

Challenging Stigma: Identity Talk among Male Sex Workers in a Recovery Program

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Sharon S. Oselin¹

Abstract

Research shows that stigma can generate severe and prolonged negative consequences for particular groups. Affected populations often attempt to mitigate stigma and its effects by implementing various management tactics, such as concealment and resistance. Due to its illegality and the taboo surrounding it, people involved in street-based prostitution are especially susceptible to stigmatization. This article extends knowledge on how male sex workers cope with stigma by examining their use of identity talk—the ways in which they craft and avow personal identities that resuscitate self-worth and dignity. Identity talk unfolds within a service-provision organization, A Lift Up, and men's relationship to this program and their views on prostitution influence their narratives. The findings highlight how identity talk shapes and is also influenced by behavior. The data consist of 21 in-depth interviews (male sex workers and staff members) and participant observations within this setting.

Keywords

sex and gender, crime, law, deviance, sexualities

Introduction

There are a number of studies that conclude sex workers experience substantial stigma and discrimination (Abel and Fitzgerald 2010), even when compared with other types of low-status occupations (Benoit, McCarthy, and Jansson 2015). Drawing on Erving Goffman's (1963) widely used conceptualization, stigma is when individuals are disqualified from full social acceptance if perceived to possess certain attributes or characteristics. Implicit in this definition is that stigma is relational and contextually based. Of all types of sex work, street prostitution receives the bulk of public scrutiny due to its visibility, resulting in social displacement for those who participate in the trade.

Stigma can impact a broad array of social actors, who in turn respond to it in a myriad of ways. For example, individuals may attempt to pass by hiding the stigmatized trait or characteristic, internalize negative labels into their identity, or reject the assignment outright (Goffman 1963; Reeve 2013; Reissman 2000). Sex workers affiliate with one of the most highly stigmatized occupations and, therefore, turn to coping strategies to bear this burden. Studies uncover that men involved in street prostitution recognize their participation elicits unwanted stigma as it defies

¹University of California, Riverside, Riverside, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Sharon Oselin, University of California, Riverside, 1215 Watkins Hall, Riverside, CA 92521, USA.
Email: soselin@ucr.edu

pervasive normative masculine activities (Bimbi 2007). They report discriminatory treatment as a result of their participation (Scott et al. 2005), and respond by implementing common methods of stigma management: concealment, denial, or outright resistance (Abel and Fitzgerald 2010; Koken 2012; Morrison and Whitehead 2005; Sanders 2005; Weitzer 2017). This article examines their use of a specific coping tactic that has received little empirical examination to date: *identity talk*. According to David Snow and Leon Anderson (1993), identity talk is a strategy that low-status groups use to present a favorable personal identity to those around them as a way to contend with stigma. Avowals of self, however, do not unfold in a social void.

It is well established that those embedded in the street-based sex market are an especially disadvantaged population, even when compared with individuals who occupy other sectors within the sex industry (Vanwesenbeeck 2013). This placement amplifies their need for and reliance upon outside sources for aid. Readily available sources of support typically include service agencies and nonprofit programs that provide resources and material provisions. Rather than detail how sex workers actively resist prejudice and discrimination (see Weitzer 2017 for a review), this article explores male sex workers' use of identity talk within the confines of one service-provision organization, which I call *A Lift Up* (ALU). I find men who visit this program demonstrate three different forms of identity talk, each signaling distinct presentations of self. Such claims hinge primarily on men's assessment of the program, what they obtain from it, and their appraisal of prostitution. Their use of talk is not simply a technique to lessen stigma; it also coincides with their continued involvement in or disengagement from illegal activities. I draw on interviews and ethnographic observations with 18 male sex workers and three staff members affiliated with ALU, a Chicago-based program that serves this population.

The Sex Industry, Stigma, and Identity Work

Street-based sex work has long been a part of the shadow economy, a thriving industry despite significant state- and community-led efforts to eradicate it. Established empirical research confirms it is financial need coupled with limited options that most commonly prompts engagement in prostitution (Vanwesenbeeck 2013). As a result, Eva Rosen and Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh (2008) argue such circumstances make it a rational decision for those who experience disadvantage.

Women comprise a majority of sex workers whereas men constitute a much smaller proportion, a phenomenon mirrored in the abundance of research focused on the former group. Often considered a "feminine" job (Kong 2009), men involved in the trade have long been overlooked and understudied (Dennis 2008). Gender and occupational "misalignment" can yield various outcomes for males in female-dominated industries. For example, men models earn lower pay compared with women models (Mears 2011), while in other industries, such as nursing, men experience a "glass escalator" effect and rise quickly up the ranks (Williams 1995).

A fairly uniform experience across outdoor sex workers is their heightened risk of stigmatization, which is comprised of labeling, stereotyping, separation from conventional society, status loss, and discrimination (Link and Phelan 2001). With a primarily male clientele, David S. Bimbi (2007) asserts that male sex workers are doubly stigmatized due to immersion in a feminine trade *and* their violation of heteronormative conduct. However, other scholars point out their experiences with stigma vary according to context. A few studies reveal gay and bisexual male sex workers experience increased validation, lower stigma, and are more likely to be viewed as an object of fantasy if they are embedded within gay communities (Groves and Smith 2014; Koken, Bimbi, and Parsons 2010). For those who operate outside of predominantly gay spaces, stigmatization is more likely to occur.

