Article

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Using photovoice with sex workers: The power of art, agency and resistance

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Abstract

Situated within an arts-based research framework, photovoice method was utilized with women working in diverse aspects of the sex industry. The purpose of this project was to understand sex workers' lived experiences through their own artistic self-representation. This supports the acknowledgement of individual strengths, skills, visions, and voice. Another goal was to provide opportunities for group dialogue, engagement in community education, and activism through art. The findings from this study have implications for furthering our understanding of the lives of sex workers. Specifically, attention is given to the role of intersectionality as informing the lived experiences of sex workers. Findings from this study also highlight sex workers' shared experiences of stigma and the use of photography as an act of resistance to this stigma. This project confirms how empowerment comes about through the arts. Using photovoice method with sex workers affirms agency, self-representation, voice, and choice in sex work.

Keywords

Arts-based research, empowerment, photography, photovoice, sex work, visual methods

The ways in which sex workers[1] are often studied and represented socio-politically and academically do not always take into account their voices, subjective experiences and participation in the process. This can contribute to the stereotyping and stigmatization of sex workers, while social science research is consistently being done *on* sex workers instead of *with* them. This research study moves beyond a traditional qualitative research approach by implementing the methodology of photovoice *with* women working in the sex industry. Through the use of photovoice, sex workers utilized visual representation (photography) to generate art,

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collaboratively create knowledge, and raise community awareness of their needs (Wang, 1999). The purpose of this photovoice study was to gain a deeper, more complex understanding of the lived experiences of female sex workers through the artistic medium of photography. This arts-based project aimed to highlight sex workers' visual voices and their subjective experiences, through a process that increased their involvement, creativity and investment in the research process. With the opportunity to represent themselves through art, sex workers engaged in group dialogue, community education and activism through art.

Arts-based research framework

This photovoice study is informed by (visual) arts-based research, which emphasizes constructivism, critical interpretation, and contextualism (Sullivan, 2005). Three main goals of arts-based research are: (1) social activism by giving voice to those with less power in society (Barone, 2000); (2) making connections between research and lived experience (Garoian, 1999); and (3) making meaning through multiple senses and medium (Norris, 2000). What distinguishes arts-based research from traditional qualitative methods are the multiple creative ways of representing experiences and the different representational forms (medium) of expression that can effectively enhance the understanding of the human condition and experience.

I am inspired by research that transforms, empowers, and has the potential for creating social change through creativity; arts-based research embodies these qualities. It is my love for the arts and my identity as a visual artist that fuels my passion for incorporating artistic inquiry into social work research with sex workers. This project merges my own intersecting identities as a researcher, social worker, academic, artist, and activist. The fusion of visual art with research provides the opportunity to develop unique knowledge and a deeper insight into the experiences of sex workers that has never been done before with this population. Giving sex workers cameras to represent themselves serves to shift the power dynamics, acknowledges their contributions to the research process, and provides a deeper, more meaningful understanding of the complex realities of their lives.

Locating myself theoretically

Feminist theoretical perspectives that polarize sex work as either *sexual exploitation*[2] or *sexual freedom*[3] present a problematic dichotomy. These debates do not reflect the complexity of sex workers' experiences. My own personal and political perspective of sex work is consistent with the idea that sex work is a legitimate form of labor. I recognize that sex work involves both dangers and pleasures within a continuum of individual experiences. I also acknowledge the intersections of identities and the imbalance of power on an institutional, communal and individual level. I believe that the complexity of sex workers' sexual agency can best be

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illustrated by sex workers themselves. Viewing women as active agents in a broader context successfully captures the multiple subjectivities and the range of experiences, contradictions, and complexities of sex work.

Theoretical and practical framework

This photovoice project is informed by various theories and approaches. Feminist standpoint theories are crucial for understanding the world directly from the experiences of women and their social realities. In standpoint theories, all knowledge is situated and multiple 'truths' are accepted. Situated knowledge is based on our social location and the social groups to which we belong that systematically shape what we know and how we communicate (Harding, 2004). Feminist standpoint theories grant epistemic privilege to women and marginalized individuals since they know different things than those who are privileged by virtue of what they experience and how they understand it (Harding, 2004). Women are viewed as authorities on their own lives and hold the power of knowledge-construction and self-empowerment through knowledge-making.

