

# The Psychology of Prostitution

Rosemond Travis

Advisor: Elizabeth Krumrei Mancuso

Cross-Disciplinary/Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Research Grant  
Summer 2013

# Overview

---

- Motivations
- Abuse
- Mental Health Variables
- Conclusion

# Motivations for Engaging in Prostitution

- Economic Gain
  - Money to support self/family (Harding & Hamilton, 2009)
  - Money to support inessential habits (Bott, 2006)
- Drug Addiction (Cobbina & Oselin, 2011; Murphy, 2010; Roxburgh, Degenhardt, & Copeland, 2006)
- Personal Empowerment (Bott, 2006; Williamson & Folaron, 2003)
- Social Motivation
  - Boyfriend/Pimp Pressures (Akileswaran & Lurie, 2010; Bovenkerk & van San, 2011)
  - Family Expectations (Hwang & Bedford, 2004)
- Escaping Personal Hardship (Hwang & Bedford, 2004)

# Correlations with Abuse

- Childhood Abuse
  - 30.4%-59% of each sample (8 samples) reported physical abuse (22.6% in general population)
  - 13%-79% of each sample (11 samples) reported sexual abuse (12.7% of general population)
  - 45%- 61.8% of each sample (2 samples) report emotional abuse (26.7% of general population)
  - Frequency, duration, age of initial abuse, number of offenders, sado-masochist abuse, and reaction to the abuse may influence how at-risk a woman is to engage in prostitution (Bagley & Young, 1987)
  - Prostitution may be an attempt to feel empowered or valued

# Correlations with Abuse

- Adulthood Abuse and Work Violence
  - 25%-90% of each sample (6 samples) reported physical abuse or violence (5.7% in general population)
  - 13%-92% of each sample (6 samples) reported sexual abuse (5.3% in general population)
  - Violence during prostitution varies across settings
  - Perpetrators of abuse include lovers, strangers, family, and/or customers
  - Culture of violence; most women experience violence or are very aware of its potential (Surratt, Inciardi, Kurtz, & Kiley, 2004)

# Correlations with Alcohol & Drug Use

- 27%- 100% of each sample (4 samples) reported alcohol use/abuse (50.6% of women use in general population)
- 40%-82% of each sample (5 samples) reported drug use/addiction (4.8% of women use in general population)
- Some used drug before, some begin drug use after beginning prostitution (Roxburgh et al., 2006)
- Reporting “Use” versus “Abuse”
- Basic “Yes” or “No” to using drugs/alcohol
- Rates of drug use/abuse differ across settings

# Correlations with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

- PTSD: Having trouble coping with at least one major distressing event from the past and experiencing flashbacks, hyper arousal, or emotional numbing
- 21%-72% of each sample (8 samples) report having PTSD symptoms (6.8% in general population)
- Could be due to past abuse, current violence, or an unrelated event
- Rates vary by setting of prostitution

# Correlations with Anxiety

- Anxiety Disorders: Physical and psychological hyper arousal caused by real or imagined objects/ situations
- 29%-34% of each sample (3 samples) have anxiety (29% in normal population)
- Could have anxiety about facing violence, guilt, shame, or stigma (Freed, 2003; Tomura, 2009)



# Correlations with Depression and Suicidal Thinking

- Depression: Sad affect, feelings of worthlessness, lack of optimism
- 41%-100% of each sample (6 samples) report having depression (16.5% in general population)
- High rates do not vary much across settings
- 38%-74% in each sample (2 samples) consider suicide, about 41% attempt suicide (3.7% consider & .5% attempt in general population)
- Could be due to shame, guilt, self-blame, losses (Freed, 2003; Kramer, 2003)

# Correlations with Dissociation

- Dissociation: psychological escape to cope with a stressful situation; experience memory loss
- 24% report any dissociation (9% in general population)
- There is a desire to escape from the present situation of prostitution
- Could happen when with clients or in personal relationships

# Correlations with Somatization

- Somatization: having physical, medical symptoms without the presence of an actual medical problem
- 11%-19% of each sample (2 samples) report unexplained physical symptoms (16% of general hospital patients)
- Rates vary across cultures, as some cultures are more or less accepting of psychological problems versus physical problems.

# Conclusions

- Correlational research does not allow us to say that engaging in prostitution **CAUSES** any of these psychological variables
  - Prostitution could come before psychological problems
  - Psychological problems could come before prostitution
  - Mental health could contribute to other factors, which can influence engaging in prostitution
- Longitudinal research would be necessary