Affected populations respond to stigma and status loss in different ways but like most marginalized men they typically harbor the desire to "create, maintain, and claim membership" in the dominant group to the best of their ability (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). People cope with

“spoiled identities” through passing, selective disclosure, and even resistance (Goffman 1963; Reeve 2013; Reissman 2000). As it applies specifically to sex workers, research illustrates that many try to conceal their involvement in the trade, deny it when confronted, and lead double lives (Abel and Fitzgerald 2010; Koken 2012; Morrison and Whitehead 2005; Sanders 2005). Despite such efforts, sex workers may still internalize the negative label assigned to them by external actors, thereby affecting their self-image (Goffman 1963). Moreover, male sex workers can compensate for their involvement in a low-status stigmatized occupation by emphasizing their possession of other socially desirable traits, such as physically built bodies or entrepreneurial skills (Kong 2009; Padilla 2007). Street-based sex workers are hard-pressed to successfully execute many common stigma management tactics because their performance requires solicitation and visibility in public venues.

Given that roles and identities are intertwined (Stryker 1980), it follows that participation in the sex trade is likely to affect one’s identity (Dewey and St. Germain 2016; Oselin 2014). I examine an overlooked tactic—identity work—through which male sex workers cope with occupational-related stigma. David Snow and Leon Anderson (1987, 1993) conceptualize this term as how stigmatized individuals attempt to craft and avow a favorable personal identity during interactions that afford them a measure of self-worth and dignity.¹ In this article, I focus on one specific component of such work: *identity talk*. Male sex workers who affiliate with ALU employ talk that includes varying configurations of role, associational, institutional distancing, and/or adoption.

Identity talk occurs within the confines of ALU, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to serve men involved in the sex trade, with the hope to cultivate their exits. This population often depends on the amenities of the program to meet or supplement their basic needs, such as food, clothing, showers, laundry facilities, and Internet access. However, as I show, some men glean much more from ALU beyond provisions, which affects their expression of personal identity. I investigate how male sex workers’ identity talk conforms to or diverges from this recovery organization.

Recovery Organizations: Catalysts for Change or Sites to Resist?

Research on organizations and institutions examines the ways in which they promote particular ideologies, attempt to regulate their members, and cultivate identity changes (Kunda 2006; Schmid and Jones 1991). These contexts can range from total institutions, such as asylums or prisons, to self-help, therapeutic programs. Usually closer to the latter, recovery programs are environments catered toward individuals affiliated with “deviant” or illicit activities, spaces that aim to nurture lifestyle and identity transformations (Archibald 2007). Existing studies focus on an array of populations situated in “recovery” organizations—such as gang members (Flores 2014), homeless youth (Armaline 2005), formerly incarcerated female addicts (Leverentz 2014), and sex workers (Leon and Shdaimah 2012; Oselin 2014)—to illuminate the interpersonal as well as the individual-organizational dynamics that unfold within these confines.

Recovery, as it is conceptualized within the literature, typically consists of spiritual development, pro-social behavior, self-regulation, and personal accountability for one’s own well-being (Rose 2000). This notion is now widely infused into mainstream American culture and even applied to sex work (Dewey 2014). Economically and socially disenfranchised individuals have limited opportunities for acquiring resources; therefore, they are frequently in a position where they rely on recovery, treatment, and self-help organizations to ensure their daily subsistence.

Many scholars negatively critique recovery organizations for their heavy-handed exertion of social controls unto individuals dependent on their services (Garey 2002). This body of work exposes a common pattern whereby clients must conform to program expectations in exchange for continued access and services (Shih 2016). Yet, the extent of the forms and pervasiveness of

social controls varies by the structure and ideology of the program. In her study, Sharon Oselin (2014) reveals that residential programs for female sex workers closely align with total institutions, and social controls are rampant, directing many aspects of their talk and behavior. Conversely, those structured as self-help treatment programs are far less restrictive due to fewer or ineffective social control mechanisms. Similarly, in an analysis of formerly trafficked women, Jennifer Lynne Musto (2008) finds antitrafficking organizations curb women's agency regarding activism in the antitrafficking movement.

In contrast, some of this research emphasizes that members within organizations and institutions regularly exert autonomy (Roscigno and Hodson 2004). At certain venues, individuals use narratives as an agentic tool of meaning-making to help clarify boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors, a way for them to transcend organizational constraints (Chen 2012). Clients within treatment programs can renounce negative roles and imputed identities, some of which are reinforced by the organization (Flores 2014; McCorkel 1998). Erving Goffman (1961:189) refers to this practice as "secondary adjustments," or how the individual stands apart from the role and self that are imposed by the institution.

While the above studies provide helpful insight into the dynamics between organizations and individuals, they do not illuminate how marginalized populations employ identity talk as a technique to offset stigma while immersed within these spaces. Indeed, we know little about whether and how disadvantaged sex workers utilize this practice. Corey Shdaimah and Chrysanthi Leon (2016) begin to assess this strategy when they uncover how women in prostitution assert their identity as moral and rational actors, drawing support from their relationships with other sex workers to produce a counter-narrative that assuages role-related stigmatization.

This article analyzes identity talk among men engaged in the street-based sex trade—their explicit efforts to craft and espouse a favorable personal identity within the confines of a recovery program. The primary benefits they receive from ALU, whether socioemotional or material, coincide with their identity talk as well. I find clients who visit ALU to fulfill socioemotional needs are more amenable to the program ideology and proscriptions, speaking of their personal identity as tightly coupled with recovery. In comparison, men who only attend the program for basic amenities tend to castigate ALU and avow a personal identity disconnected from the organization. As I will show, identity talk is an important consideration not only because it provides insights into constructions of self but also because it holds implications for continued involvement in illicit activities.