A major theoretical and practical underpinning of this project stems from Paulo Freire's empowerment education for critical consciousness, which involves individuals working together in group efforts to: identify their problems, critically access the roots of the problem, and develop strategies to take action. Freire (1970) argues that the visual image is a tool that enables people to think critically about their communities, and reveals the everyday social and political realities that influence their lives. The idea of codifying language and experiences into visual images is seen as a way to 'stimulate people ''submerged'' in the culture of silence to ''emerge'' as conscious makers of their own culture' (Freire, 1970: viii). Within Freire's process of community dialogue, 'codes' are concrete representations of community issues that can be used to build awareness and encourage the construction of knowledge. As a communication tool, photographs can educate, inspire and influence decisions (Freire, 1970).

This research is also rooted in a participatory approach to documentary photography. In the 1970s, professional photographers started giving cameras to people who had typically been the subjects of their photographs (Wang and Burris, 1997). This resulted in the opportunity for individuals to use their grassroots voices and images to advocate for policy changes.

Photovoice method

The process of photovoice entails giving cameras to individuals who use photography to identify, represent, and enhance their communities (Wang and Burris, 1997). The main goals of photovoice are: (1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns; (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small

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group discussions of photographs; and (3) to reach policymakers and others who can be mobilized for change (Wang and Burris, 1997). Photovoice uses the immediacy of the visual image and accompanying stories to provide voice and to promote an effective, participatory means of sharing individuals' experiences and expertise.

Photovoice research design

Community collaboration

Prior to beginning this project, I volunteered as an activist with the Sex Worker Outreach Coalition (SWOC) and engaged in outreach to sex workers. This research study was a collaborative endeavor with a fellow SWOC activist and sex workers' rights advocate. Before recruiting participants, we hosted a community fund-raiser. This benefit served multiple purposes: (1) friends and colleagues donated 35 mm cameras; (2) various community members attended the fund-raiser and learned about the project; and (3) money was raised to pay for study expenses.

Recruitment process

Multiple methods and strategies of recruitment were implemented over a period of four months. Study flyers were created and distributed in various neighborhoods and venues. These settings included: inside dressing rooms and bathrooms of different exotic dance clubs, a methadone clinic, an outreach clinic for the homeless, various drop-in centers, and social service agencies known to serve sex workers (e.g. needle exchange programs). A graphic version of the study flyer was posted on the SWOC website, list-serve and myspace webpage, listed in a local newspaper, and posted on Craigslist. All study participants were invited to identify friends and acquaintances that would consider participating.

Participant diversity

Those invited to participate were (1) at least 18 years old; (2) female; (3) currently working in the sex industry in Portland, Oregon for the past six months; and (4) engaged in sex work.[4] A total of eleven female sex workers participated in this study from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, as well as ability status. The women were between the ages of 18–52 years old, with varied educational experience and social class backgrounds. They were engaged in street work, escorting, exotic dancing/stripping, pro-dominatrix/BDSM work, erotic massage, and erotic nude modeling. The years of sex work experience ranged from seven months to 39 years. Some of the women had children and/or were in a serious relationship. Their living situations varied (from living on the streets to living in a house with room-mates), and for some, changed over time.

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Implementing the method

Each woman began her participation in the project by attending a group or individual photovoice training workshop to ensure knowledge of the study goals, photovoice method, procedures, risks, and ethics prior to taking photographs. After attending this workshop, each participant was given her own 35 mm camera to take 36 photographs of her needs and aspirations. After the women went back to their communities to photo-document their lives, their rolls of film were developed and individual dialogue sessions were held with each participant to reflect and discuss her images.

Typically, photovoice method involves a participatory group dialogue session for sharing photographs (Wang, 1999). However, holding individual dialogue sessions with each artist was deemed more helpful in this study, due to the sensitive content of some photographs and private nature of some reflections. I wanted to eliminate any potential for participant discomfort in sharing photographs and stories within a larger group. In the individual dialogue sessions, each woman's subjectivity (living and working experiences) was explored. Each participant wrote her own 'artist biography' in addition to captions for each image.

Afterwards, the participants were invited to partake in two group dialogue sessions where they shared their photographs with each other and planned for the art exhibit. All but three of the women attended the group dialogue sessions and voted on the photographs they wanted to display in the community. Participants were compensated $50 in cash, as a thank you for their time and effort.

