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**Feeling safe while doing sex work: Motivation for entering sex work moderates the relationship between perceptions of physical danger and desire to leave sex work**

Arnold, K.A., Turner, N., Barling, J., & Iverson, R. (in press).

### Abstract

Large segments of society stigmatize sex work as ‘dirty’ because of the moral dubiousness and physical danger associated with its conduct. Drawing on social exchange and self-determination theories, we investigated the relationship between perceptions of physical danger at work and desire to leave sex work as an occupation among 321 female sex workers in Melbourne, Australia. We examined reasons for entering the occupation of sex work as a moderator of this relationship. Under conditions of high perceptions of physical danger, women who cited extrinsic (largely economic) reasons for choosing sex work reported higher desire to leave sex work than women who cited intrinsic (personal) reasons for choosing sex work did. Levels of desire to leave sex work of women who reported intrinsic reasons for choosing sex work did not differ across levels of perceived physical danger. As such, we consider the ‘dark side’ of intrinsic reasons for choosing work that may inadvertently deter respondents from wanting to leave physically dangerous work.

*Keywords:* danger, dirty work, safety, sex work, turnover

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Hughes (1951) defined ‘dirty work’ as work that is considered disgusting, degrading, or both. Almost five decades later, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) extended this construct, suggesting that dirty work can consist of physical, social, and/or moral dimensions. Physically-stigmatized work puts individuals in contact with death, effluent, and physical danger. Socially-stigmatized work follows from an association with stigmatized groups (e.g., prison guards guarding prisoners) or working in a subservient position. Finally, morally-stigmatized work comprises what might be perceived by some as sinful tasks, or requires the use of confrontational tactics. Prostitution (hereafter ‘sex work’) typifies dirty work, as it is stigmatized on all three of these dimensions (Arnold & Barling, 2003).

Sex work can be dangerous both physically and psychologically. Based on a global consultation with sex workers, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2012) outlined three common types of violence that sex workers face: physical, sexual, and psychological. The prevalence of experiencing physical violence appears to be high, with sex workers facing high risk of assault (Salfati, James, & Ferguson, 2008); one study spanning five countries found that 73% of sex workers experienced some form of non-sexual battery, and 62% reported being raped (Farley, Baral, Kiremire, & Sezgin, 1998). More recent data from brothel-based sex workers in Abuja, Nigeria, demonstrate similarly high prevalence rates, with over half of female respondents reporting some sort of violence during the past six months. Within the group reporting violence during this time period, the most common types of violence were sexual (42.5%), economic (37.7%), physical (35.7%), and psychological (31.9%) (Olufunmilayo & Abosede, 2014). More generally, a systematic review of the literature demonstrated lifetime

prevalence rates of experiencing workplace violence among sex workers as between 45% and 75%, with experiences over the past year being between 32% and 55% (Deering et al., 2014). Physical hazards are potential motivations for leaving the sex work occupation, and we investigate this in the current study.

While sex work is physically dangerous, the level of objective physical danger may vary based on specific contextual factors. In a systematic review of research on sex workers from around the globe, Deering et al. (2014) note the growth in data about how contextual factors predict the risk of physical danger for sex workers. For example, sex workers working in jurisdictions that criminalize sex work, and those working on the street or in public places, may be at greater physical risk than those in sex-work permissive jurisdictions or brothels.

Despite an objective level of physical risk in a particular job, individuals may perceive the extent of the physical danger differently. Research has long shown a link between *perceptions* of physical danger at work and workplace withdrawal behaviors such as absenteeism (e.g., Castle, 1956; Hill & Trist, 1953, 1955) and more recently turnover intentions (e.g., Cree & Kelloway, 1997; Cottini, Kato, & Westergaard-Nielsen, 2005; Harrell, 1999; Lai, 2015; Morrow & Crum, 1998) in occupations far less stigmatized than sex work. In the current study, we were interested in examining whether this relationship between perceptions of physical danger and withdrawal intentions would generalize to sex workers.