Data and Method

The data for this paper consist of conversational and in-depth interviews with outdoor male sex workers who regularly visited ALU, a recovery program in Chicago, during the summer of 2012. They are supplemented by ethnographic observations collected during the short time I was immersed in this field site. I gained access to this population through the nonprofit organization, which provides resources exclusively to men engaged in street prostitution. ALU has existed for more than 20 years and offers a variety of services to clients, including street outreach and a drop-in day center. The program is situated in a lower economic, crime-ridden neighborhood known for its abundance of social service programs.

In addition to their regular street outreach, ALU operates a drop-in center where men can receive amenities six days per week between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. During these times, clients can utilize an abundance of services: hot lunch, showers, laundry facilities, access to phones, computers, and the Internet, fellowship with staff members and other clients, connections with external social services, guidance and counseling, and educational presentations (e.g., safe sex practices and HIV awareness). Men visit the program entirely voluntarily; there are no required or mandated visits due to court orders or probationary terms.

ALU is a Christian program whose mission is to serve this population, help them rebuild their lives, and generate spiritual growth. The program is nondenominational in approach, comprised of staff who affiliate with a wide range of churches (or none), including Catholic, Protestant, Baptist, Lutheran, and others. Despite attempts to probe, I was unable to uncover any organizational stance (or individual staff member position) on homosexuality and never witnessed open discussions about it between staff members. Although their religious foundation clearly influences the program ideology and mission, I repeatedly observed staff members make explicit effort to treat the men with kindness and respect regardless of their personal spiritual beliefs and ongoing involvement in sex work. A core program tenet is for staff members to build personal, affective relationships with men rooted in trust, or as one staff member put it, "meeting men where they are at." There is a small group of staff who interacted daily with clients that included four interns, the program outreach coordinator, the center director, and the assistant director. Other staff members, such as the program executive director and administrators, sporadically visited but spend far less time with the men.

There are minimal formal control mechanisms at ALU, reflected in sparse program rules and consequences. The primary rules prohibit physical violence, verbal threats to others, drug use, or sex on the premises. Clients who violate these rules receive a verbal warning from staff and may be barred access to the center for a specified period of time. According to staff members, and confirmed by my observations, sanctioning clients was atypical because most men adhere to these guidelines. During my month-long field immersion at ALU, only one man received a punishment for his repeated verbal threats made to other clients; as a result, he was unable to visit the center for a two-week probationary period. Further evidence of the program's mission to be a "welcoming place" is their acceptance of clients who continually utilize program amenities but indicate few, if any, signs of exiting illicit lifestyles. Participants possess an average of 10 years visiting ALU but many remain engaged in activities that belie the program ideology and mission.

I attempted to build rapport with clients within this setting by acting as a volunteer within the site for one month. I visited the center five days per week, approximately six hours per day, to maximize my interactions and conversations with clients and staff members. I was a known researcher and often carried out duties of a program intern: helped prepare meals, washed dishes, had conversations with clients and staff members, organized the pantry, observed group sessions, conducted interviews, and attended staff meetings.

My data include semistructured interviews with 18 male street-based sex workers who frequently visited ALU, three staff members, and conversational interviews with anyone in the center.² During informal interactions, I asked clients to participate in this research study. All participants did so voluntarily and each received a \$20 gift card upon completion of the interview to compensate him for his time. The digitally recorded interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. Questions focused on demographic details, entrance into sex work, experiences in the trade, benefits and detriments of the work, masculine identity, perceptions of ALU, its staff and other clients, and desistance. The interviews transpired in a large private back room, filled with couches and chairs, and used for group educational classes. The three interviews with staff members consisted of Rob (the program outreach coordinator), Shireen (assistant center director), and Keith (center director), whom I selected because they were in positions that required daily and prolonged interactions with clients. During these interviews, I inquired about the program mission, goals, and history, daily operations, services, staff-client interactions, program rules and discipline, assessments of clients, descriptions of client experiences, and their personal histories.

This sample is comprised exclusively of nonwhite cisgender men who engaged in street-level sex work, many of whom were homeless and desperately in need of resources. A vast majority of the clients reported a drug addiction. Table 1 reflects demographic characteristics of the participants, including age, race/ethnicity, sexual identity, self-described drug addiction, time in sex

Table 1. Male Sex Workers' Demographics, Characteristics, and Identities.

| Identity | Name | Age | Race/ethnicity | Sexual identity | Drug addiction | Involvement (years) | Desistance sex work |
|--------------|---------|-----|------------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Recovery | Ben | 47 | African American | Gay | Y | 20 | Y |
| | Miguel | 42 | Hispanic | Gay | Y | 5 | Y |
| | Daryl | 47 | African American | Gay | Y | 25 | Y |
| | Omar | 43 | African American | Bisexual | Y | 19 | Y |
| | Terrell | 42 | African American | Bisexual | Y | 20 | Y |
| | Juan | 35 | Hispanic | Bisexual | Y | 8 | Y |
| | Calvin | 48 | African American | Bisexual | Y | 22 | N |
| | DeShawn | 37 | African American | Gay | Y | 4 | Y |
| | Jamal | 40 | African American | Bisexual | Y | 15 | Y |
| Street | Curtis | 34 | African American | Straight | N | 8 | Y |
| | Martin | 46 | African American | Straight | Y | 10 | Y |
| | Scott | 49 | African American | Straight | Y | 35 | N |
| | Jordan | 25 | African American | Straight | N | 4 | Y |
| Professional | Steve | 43 | African American | Bisexual | N | 20 | N |
| | Rich | 47 | African American | Gay | N | 20 | N |
| | David | 45 | African American | Gay | Y | 20 | N |
| | Abdul | 40 | African American | Gay | Y | 6 | N |
| | Bobbie | 51 | African American | Bisexual | Y | 10 | N |

work, and desistance from the trade. While this latter concept generates significant debate within academic circles, in this article, I rely on men's own admission of desistance rather than assign this status.