Educating the community through art

The photographs taken by the artists were represented in various community art exhibits over a period of two years. These locations included: local cafes, public libraries, three universities, two art galleries, a bookstore, and a social service agency. The traveling exhibit served to inform policymakers, influential community advocates and the broader public about sex workers' needs and important issues in their lives. They provided a forum for sex workers to share their lived experiences, perspectives, and artwork with individuals beyond academia. While this research study did not have any immediate or direct effects on local policy decisions, it received a lot of media attention and community support. The art exhibits were featured in two local newspapers and televised on the local news station.

Data analysis procedure

Given that I was interested in the lived experiences of sex workers and the meanings they assigned to objects, people, places, and events in their everyday lives, as expressed through their photographs, I borrowed techniques from interpretive phenomenological approaches to analyze the data from the individual dialogue sessions. Specifically, I used tools from Smith and Osborn's (2008) approach to

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explore how participants made sense of their personal and social world and the particular situations they were facing. I focused on the meanings that various experiences, events, and states held for them. My analysis was concerned with trying to understand what their world was like, from *their* point of view.

The analysis of the data involved two major parts: (1) a within-case analysis of each participant's transcript; and (2) a cross-case analysis comparing all of the participants' transcripts together. The analysis took several forms, which included looking at each photograph and its description produced by each artist, identifying common themes for each artist based on her dialogue session (within-case analysis), and then comparing and synthesizing all of the artists' themes together (cross-case analysis). The data consisted of 396 photographs taken by the participants (along with their titles and captions), field notes and journal entries.

Trustworthiness, quality and rigor were assured through various means. I personally collected all of the data, transcribed the dialogue sessions, and analyzed the data. I constantly worked with the data to see if my categories, themes, constructs, interpretations, and conclusions made sense and reflected the nature of what I was trying to understand. Prolonged immersion in the field, triangulation of the data, and the multiple data sources contributed to the credibility and thoroughness of the analysis process.

In addition, my community partner analyzed the data independently, using her own process, so that we could compare our coding schemes and findings to ensure similarity in the themes that emerged. An expert reviewer, guided by my analysis process, was chosen to audit the analysis based on her research experience. Participant checks occurred at different stages with all data collected. Every artist had a say in which photographs and quotes were to be included in the art shows. The women were invited to review their transcripts and make clarifications to their statements. After the data analysis, I invited the participants to review the themes that emerged.

Presenting the findings

This section highlights some of the main themes that emerged from a synthesis of the findings: (1) diverse experiences of sex work (i.e. there is no universal sex worker experience); (2) shared experiences of stigma and stereotyping related to working in the sex industry; (3) the use of art as activism and as a form of resistance; and (4) empowerment through the arts. In the following paragraphs, I present a few of the photographs taken by the artists under each theme in order to provide an essence of the diversity of images created. These images and quotes are only a snapshot of the range and variety of photographs that emerged from this photovoice project.

Diverse experiences of sex work

This theme highlights the diverse experiences of working in the sex industry, including how women viewed their work, their intersecting identities and their roles as sex

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Figure 1. Untitled.

workers. Mouse (21 years old), engaged in erotic modeling photography and exotic dancing, uses an image of her shoes (Figure 1) to differentiate between who she is as a person and the character she plays in the work that she does.

> Shoes are very defining for who you are . . . these are the boots that I wear every single day. That it's the footwear embodiment of who I am, and those [heels] are my character shoes . . . I don't want to embody who I am when I am stripping in my everyday life . . . I don't want to think of myself as the kind of person who shamelessly flirts with fifty year old strange men I have never seen before in my life and gets naked in front of them and teases them. That's not who I am. It's my job, how I make money, but not my personality . . . It's a character I play to make money.

Rogue (31 years old) was engaged in street work and escorting. She was married and the mother of four children, but her family did not know about her engagement in sex work. Rogue took a photograph of a tree (Figure 2) and said, 'This is my need to just to stand tall and strong like the tree does. It's hardest to stand tall and strong when I have to lie to my husband. I *hate* what I'm doing. I absolutely hate it.'

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Figure 2. Untitled.

Merry Mag (52 years old), expressed her choice to engage in street work, compared to high-end escorting.

