dalla 2006; Månsson and Hedin 1999; Sanders 2007). Such explanations focus primarily on reasons (or motivations) for leaving and turning points of change that result in an exit from sex work (Dalla 2006; Sanders 2007).

Both of these lines of inquiry and their conclusions shed light on why women stay in prostitution and why they leave. Yet neither puts forth an analysis of exiting that considers a multitude of factors that encompass both internal and external circumstances. I find that while internal factors are important because they imply cognitive shifts and a willingness to leave, it is also the knowledge of available "helping" programs and third-party bridges that shape exits. My findings do not discount these previous theories, but they enrich them by emphasizing it is the combination of internal and external factors that lead prostitutes to exit via PHOs.

PHOs indeed provide one alternative to being "trapped" in prostitution as a result of macro-forces. For these prostitutes, their structural and economic circumstances did not change prior to leaving nor were their internal alterations enough to incite exits. Instead, it was the culmination of these four factors that pulled prostitutes out of the trade, coupled with the perception that PHOs could provide them tools (skills, structure, opportunities, and support) that would ultimately ease their transition. The role of organizations (PHOs), and what they represented, was crucial to this process of initial exits, as the women in this sample felt their affiliation with a PHO offered future possibilities and opportunities they otherwise would not have had. In other words, most women anticipated their future lifestyles (including socioeconomic status) would change due to their association with PHOs.

While this study examines the relevant factors associated with leaving prostitution via PHOs, I do not argue that upon enrollment these women have fully or indefinitely exited that role. In fact, I contend this transition is sure to involve a longer, more complex process of change that is shaped by these organizations and their staff members. Such an analysis, however, extends beyond the scope of this article.

Nonetheless, there is some empirical data that suggest an association with a PHO may increase the likelihood of long-term, "successful" role exiting. While I did not collect longitudinal data on these women, the PHOs conduct follow-up studies⁵ of program graduates, which conclude that on average between 65 and 90 percent of women remain out of prostitution a year after graduating. Moreover, research on other deviant populations attributes successful exiting to their utilization of "helping" organizations. For instance, studies on homeless individuals who have high levels of interaction with a program/shelter have increased odds of exiting and decreased substance use (Cohen, Onserud, and Monaco 1993; Thompson et al. 2004). While there are certainly differences between these two populations, both inhabit deviant roles and are generally disadvantaged and disenfranchised groups, often without the personal resources or networks to support exits. The findings in this study may hold implications for role exiting among other disenfranchised, marginalized, and deviant groups of people.

Because this study is solely based on street prostitution within U.S. cities, these conclusions have limitations and may not apply to sex workers in other contexts or countries that maintain a different socio-legal approach to prostitution. The integral factors to initial exits may also vary according to the pathways out of prostitution (e.g., exits without organizational aid). To assess the generalizability of this study, future research should compare the process of initial exits among different

types of sex workers (and between deviant populations) across varying contexts. The role of “helping” organizations should also be considered in such studies. Moreover, research needs to continue to analyze how the overall exiting process unfolds for prostitutes, and other types of sex workers, beyond the initial exit.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank Valerie Jenness, Kate Luther, Matthew Mahutga, Calvin Morrill, Jen’nan Read, David Snow, Ronald Weitzer, and the anonymous reviewers at *Sociological Perspectives* for their constructive and encouraging comments on various drafts of this article.

NOTES

1. Some researchers view the term “prostitute” as a pejorative label and consequently advocate for the use of “sex worker,” a term that emphasizes their labor (see Barton 2001; Leigh 1997). After some consideration, I decided to use both terms because I feel the type of sex work one does can result in vastly different experiences. So to solely use the umbrella term “sex worker” obfuscates the particular experiences of street prostitutes that appear to be unique from the experiences of other types of sex workers (e.g., escorts, strippers, phone sex workers, etc.). In using the term “prostitute” I do not intend to endorse the ideology that the prostitutes are only victims (or criminals) or to de-emphasize the labor involved in their jobs. Instead, I use it to provide clarity for the reader. I want to allow the women’s own stories to represent them and the circumstances that are salient in their lives.
2. I use this as an overarching term, labeling all organizations that specially provide services for women in prostitution “prostitution-helping organizations.”
3. It is likely there are more than thirty-three of these organizations within the United States, but due to their lack of visibility, it is often difficult to locate them.
4. I did not find tenure in the trade, and the associated “toll” (Barton 2006), to impact initial exits from prostitution. The only time I found it relevant was when it provoked and was tied to particular reasons for leaving, as in the case of exhaustion and perceptions of being too old.
5. The follow-up studies consisted of a combination of methods, including visits with the individual, phone calls, word of mouth, and searching criminal record databases for rearrests on prostitution charges.

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