Given the physical dangers associated with sex work, a desire to leave the occupation may not be a negative outcome. We suggest the relationship between perceptions of physical hazards and desire to leave the sex work occupation is moderated by individual differences in motivation for entering sex work. We theorize that individuals who enter sex work for intrinsic reasons will be less likely than those who enter for extrinsic reasons to want to leave the

occupation in the face of physical danger. Intrinsic motivation fulfills basic human needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence (e.g., Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017), and as such, when these needs are fulfilled greater satisfaction results and the desire to leave the occupation as a result should lessen compared to extrinsically motivated individuals. This paper responds to the call to focus research attention on outcomes of *perceived* occupational danger (e.g., Lambert, Minor, Gordon, Wells, & Hogan, 2018) and considers how the motivation for ‘getting into’ sex work may change the relationship between perceived physical danger and wanting to ‘get out’ of sex work.

Investigating predictors of wanting to leave sex work occupation has the potential to illuminate whether working conditions that relate to a desire to leave other occupations have the same salience in stigmatized and highly physically dangerous work roles. Hughes (1951) suggested that many times “the processes which are hidden in other [higher status] occupations come more readily to view in these lowly ones” (p. 318-319). An examination of sex work and the reasons that sex workers enter the occupation, therefore, has the potential to reveal the conditions under which sex workers might be more or less likely to tolerate physically dangerous work, to desire leaving the occupation, or both. Furthermore, sex workers are rarely studied in occupational safety research due to the stigma of the occupation, assumptions about reasons for working in occupation, the challenge of reaching a sample of workers large enough to conduct quantitative analysis, and more generally perceptions of both researchers and sex workers of the “informal nature of [this particular] workplace” (Ross, Crisp, Månsson, & Hawkes, 2012, p. 105). The present study uses a large sample of female sex workers to investigate the relationship between perceptions of physical danger and desire to leave the occupation of sex work.

## **Theory and Hypotheses**

### **Physical danger and desire to leave as social exchange considerations**

We broadly frame the current study within social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Social exchange theory suggests that individuals weigh costs and benefits when making work-related decisions, such as whether to remain in an occupation. In the current study, sex workers' perceptions of physical danger are conceptualized as a potential cost. Individuals differ in their perceptions of physical danger associated with the same working conditions, with "objective and subjective assessments of risk in the workplace seldom agree[ing]" (Cree & Kelloway, 1997, p. 304). Given this, we focus on perceptions of physical danger as an indicator of poor working conditions that may predict the desire to leave the occupation.

Past empirical research has established a connection between poor working conditions and either desire to turnover, intentions to turnover, or actual turnover (e.g., Bockerman & Pekka, 2009; Garcia-Serrano, 2004). In this study, we make the distinction between desire to leave and intentions on three criteria: perceived performability, action-connectedness, and temporal framing (Perugini & Bagozzi, 2004). Desire reflects a personal, more abstract motivation to perform an action often in a time-indefinite way (e.g., "Michaela would like to leave her occupation"), whereas intentions reflect a more efficacious declaration of action often within a specified time (e.g., "Michaela will look to change her occupation in the next year"). Despite these differences, desire remains an important motivational predictor of intentions, and both turnover intention and actual turnover are correlated with desire to leave. In an investigation of a heterogeneous sample of Danish workers, Cottini et al. (2011) found that exposure to physical hazards increased the likelihood of voluntary turnover by three percentage points. In the

same way that objective physical hazards and subjective perceptions of danger or risk (e.g., Goldberg, Car-el, & Rubin, 1991) do not overlap completely, previous empirical research has investigated how *perceived* physical danger relates to work withdrawal behaviors.

Similar to studies investigating the connection among objective hazards, turnover intentions, and turnover, studies investigating the relationship between perceptions of physical danger and turnover intentions have found comparable associations. For example, Cree and Kelloway (1997) developed a model suggesting that subjective risk perceptions would predict turnover intentions and willingness to participate in occupational health and safety programs. Testing this model in a sample of 130 production employees in plastic packaging manufacturing plants, they found that as subjective risk perceptions increased, turnover intentions also increased. Similarly, Morrow and Crum (1998) collected railroad workers' perceptions of physical safety, and assessed whether this accounted for variance in various outcomes (for example, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intent to stay) over-and-above objective safety risks. Using a stratified random sample from employees in the largest railroads in the United States, cross-sectional perceptions of physical safety explained incremental variance in intent to stay by 3% (among other outcomes), similar in magnitude to Cottini et al.'s (2011) findings described above.