> I do street work, *always* street work. In my youth, I had done real high-end sex work where I got paid a lot of money, but I prefer to do 10 minute jobs instead of doing dinner and all that happy horse shit. I'd rather do five, 10-minute jobs and spend the money the way I want to, than sit there and pretend to be their [client's] wife for the night, and all that pretense so that the ever-so-fragile male ego isn't harmed and, in their minds, it's a legitimate date.

Mouse presented a self-portrait (Figure 3) to represent her stripping as an art form.

> I put these photos together because no matter what kind of sex work you do, it is a kind of art. When I think of stripping, I treat it like an art. Everything from the movements that you do while you are dancing, to the image that you project when you are interacting with other people . . .

Similarly, Lady Purfection (23 years old), who engaged in dancing and escorting, also saw her work in the sex industry as a form of art (Figure 4).

> I'm in the sex industry because it's fun. I love what I do. Entertaining is a form of art to me . . . I had a customer take this picture because I wanted to capture this pole trick that I do; I love it so much. Dancing is my decision. I put up with a lot and I choose not to put up with a lot. I don't disrespect myself. I don't disrespect my body. It's self-expression, but some people don't understand; they think 'oh, they're just selling their self' but it's not like that . . .

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Figure 3. Untitled.

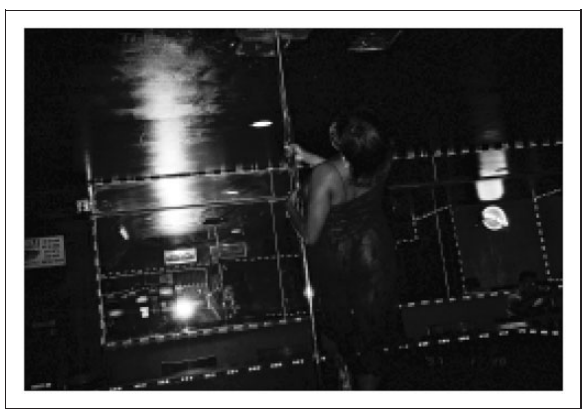

Figure 4. Seductive tales: Self-expressive, watch closely, but not too deeply.

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Figure 5. Tools of the trade.

Figure 6. Tired.

Bee (42 years old), worked as an exotic dancer, and saw her stripping as a form of professional dancing and a form of art (Figure 5).

> I have my stripper-hooker shoes on. I am wearing the big-heeled model. But the other girls [exotic dancers] wear those spiked shoes. That's because they don't dance, they lay on the floor and they crawl . . . they don't dance; I'm *really* a dancer. So, I call them nude modeling, which is showing your pussy. But, *dancing* is an art. I enjoy it and it's *great* for stress . . . This is how I make my money.

Other participants also took photographs and described their work as a way to make money. Alex (33 years old) worked as an exotic dancer and explained the importance of her personality in her work as a dancer. She used humor to make meaning of her photograph that depicts a pile of tires (Figure 6).

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Alex explains, 'This is the need to not be tired (laughter).' Cause you know, this job – it's your attitude and your personality that *really* makes you money. It *really* doesn't matter what you look like or what kind of body you have, it's your attitude.' Alex identified her personality as a personal strength in her line of work. Similarly, Crystal (29 years old), who worked as an exotic dancer, erotic masseur and escort for elderly gentlemen explained, 'You want to be friendly . . . there's a lot of customer service . . . that's brought me a lot more money, actually . . . being friendly and out there.'

Shared experiences of stigma

While the theme of stigma was raised in multiple stories, there were some women who specifically photographed and addressed the need to challenge stigma, stereotypes, and assumptions about sex workers. These photographs served to create awareness about how social and cultural assumptions, stigma, and stereotypes of sex work can serve to perpetuate violence, discrimination, and injustice in the lives of sex workers.

Alex photographed a wooden fence to express her need to not feel fenced-in and stereotyped because of her work (Figure 7), which presented complexities in her romantic relationships.

> Sometimes working in this industry you feel fenced-in, because there's a certain stereotype . . . the one thing that people love you and like you for, is the one thing people inevitably throw in your face and despise you for. If a guy takes an interest in you, you think it's very complimentary, but then he's like, 'oh, why don't you just go suck up to some guy and get your money the way you do . . .' or they call you 'big whore,' so you feel fenced-in in that way – there's no way around it or out of it.