In terms of age, participants ranged from 25 to 51, with a mean age of 42 years old. A majority of the men were African American ($N = 16$) with only two Latinos, a pattern that reflects the racial and ethnic composition of most center clients. Participants, who primarily served male customers, reported their sexual identity as follows: seven gay, seven bisexual, and four straight. All the men cited financial benefits as the primary reason for engagement in sex work, yet some discussed secondary motivations, including curiosity, enjoyment of sex, or drug addiction. The average time in the trade was approximately 15 years, although many took at least one short break during their tenure. I assigned all study participants a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

After uploading interview transcripts into Dedoose qualitative software, I relied on grounded theory to inductively devise codes and identify themes within the data (Strauss and Corbin 1990). At the onset of this project, I used the sensitizing concepts—or the background ideas that inform the overall research problem (Charmaz 2003)—to guide my focus, which consisted of individual assessments of sex work, benefits and detriments of the trade, and current status of involvement. Although I did not entirely disregard these initial concepts, I allowed the codes to emerge from the data so as not to be constrained by my initial orientations (Padgett 2004). I applied broad codes through subsequent refinement, generated more specific codes pertinent to this analysis, and ultimately drew connections between categories (Strauss and Corbin 1990). This process generated specific themes regarding identity talk, its alignment or distance from ALU, and other forms of illicit practices.

Identity Talk: A Tactic to Lessen Stigma

I analyze men's identity talk as it hinges largely on their participation in the street-based sex trade and their corresponding personal identity construction. While certain men reject an identity connected to prostitution by formulating alternative selves, others accept it and refashion it as

empowering. Specifically, men who visit ALU construct three different personal identities, stemming from their views regarding sex work and contingent upon their perceptions of program benefits: men in recovery, men of the streets, and professional sex workers.

Organizational Alignment: An Identity Tied to Recovery

As a recovery program, ALU encourages an identity change for clients, one divested from sex work and replete with newfound talk and behaviors. Far from being a total institution, this drop-in center is open to any man involved in the street sex trade. Despite some formal rules within this setting that prohibit physical violence, verbal threats, drug use, or sex on the premises, most social controls usually unfold in an informal nonpunitive manner. Shireen, assistant center director, explains her approach to the men, and how she tries to cultivate a change in a hands-off style:

I'm always talking to them about validity, about how much the Lord loves them. I'm still encouraging them to undergo that goal of transformation, but when it gets to be too long [and they don't change] it's like, "Is this something that you really want?" If not, then I feel like I need to pull back. If you wanna live your life this way, that's fine. So then I start walking with them in living the life that they are living. If all you wanna do is come shower, eat, do your laundry and go back out there, then that's what we're gonna do. I kind of let them see that this is the life that you're choosing.

Likewise, Keith, the center director, frames men's involvement in the sex industry as deleterious to their identity:

[we try to help them see] how certain behaviors are unhealthy, like prostitution or violence. At first they may think they can separate what they do from who they are . . . but when they really start seeing the toll that it's taking we hope they try to make changes and do things differently.

When asked how the staff achieve this in the absence of extensive rules and regulations, he responds,

I think being relational with the men, being able to meet them we're they're at . . . It blows a lot of the men's minds that we're here just for them—we're with our guys even in death, at the hospital, by their bedside, as they're in and out of prison. By letting them know we love you unconditionally.

These staff place emphasis on establishing relational and emotional connections with the clients, a practice that just so happens to satisfy a void in certain sex workers' lives.

Men who align their identity talk in accordance with ALU's recovery ideology all list socio-emotional support, rather than material supplies, as the primary benefit they receive from the program. When prioritized, this perk acts as an informal mechanism that facilitates a particular type of identity talk, one grounded in recovery. An expressed lack of emotional and social sustenance is not altogether surprising given prostitution is a highly stigmatized and stigmatizing activity. As a result, fractured or strained relationships with traditional supportive networks, such as family members, are all too common (Dewey and St. Germain 2016). For men like Jamal, receiving this from staff is a major boon,

We're so distanced from our family. So ALU, they aren't just a place for resources, I was more attracted to the love than anything else. Even to this day, I just feel good to be loved on by them so I keep coming.

Omar, too, articulates his unmet emotional needs, which are satiated by staff and other men at the center:

The staff they take time and talk to you. I think a lot of times I prostituted not only for the cash but for the companionship. So, coming to the program I got the fellowship with the other guys and with the staff. That was something that they satisfied so I could get off the streets and quit.

And Juan stresses the biggest benefit of the program is the nurturing:

More than anything, I feel like they love you, that is the main thing. I think love is the key about everything. They love me and I love them so much. Feel you have somebody that's got your back and tell you at least everything's going to be okay.

These holes are fulfilled by staff at ALU and even fellow clients, an exchange some men appreciated above all other amenities.³ Shelly Wiechelt and Corey Shdaimah (2015) likewise find that female sex workers who receive empathy, compassion, and nonjudgmental treatment from staff at a service-provision program were more likely to view it in a favorable light.

The program discourse is to “provide unconditional love” and its implementation by staff dovetails with men’s expressed socioemotional needs. Indeed, their satisfaction and positive evaluation of ALU wove its way into their identity talk. Such narratives of recovery encompass an endorsement of ALU principles, a separation from prostitution, and selective associational distancing from other sex workers for half of the men in this sample.