Figure 7. On both sides of the fence.

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Jasmine (31 years old), who worked as a street worker and as an escort, expressed anger and pain because of the way she was treated and stigmatized in society as a homeless street worker (Figure 8).

> It's hard to spend each day with people looking down on you and people looking at you in disgust and people treating you like you don't exist. It's hard to exist like that, even if you've got as tough of a skin as I do.

Merry Mag expressed the need for safety, in addition to addressing violence related to the stigma against sex workers (Figure 9).

> This one time, I almost got murdered by this man [client] and I thought that I was gonna die. He was saying that he was gonna kill me because I was a whore and his mother was a whore and he was angry . . .

Figure 8. Untitled.

Figure 9. Sometimes sex work hurts – call the bad date line. Not all people hate us.

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Sarah (37 years old), engaged in street work, described her fear of police violence. She accompanied her story with the image of an angel statue to symbolize protection (Figure 10).

> I don't get anxious about the dates; I get anxious about the police. I get terrified. I don't feel safe until I get into a guy's car because I got kidnapped one time by the police. They took me somewhere – it wasn't even a station – where all these cops, who weren't even on duty, were there. They held me there for two hours, told me I was under arrest, for nothing! I was crying and they had me handcuffed and they were like, 'don't get your AIDS-diseased tears on our desk!' They were calling me, 'fucking bitch' and 'nasty whore.' Then they go, 'well we're not going to arrest you'cause you'll be out next day doing the same thing.'

Figure 10. An angel always watching over the women working the street who are vulnerable to the utmost evil.

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Use of art as activism and a form of resistance

This theme illuminates the political agency of the women and their efforts to speak out against the criminalization of sex workers, work-related stigma, violence, and other injustices. Through their photographs, they captured important issues relevant to their lives, bringing awareness about these experiences and perspectives through the political act of photographing them. They used art as a form of activism and resistance to sex work-related stigma that leads to stereotypes, discrimination and violence.

At the club where she worked, Grahm (21 years), working as an exotic dancer and dominatrix, took a series of photographs depicting money and drinks on a dressing room table (Figure 11) to critique the media stereotypes of strippers.

> This [photo] challenges the stereotype that strippers are obsessed with cash and that it's difficult to manage your money when you have this constant flow of cash . . . there's this weird cultural obsession with stripper imagery . . . money is sexualized and having cash in your hand becomes a thing that is very sexy. But, really, people value cash in

Figure 11. Collecting drinks in the dressing room.

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Figure 12. Who all are innocent I.

> intensely different ways . . . that [image] really defies the stereotype of the blingy stripper and the frivolous, stupid stripper who can't get her shit together.

Grahm also critiqued the radical feminist discourse supporting the notion that sex workers need to be 'saved.' Through her images (Figure 12) and access to feminist discourse, she challenged the stereotypical portrayal of sex workers as vulnerable victims.

> This little girl playground theme is about the stereotype of sex workers as wounded, hurt, vulnerable, and helpless. I want to call attention to the sexualization of victimhood, to voyeurism, to the objectification of sex workers in discourses about them. I want to encourage people to question their impulse to help, to save, to define what's 'really' going on.

Sarah photographed three condoms (Figure 13) to highlight the unreasonable laws criminalizing women, specifically street workers.

> Three or more condoms can get you arrested for prostitution. I HATE that law. It makes me SSSSICK. Here women are trying to protect themselves and others against AIDS and Hepatitis and other diseases, and they're gonna arrest them for it?!

In a photograph of her cat (Figure 14), Sarah used humor to highlight the unjust criminalization of sex workers. She explained, 'This is my favorite photo. I want, underneath it, something like, "the only legal pussy" or "the only pussy that's legal" (laughter) . . . That's exactly what this is about – legalization – it's a huge passion of mine.'

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Figure 13. The three condom law: This could get YOU arrested for prostitution!

Figure 14. The last legal pussy.

Similarly, Jasmine expressed the societal need for legalizing prostitution.

> To really help sex workers would be to make it safe for them to carry out what they do. I don't think there is anything wrong with selling your body if it's safe, clean and regulated . . . By making prostitution illegal they're not helping; they are making our lives worse. They want to own our bodies, literally. It's horrible. They don't care about us women, they just treat us like garbage; they think of most of us are garbage . . .

Merry Mag shared her anger towards privileged policymakers and the unreasonable laws used to punish sex workers. She stated her preference for the decriminalization of sex work and created a collage of images to include activist buttons, signs, stickers, money, make-up, and undergarments (Figure 15).

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Figure 15. There is no shame in consensual sex work. There is shame in a society that would criminalize us for trying to support and protect ourselves.

> It's hypocritical, white men making the laws. Because they don't like that women are making money through sex work and they don't like that they are being tricked out of their money. They don't want women having the upper hand and they're pissed off that women have all the pussy. They feel like they should be able to get it for free, when and however they want. But where we, women, have the power is in our pussy, but we're not taught that's what it is; that we can use it as a way to get money. So I'd rather be blunt fuck honest – I'll give you head the way you like it, and you give me money so I can pay my bills or do whatever the hell I want with it. But that's illegal and that's stupid.

Empowerment through the arts

Many of the women reflected on the transformative power of art. Photovoice allowed participants to use photography as an extension of themselves and as a

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space to re-enact their visions. For instance, Jasmine presented herself topless in a photograph. She expressed,

> This is my primal naked self. This is me and I am confronting you with myself; there's no armor, nothing. I want to be able to show myself without shame . . . I'm very self-conscious of people seeing me naked . . . so it's an aspiration to be comfortable with my own body for once.

Jasmine identified her desire not to be ashamed, took action to achieve her goal, and photographed her accomplishment. The opportunity for sex workers to use photography to document their 'selves in action' elevates the importance of their creative abilities and their personal strengths, thus supporting the potential for transformation.

Certain participants felt empowered through the opportunity to use art as a form of activism. For Sarah, this study gave her the opportunity to explore her creativity in support of the rights of street workers.

> I am SO glad I participated in this project because it's given me a purpose; a great opportunity to pursue my mission – to help the girls [fellow sex workers] and to stand up for our rights and fight against police brutality . . . it's also created an urge, a desire to experiment more with photography.

Some of the women felt empowered by the ways in which photography provided them with the chance to think about what was important in life. For Mouse, the process of creating art and talking about her needs and aspirations was empowering.

> It was amazing. I really liked how much it forced me to think about these things in relation to being a sex worker . . . especially now, that I am redefining my goals. Thinking about my aspirations made me feel a lot more positive. The fact that photography was involved was really wonderful because now I have that record of what I was aspiring to.

Mouse presented a photograph of herself on the top of the roof (Figure 16) to symbolize her aspiration to be more spontaneous.

> It was the first time I climbed up on top of my house. I want to do that more often in my life – I want to think of spontaneous seemingly impossible things that I've never done before and just do them. The airplane trail and having me so small in the corner really emphasizes how large I felt the possibilities were at that moment. So, to use the cliché, the sky is the limit. That's really how I felt standing on the apex of the roof right there.

Involvement in this photovoice study was also a way for the artists to assert their agency and have a voice. After sharing her photographs in the individual dialogue session, Lady Purfection talked about her experience. She said, 'I just wanted to say that I'm glad I partook in this study. It makes me feel good that my voice is being heard.'

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Figure 16. Untitled.

Discussion

The photographs captured the depth, beauty and complexity of each artist. While their photographs and stories did not always give a prime focus to needs and aspirations related to sex work itself, they were linked to other areas of their lives, including domestic life, homelessness, hobbies, motherhood, politics, activism, grief, love, and happiness. The themes that emerged in the findings have implications for: furthering our understanding of the role of intersectionality as informing the lived experiences of sex workers; acknowledging experiences of stigma and the act of resistance; confirming how empowerment comes about through the arts; and affirming agency, self-representation, voice, and choice in sex work.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a useful lens for challenging radical feminist beliefs of a universal experience of sex work. Initially coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality highlights the merging and mingling of multiple markers of difference (Ludvig, 2006). In this discussion, intersectionality refers to the idea that an