Staff express commitment to the idea of recovery for the clients who visit the site, which translates to quitting sex work, being sober, developing spiritually, and helping other sex workers follow suit. The corresponding narratives of men in recovery imply compliance to these tenets. First and foremost, identity talk included strong verbal condemnation of sex work and a separation from that role. By disparaging sex work and drug use, often perceived as interconnected, men engage in redemption scripts (Maruna 2001), which contrast their lifestyle in sex work to that of recovery. Miguel reflected upon his five-year involvement in prostitution as it negatively impacted his sense of self:

I’m an addict. So in my addiction I was putting myself at risk by prostitution, giving up my morality and what I’m worth in order to just get more drugs. I would never, ever do that when I’m sober. It’s a disgusting, pathetic life on the streets.

Referring to himself as one in recovery, Daryl describes the two lifestyles as incompatible: “I got sober. I couldn’t bring that life of prostitution, drugs into this one. I tried a couple of times and it just didn’t work. So I left that one behind.” Jamal similarly underscores how faith and sobriety, key features of recovery, are essential to his separation from the sex trade: “The big things that helped me change were getting sober and rededicating my life to Christ. And this is new, coming out of prostitution and trying to live right as a man.”

Men who profess an identity connected to recovery expose parameters regarding how they selectively associate with individuals in prostitution. Accordingly, they minimize their interactions with active sex workers within the center but participate in stroll “outreach” to connect to others outside these confines. Through this talk, they fashion themselves role models and cultivators of change for those who remain in the industry. Ben, who transitioned out of sex work while a client in ALU, is a 47-year-old African American man who exemplifies this throughout his narratives. While at the center, he expresses frustration with others who frequently attend but do not embrace recovery: “I see some guys in here they seem like they don’t want to change. I just got disgusted with myself so I did. I just let them be while I’m here.”

Yet, I soon learned he channels this irritation into action. One day, shortly after my arrival at the center, I came out of the kitchen and noticed Ben slouched on an old misshapen, blue-flow-ered couch pushed against the wall in the living room. I sensed his low energy level and drawn appearance, but greeted him and asked how things were going. He admitted he was tired because

he had been out overnight doing outreach work with ALU staff. Ben recounts how he uses himself as a reference point to motivate active sex workers to follow suit:

We went out last night to this park where I used to hustle, I see guys doing it and I tell them I understand. You can get help . . . change your life like me and all I've done. I tell them about that.

With a contained smile and a note of pride in this voice, he concludes, "A lot of them come to ALU from my intervention."

Likewise, Terrell desires to share this message with men active in prostitution: "I want to be a testimony for other guys, let them know that what they're going through they don't have to go through. There are other ways, like recovery." Daryl affirms his identity, which he connected to a specific form of masculinity, through service and mentoring:

Those of us in recovery are the bridge, where others can see that we used to be one of them and now our lives are changing. In recovery you want better for yourself, and those things of the streets, like prostitution, won't be acceptable anymore. It's a hard journey to feel like you are a human being, a man. Now I'm a teacher where I can connect with others and minister to a guy who hasn't made that decision yet, to help him.

These outings provide opportunities for men to disseminate information about the program and its amenities, but perhaps more importantly, enable them to espouse identity talk that underscores a new personal self. Staff validation and praise offer additional incentive for men to act as volunteers, role models, and teachers, which further buttresses their identity talk. Rob, ALU's outreach coordinator, communicates this to the men who accompany him:

When clients take ownership over their lives then we have huge success. It's like watching a certain guy change over the past few months, where he's volunteering, cooking and encouraging other men. He's helping other guys in the program on his own accord.

Keith concurs, and said he reminds men that, "[it's a sign of change] when they continue to hang out with the guys, when they try to pull guys out of the lifestyle or lead by that example."

The remaining men in this sample do not avow an identity tied to recovery. Instead, their talk spurns recovery principles and professes other conceptualizations of self. Four reference an identity heavily informed by the code of the streets, while five proclaim they viewed themselves as professional sex workers. Beliefs about prostitution and views of ALU (as a vehicle of recovery) played prominently in these manifestations.

Rejecting Recovery: Crafting and Claiming Alternative Identities

In stark contrast to those in recovery, the remaining men visit ALU to attain basic material supplies and denote this as the only reason they continue to return.⁴ A common theme is for these individuals to cite staples as benefits, while they demean socioemotional support from staff. For instance, David summarizes the material benefits of the program while calling into question its efficacy:

I'm pretty stable inside and out. I don't need much from them except . . . [at times] something to eat, to make some phone calls. Nine times outta' ten, when the person walk out that door, they going out of it the same way they came in it.

Martin, a 46 year old with a 10-year history in prostitution, considers ALU and the corresponding recovery approach feeble. He acknowledges the emotional care staff give but quickly dismisses

it as unimportant for real life changes: “What they offer, it’s like a bandage effect . . . they offer you many intangible things, like care, but that only lasts until you get out the front gate.” And Steve expresses frustration with staff members because he believes they cultivate dependence among clients, which he finds unhelpful and detestable:

They try to help. I don’t let them besides things like having an address for mail. Guys go to them to get something and they love being like that Momma figure. I don’t appreciate that, it doesn’t work with me.