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individual's experiences are influenced by a multitude of identities (such as race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, ability, and so on) that interact and intersect. Social locations are created by the intersections of multiple identities (Murphy et al., 2009). The findings suggest that the unique self-representations and lived experiences of each artist were informed by the intersections of their multiple identities and social locations. Educational level, sub-culture, age, lifestyle, personality, and roles in life (mother, grandmother, wife, student, etc.) informed the artists' diverse identities and influenced their self-representations and expressions of needs and aspirations. Some of the life circumstances relevant to the participants in this study included: working conditions; family situation; living and working in the Pacific-Northwest; involvement in school, child welfare, or in the criminal justice system; and homelessness. Contrary to Farley and Kelly's (2000) claim that physical and sexual violence and drug abuse are intrinsic to prostitution, this was not the experience for all of the women in the study. Participants who were the same age, engaged in the same type of sex work and identified in the same way racially, sexually and economically, had completely different experiences of working in the sex industry, and may or may not have experienced violence or drug use. The women's intersecting identities informed their unique experiences and served to challenge unidimentional representations of sex workers.

Stigma and resistance

While the intersections of one's multiple identities produced distinctive experiences and varied needs and aspirations, there were meaningful similarities. Based on their shared sex worker identity, the artists shared experiences with stigma. This study supports the findings of other research that highlights the stigma experienced by sex workers. Vanwesenbeeck (2001) explores stigma and the additional efforts that sex workers placed into managing their identities. Sloan and Wahab (2000) speak to the burden of stigma and the barriers faced by sex workers as a result of discrimination.

While the experience of stigma was prevalent in all of the artists' photographs and stories, the ways in which stigma was experienced and expressed differed among them. Vanwesenbeeck (2001) asserts that stigma does not affect all sex workers to the same extent. In this study, variation was found in the amount and type of stigma-related experiences and negative social reactions encountered. It was common for women to experience additional layers of stigma related to their drug addiction, homelessness, and mental health issues. Phelan, Link, Moore and Steve (1997) discuss the intersections of homelessness, mental health and stigma. While stigma was experienced differently depending on one's social location, identity, and working conditions, the need to resist stigma and stereotypes was infused in many of their discussions and photographs.

Many of the artists used their photographs as a strategy to challenge fixed ideologies about sex work, to deconstruct old dichotomies, and to (re)define themselves. The use of a camera provided the means of giving the artists an authoritative

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voice (Bloustien and Baker, 2003). The women used their creative control and freedom to set the agenda for what was depicted and discussed. By presenting their lived experiences and choosing to reveal or withhold information, they shaped the stories that evolved. The artists actively resisted the stigma in their lives through the creative representations of their multiple realities and complex selves.

Empowerment through the arts

The use of art in this study had a powerful and meaningful impact on the artists, as many of the women reflected on the transformative power of art. The artists demonstrated how their participation in the photovoice process presented new possibilities for living their lives and provided a space for visually documenting their transformation. This study contributes to the literature on empowerment through the arts by providing a concrete way for people to communicate their visions and voice (Wang and Burris, 1997). Photovoice allowed participants to use photographs as an extension of themselves and as a space to re-enact their visions. The experience of empowerment through the arts is in-line with other studies which describe engagement with photovoice as an opportunity for women to experience participation and self-determination (Wilson, Dasho, Martin, Wallerstein, Wang and Minkler, 2007).

Affirming agency, self-representation, voice, and choice

Participation in this project was a way for the artists to assert their agency through their visions, voices, and the opportunity for self-representation. Considering the participants as agents capable of investigating their own situations can feel empowering and make a project more useful to them (Feen-Calligan et al., 2009). For those most marginalized in the study (based on their lack of resources for survival and type of sex work) this project provided visibility and a sense of existence. Hammond (2004) states, 'a photographic presence may serve as an important political statement of existence and significance' (p. 137). A few women identified the need for existence and photographed events in their lives as a way to prove things happened. Photographing themselves and their surroundings communicates their presence in this world and reinforces the importance of their existence.

It is important to highlight that contrary to some perceptions and representations of sex workers as vulnerable victims (Farley and Kelly, 2000), none of the women in this study saw themselves as victims without choices, even if they experienced emotional, physical, and sexual violence, poverty, or drug addiction. All but one of the artists presented mixed feelings about sex work in regard to personal power, agency, freedom, and choice. All of the artists emphasized that working in the sex industry was their choice. This is contrary to radical feminist beliefs that 'few women would choose prostitution' (Young, Boyd and Hubbell, 2000: 797).

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Some of the women photographed their bodies or the body parts of others to represent their needs and aspirations. The bodies that were photographed represent sites of struggle, power, strength, independence, choice, and vulnerability. Tidwell, Heston and Fitzgerald (2009) assert that 'even when people use objects as stand-ins or signifiers for their bodies, they are linking, extending or representing their corporeal existence and identity' (p. 129). The artists also used storytelling as a way to create meaning of their images. The stories they shared consisted of their past experiences and provided a perspective of their social locations and circumstances in life. Cole and Knowles (2001) state, 'the stories we remember and tell about our lives reflect who we are, how we see ourselves and perhaps, how we wish to be seen . . . when participants are revealing elements of their lives, they are revealing elements of their identities' (p. 119). As storytellers, the artists held the power of sharing and self-representation, as well as the freedom to re-invent themselves.

Implications for social work

Practice

Social workers engaging in direct service work with sex workers can explore the usefulness of creative art forms, such as photography, as another way of knowing, seeing and understanding that can be used to inform practice wisdom. This is congruent with the profession's value of the dignity and worth of each person (NASW, 1999). Photovoice reinforces the belief that each woman is an expert of her own life, while maintaining the power in her ability to shape her subjectivity according to the narratives and images she wishes to share. Social workers need to disregard negative stereotypes and judgmental attitudes about sex workers and place them at the center of service provision (Wahab, 2004), instead of treating them as vulnerable victims that need to be saved. The participatory aspects of photovoice provide social workers with collaborative tools to include sex workers' perspectives on appropriate social service needs. Images from visual evidence can facilitate the prioritization of issues and the identification of services and programs that are not having their intended effect.

Policy

Incorporating art as social activism within social work has the potential to impact county, state, and NASW policy related to sex workers. Photovoice exhibits can provide a forum for influencing local policies that criminalize sex workers. A few of the artists addressed the need for decriminalization or legalization of sex work in their photographs, and expressed the importance of changing current policy on sex work. The women articulated the importance of being able to carry out their work safely and without fear of arrest. Photographs created by sex workers can serve to visually depict the harmful effects of criminalization on their lives. Social workers

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can adapt a decriminalization agenda within their agencies. They can also support the NASW policy statement on commercial sex work that supports self-determination, addresses the issues faced by sex workers, and advocates for their rights. It is important that sex workers are acknowledged as experts, leaders, and advocates of their own lives and profession.

Research

While the fields of education, community health, and nursing have embraced arts-based research, social work has yet to significantly incorporate the arts into research. If we continue to follow traditional research methods, we undermine the power of our discipline to offer innovative and useful approaches to research (McNiff, 1998). Arts-based research in social work can foster social action and advocacy around the needs and issues of sex workers through creative means that are shared *beyond* academia and *with* the broader community. This is congruent with the profession's ethical responsibilities of social and political action within the broader society (NASW, 1999).

This photovoice study responds to the unmet need for combining creativity and scholarship with social action for the purpose of educating communities, challenging stereotypes, and inspiring action for change. It is crucial that future social work research with sex workers continues to use arts-based methods to explore and understand the multi-layered, multi-dimensional and complex realities of individuals working in the sex industry. We should continue to advocate for research that challenges stereotypes and stigma. We need to support methods that include the creative participation of sex workers and the opportunities for self-representation and self-definition. As social workers who strive to understand the human condition, photovoice can offer a kaleidoscopic perspective of the 'rich landscape' (Figure 17) that individuals inhabit, as well as our own.

Figure 17. Rich landscape.

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Notes

1. In this article, I use the term, sex worker (as opposed to prostitute) because it is less stigmatizing since it suggests an income-generating activity rather than a totalitizing identity.
2. Sex work as sexual exploitation is reflected in the works of Millett (1970), Barry (1979), Dworkin (1987); MacKinnon (1989), Jeffreys (1997) and Farley (2004).
3. Sex work as sexual freedom/pro-rights is reflected in the works of Califia (1998), Rubin (1984), Paglia (1992), Pheterson (1989), Chapkis (1997), Nagle (1997), and Doezema (1998).
4. Defined as the exchange of sex or sexual stimulation for money or other forms of payment.

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