Curtis reiterates this sentiment, framing the efforts of those in recovery as dismissive and misguided: “I’m not fully accepted here because I do things different from the other guys. You have people here at ALU that’s plain idiots, staff members who aren’t educated about what’s going on out there in prostitution, on the streets . . .” And Jordan echoes his assessment: “[t]here are times when clients have not been accepted here. So that made me feel disrespected because I’m a person that just likes to accept people, no matter what they are like or doing.” Perceptions of differential treatment of men who do not pay lip service to recovery only exacerbates their defiance.

Rather than follow the route of recovery, other strategies for deflecting stigma include narratives that evince personal identities aligned with the “street code” or sex work as a profession. Excluding provisions, criticisms of ALU and recovery are a common theme infused throughout their identity talk, a way to indicate distance from this organization whose mission is to “help men in prostitution.” Although used to assert alternative identities, this talk simultaneously resists the program akin to secondary adjustments (Goffman 1961).

Assertions of self informed by the street code. A handful of men at ALU engage in identity talk congruent with the “code of the streets,” which teaches dominance over others to demonstrate superiority and attain status, upholds heterosexuality, and is linked to violence (Anderson 1999; Reich 2010). Participation in sex work, however, has potential to undermine their proclaimed identity because of the stigma attached to selling sex to other men. Like the men who avow recovery, these individuals clearly view sex work as immoral but make more vehement declarations regarding their own heterosexuality. Frequently, such narratives incorporate sexual conquests and objectification of women, highly prioritized attributes among men embedded in illicit street markets (Contreras 2013; Mullins 2006). By doing so, they attempt to protect their personal identity assertions despite an association with sex work.

During a casual conversation after lunch one day, Scott, 49 years old, makes reference to a past girlfriend, which he then followed up with a declaration of his sexuality as a straight man: “I’ve always desired beautiful women. I’m not gay. I just do gay things.” Perhaps because I did not provide enough affirmation regarding his comment, a few days later, when I conducted an interview with him, he revisits the topic by graphically describing his state of arousal as it varies between sexual interactions with men and women:

I associated with men in the sexual arena [in prostitution], but I rarely had a hard on. That’s not my interest. I have been with many women, too, and as soon as she begins to unbutton her blouse I’m busting out of my pants.

Jordan similarly asserted his heterosexuality, his desire for women, and sexual disinterest in men: “I look at myself as a straight man. I don’t look at another man as someone sexually. Even though money is a motivation, it was very hard for me to perform.” Curtis, 34 years old, not only articulates regret about past sex acts with men, he pointedly bashes male sex workers (or any men) who derive pleasure from same sex encounters:

I think it’s repulsive, so I try not to have sex with men. I never in my life enjoyed male prostitution, never have, never will. To be a man and to know that you have to lay with another man to perform—if somebody say that don’t affect them, they’re lying.

Moreover, these men also maintain dominance over male customers by establishing strict parameters around the types of sexual behaviors they are willing to engage in with them. While they often try to eschew sex exchanges altogether, when unsuccessful, they adopted discourse commonly espoused by incarcerated heterosexual men to sustain a particular identity. Claiming to only fulfill the sexual “top” position is prominent in their identity talk; an individual who maintains a position of power compared with those who become “punks” or feminine (Donaldson 2001). In his identity talk, Martin makes a clear distinction between the “strong” and “weak”:

There were certain things I just didn't do, such as anal or oral sex. I was the top . . . So I was at an advantage. I think men who offer those things really is subjected to a lot of abuse because they [are] more like the weaker one.

Curtis, too, indicates this stance in the following remark: “If I do have sex, clients just performing on me. I'm not gonna touch you, dude.” Throughout the above proclamations, this group of men verbally exhibits a separation from the role of sex worker. To that end, they demarcate themselves from other men in the sex trade who enjoy it and/or are gay or bisexual, expressing their scorn for those who do not share their antipathy.

In accordance with the code of the streets, it is especially critical to dole out violence when one is aggressively confronted (Anderson 1999; Dance 2002). A willingness to do so became a common theme in the identity talk of certain men, where their physical prowess is integral to their personal identity. For example, Curtis views other sex workers' interference with his earnings as a personal affront, to which he must respond with swift retaliation:

If anyone come up to me to take a client, I tell them to get the fuck on about your business. I'll check you. Because if you try and take this person away from me, you're trying to take food out of my mouth, which is very disrespectful to me and who I am.

In another illustration of a man whose identity is bolstered through physical alacrity, Scott discusses customer attempts to cheat him as a sign of personal disrespect. He feels compelled to defend his honor through violent assault:

I dispense violence with clients who tell me we have a verbal agreement [for a price] and then alter it. I'm ready to beat your ass now because you lied to me. You're already using me, and now you want to kick me in the nuts.

Men who express an identity informed by the streets employ talk that signals a separation from prostitution, noting their distaste for sex work and for those involved in the trade. Weaved throughout these tales are the boundaries they enact during sexual exchanges, and their preference for physical solutions to address interpersonal disagreements. Finally, these men espouse no narratives of recovery or appreciation for ALU: It is clear they use the program solely for resources. They lambaste men who profess recovery, those who receive and appreciate the emotional and social offerings of the program. In contrast, they claim no need for such nurturance, which coincides with the street code of emotional and physical toughness.

Adopting a professional sex worker identity. This final cluster of men at ALU engage in identity talk that departs from the two other iterations. While they want no part of recovery and perceive ALU as a place to solely gather provisions (like those who avow a street-based identity), their talk confirms an ongoing acceptance of the role attached to sex work. They do not denounce sex work as harmful, immoral, or feminine but instead frame it as an empowering profession, a perspective infrequently found among street-level sex workers (Minichiello et al. 2000). Their sexual orientation features prominently in their verbal assertions, emphasizing their ability to earn income

while simultaneously fulfilling a desirable lifestyle. Similarly, Graham Ellison and Ronald Weitzer (2017) unearth that gay and bisexual male sex workers describe the advantage of blurred boundaries between commercial and casual sex.

In general, men who consider sex work an occupation report higher positive perceptions regarding their involvement (Bimbi and Koken 2014). Research suggests there is added incentive for male sex workers immersed within the gay community because they are likely to experience greater tolerance and acceptance from community members due to less stringent norms regarding sexual conduct (Groves and Smith 2014; Koken et al. 2010). Male sex workers articulate their participation in the sex trade as a viable occupational choice, one that validates and affirms their sexual desire for other men. It affords them frequent opportunities to interact with an abundance of gay and bisexual men, both fellow sex workers and customers. Thus, they embrace, rather than imply separation from, the role and associations connected to prostitution.

When asked how he felt about engaging in the street-based sex trade, Rich smiles and exclaims, “I love sex. I get pleasure out of it. That is the benefit—if you can get paid for it, hey, even better.” At 51, Bobbie appreciates the profits from sex work and finds them especially rewarding because he is able to remain embedded within an exciting social scene:

I like the money and [sometimes] people would pay big money to commit sexual acts on me, or for me to introduce them to somebody that they could commit acts on. I like that atmosphere and it is basically free money for doing what I like.

Consider David, with a 20-year history in prostitution, who clarifies that sex work coincides with an elaborate party scene, which he finds especially alluring: “I get to explore my life as being gay and many avenues of that within prostitution. It could be drugs, find a relationship, find someone who just wants to socialize and entertain with you. It’s an exploration all around.” All of these men stress how they find the work pleasurable, but their statements also underscore that the sex industry provides more than cash and physical satisfaction. Indeed, it helps them satiate other socioemotional needs when they develop friendships and romantic liaisons or simply meet new people.

Repeatedly, these men cite friendships with gay or bisexual clients as a positive outcome, an affirmation of a personal identity intertwined with sex work. For example, Steve, a bisexual man, attributes his involvement in prostitution as responsible for opening doors to new relationships with a range of men he otherwise may not have encountered. He derives pleasure from the fact that he could openly express his attraction to men and even interact with interesting, well-established professionals. After a brief move to Las Vegas, Steve had a greater appreciation for the Chicago gay scene and was happy to return to it. He perceived involvement in sex work as conducive with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) culture:

Sex work is a lifestyle where you feel free. You meet people easily and being able to meet different types of people was great—rich people, poor people, doctors, lawyers, preachers. I like loud gay scenes, like Chicago. Vegas was just a different gay scene, where you didn’t even know it was there.

Abdul, a 40-year-old gay man, echoed his sentiments: “One of the best things is you get to meet some good people in the scene. Yeah, and that’s a high for me to get all this attention. I can relate to every male prostitute out there.”

These individuals argue sex work provides opportunities to form more intimate and long-standing romantic relationships with male customers as well. It, at times, serves as a gateway to love and an abatement of loneliness when they made emotional connections. David states his involvement in prostitution was partly sustained by this mission, as he is always “lookin’ for love.” Bobbie basks in the attention he receives from other men, some of whom develop strong

feelings for him and want to establish more than a customer-worker dynamic. He feels being a sex worker elevates his cultural capital, makes him more desirable, and helps fulfill his personal needs:

I'm getting all this attention from men. Now I've got this façade [as a sex worker]—this illusion that people are drawn to. I've got clients who wanna be my boyfriend, who say, "I love you." It is a very intoxicating lifestyle.

When he is in a committed relationship, Abdul relies on sex work only to pay the bills. In between boyfriends, however, encounters with clients meet his physical and emotional needs. During periods when he is single and lonely, he especially values the socioemotional benefits. Sexual acts and bodily contact make Abdul feel better and at least temporarily satiate his desires:

I ultimately want the [committed] relationship. I'm out here hustling while in relationships to bring money in but that's just financial then . . . But now I'm single and it's been real rough. I don't have nobody—it gets lonely and sometimes I feel like I need to lay underneath somebody. So I go out there and get that with clients. I'm not gonna lie, I love it and to this day I do it.

Prostitution, as noted in their identity talk, presents an outlet to receive affirmation of their sexual identity *and* a strategy through which to meet their financial, social, emotional, and sexual needs. Due to this perspective, these men express no longing for recovery or reliance on ALU for anything beyond supplemental material provisions; they get their socioemotional desires satisfied via interactions with others affiliated with the sex trade. They are the only subset of men who embrace the role of sex worker and deliberately cultivate regular associations with individuals in this scene.

Discussion and Conclusion

Male sex workers who affiliate with ALU engage in one of three forms of identity talk to indicate specific constructions of self to people around them. Such efforts to assuage stigma end up differentiating men from one another, despite shared experience in prostitution and reliance upon the program. In this sample, identity talk largely hinges on an expressed separation from or acceptance of the role attached to prostitution. The organizational offerings, what men seek and receive from the program, and their feelings about sex work all influence their relationship with ALU, as well as constructions of self.

Avowals of self are not simply techniques to combat stigma and its negative effects; identity talk warrants closer scrutiny because its manifestation coincides with divergent life trajectories. Men who report social and emotional fulfillment from people at the facility are amenable to ALU's mission—to "recover" from sex work. Thus, individuals who profess this identity no longer engage in prostitution, work to pull others out of the industry, and strive to attain conventional markers of success. Indeed, their stated accomplishments and goals include housing, educational attainment, and legal employment. Jamal, 40 years old, exemplifies this trend. He describes himself as a man in recovery and simultaneously implemented significant changes in his life:

After I quit drugs, I lost interest in that old lifestyle and started to see I don't have to keep prostituting. Then I went to school, am staying sober, and doing all these really good things. Now I make money with a legitimate job—I run my own business cleaning houses.

Such conventional behavioral accomplishments are common among the men who assert a personal identity interwoven with recovery.

In contrast, sex workers who visit the program primarily for material provisions while rebuffing socioemotional support exhibit different forms of identity talk and continue to generate income from illegal work. This shadow work includes drug sales, robbery, or prostitution. In both forms of identity talk, sexual orientation plays prominently in their constructions of self. Certain men, whose identity is rooted in the street subculture, underscore their heterosexuality despite affiliation with the sex trade. To uphold this assertion and lessen stigma, they try to minimize participation in sex work, generating income with theft and drug dealing. Curtis, with an eight-year history in sex work, occasionally resorts to it when he needs money. However, his preferred strategy is to rob customers in lieu of sex transactions: "I had a whole new strategy where I'm basically trickin' people out of their money. I'm not doing what I say I'm gonna do sexually and once I get the money everything's out the window. I'm finished with you." Given his distaste for sex work, Curtis explains he sells drugs to sustain a more permanent exit: "I started selling weed a few years back . . . I've got this [pretty steady] source of income coming right now so I didn't need to depend on prostitution anymore." Scott, 49 years old, also dabbles in drug sales from time to time when he started "making deliveries for a dealer, to make some money," which he notes, "escalated to filling out the packages and selling." Like Curtis, he routinely steals from clients, making them pay him prior to sex acts but not fulfilling his end of the bargain. Scott illuminates his mind-set toward male customers: "Pay me, and as a matter of a fact, give me all of your money. Now I'm gonna rob you."

The remaining men claim a personal identity centered on being professional sex workers, individuals who are sexually attracted to men and can generate profit from such trysts. As illustrated in their statements, they are actively engaged in the street trade, express no inclination to quit, and accentuate the benefits of prostitution, which allows them to sustain a particular lifestyle. Similar to the men whose identity talk is informed by the street code, these sex workers exhibit no interest in recovery or in fulfilling ALU's goals.

At first glance, the above patterns of alignment with or resistant to this organization parallel those exhibited by drug-using incarcerated women in a rehabilitative program as they surrender to it, fake adherence, or defy it (see McCorkel 2013). While not framed as identity talk, they, too, participate in identity construction albeit as it relates to their drug use. My analyses differ significantly from McCorkel's study in that (1) I examine male sex workers' identity talk as it unfolds within ALU, where men are given substantial leeway to express who they are compared with women immersed in a punitive, total institutional setting; and (2) I link identity talk to life trajectory outcomes, including participation in illicit activities.

To that end, I find with the exception of those who undertake recovery, the remainder continue to be disenfranchised from conventional society and exist on the fringes, largely as a result of their illegal moneymaking activities. The relationship between street-based shadow work and marginalization is well established. In fact, Sudhir Venkatesh (2006) finds that individuals embedded in underground economies are typically unable to create the foundations for easily transferable human capital and skill enhancement, which results in minimal social integration. Beyond their own skill sets, their social networks are likely limited to individuals who have little capital themselves. As Snow and Anderson (1993) uncover among the homeless, street-based relationships can provide some forms of support yet they typically fail to provide sufficient resources to enable individuals to get off the streets. As a result, programs such as ALU can become even more significant because they can serve as a conduit between the two disconnected social and economic worlds, assuming, of course, there is a shared willingness and desire by both parties to achieve such an outcome. For example, some nonprofit programs express no interest in promoting exits from sex work but instead prioritize harm reduction for this population. While ALU harbors this goal, many men who obtain resources from it do not and fully intend to continue to partake in the sex trade or other forms of illicit income-generating work.

My data imply men who glean socioemotional support from ALU are more likely to participate in specific identity talk and corresponding behavior that aligns closely with recovery. Yet, as I argue, this form of identity talk is only one possible way sex workers attempt to minimize stigma; others devise and espouse alternative personal identities. The findings in this article are based upon a small sample of men within one specific recovery program in the United States. Future analyses should examine how different populations affiliated with recovery organizations resort to alternative strategies beyond identity talk to mitigate stigma. Additional research that compares identity talk among individuals connected to various types of organizations (beyond recovery sites) can further this line of investigation and offer greater clarity regarding the connection between assertions of personal identity and subsequent behavioral change.

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Notes

1. Personal identities are self-designated by the actor, while social identities are imputed to others based on appearance, behavior, and the location and time of action (McCall and Simmons 1978:62).
2. Although I interviewed a total of 19 male sex workers during fieldwork, I excluded one individual due to his insufficient responses to questions that ultimately informed my assessment of identity talk.
3. Intangible rewards do not render material provisions unnecessary, of course, especially due to the severe disadvantage experienced by men who attend the center. Yet, given this it is even more noteworthy that these men prioritized socioemotional support above other basic necessities and amenities, such as food, showers, laundry facilities, clothes, Internet, or mail services.
4. Only one of these men, Arnold, cited socioemotional support, which he listed as a secondary benefit.

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Author Biography

Sharon S. Oselin is an associate professor of Sociology at the University of California, Riverside. Her research primarily examines crime, deviance, and violence, often by drawing on the case of sex work. In addition to a number of journal articles, she is the author of *Leaving Prostitution: Getting Out and Staying Out of Sex Work* (New York University Press).