Does this relationship between perceived physical hazards and turnover intentions differ in stigmatized occupations? A study of 676 correctional officers in 22 different Taiwanese correctional facilities found that perceived job danger (among other predictors) was a statistically significant predictor of higher turnover intentions (Lai, 2015). Like sex workers, the job of correctional officer is one that may be considered socially stigmatized because the job entails dealing with a marginalized population (cf. Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). However, unlike sex

work, the job of a correctional officer is not necessarily stigmatized on all three dimensions of taint (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Taken together, both objectively physically dangerous job conditions and perceptions of physical danger may be correlated with higher turnover intentions. While this relationship appears to be well-established in less stigmatized occupational contexts, it has yet to be tested within sex work (cf. Lai, 2015), an occupation stigmatized on all three of the dimensions outlined by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999).

In addition to studies investigating the relationship between perceptions of physical danger and turnover intentions, previous research also demonstrates a link between higher safety climate and lower turnover intentions. Safety climate reflects perceptions of whether employees believe that their organization prioritizes their physical safety (Zohar, 2010). As an example, Huang et al. (2016) investigated the association between safety climate and various outcomes including objective turnover rates in a sample of truck drivers, finding that greater perceptions of safety climate were associated with lower turnover rates. We hypothesize:

*H1: Perceptions of physical danger at work will be associated with a higher desire to leave the sex work occupation.*

Social exchange theory also suggests that individuals consider perceived rewards when making decisions regarding occupational withdrawal. Within the context of sex work, economic rewards have been a focus (Maticka-Tyndale, Lewis, Clark, Zubick, & Young, 2000). There may also be other rewards that this occupation is perceived to provide such as flexible schedules and decision-making autonomy, as examples. When working in a profession that provides an individual with positive working conditions (e.g., economic rewards, flexible work schedules, pleasant co-workers) that outweigh the costs of working in that profession (e.g., exposure to physical danger, stressful interpersonal conditions), social exchange theory predicts that an individual would want to remain in the job due to the net positive effect of doing so. We theorize

that high perceptions of physical danger without sufficient rewards to compensate would be associated with a greater desire to leave the profession. In the current study, we conceptualize motivation for entering the sex work occupation as a potential indication of perceived rewards. We investigate this as a boundary condition that may change the relationship between perceived physical danger and desire to leave the occupation.

### **Self-determination and motivation for entering the occupation of sex work**

Across occupations, the manifest motivation for working for many individuals is the economic incentive (Jahoda, 1982), and this may be especially true for women engaged in sex work. Research has shown that one concern of female sex workers is that they might become trapped in the sex work occupation if they become accustomed to earning more money than they could any other way (Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2000). While economic reasons would appear to be the most common reason for entering sex work, there are other potential reasons, with research confirming that individuals sometimes enter this occupation for reasons of personal fulfillment (Brewis & Linstead, 2000). In the current study, we conceptualize reasons for entering the occupation according to self-determination theory (Gagné & Deci, 2005), on a continuum from amotivation through extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. We consider this as an individual difference variable that changes the relationship between perceived physical danger and desire to leave the sex work occupation.

Research focused on motivation at work has a long history (e.g., Herzberg, 1966), and self-determination theory, developed over the last 30 years, helps explain how motivation affects various outcomes. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) is a theory of motivation that suggests there are a range of motivational states that individuals experience. The theory purports that motivation can be conceptualized on a continuum: extrinsic motivation is

located at the controlled end of the spectrum (from outside the individual) and intrinsic motivation lies at the autonomous end (from within the individual). Controlled motivation is externally regulated (extrinsic) whereas autonomous motivation (intrinsic) is internally regulated. As Deci et al. (2017) state “these motivations can be seen as lying along an autonomy continuum, with the order from least to most autonomous being external, introjected, identified, integrated, and intrinsic” (p. 22). While theories of motivation such as self-determination theory are frequently used to predict employee job performance and wellbeing (Deci et al., 2017), in this study we suggest that motivation will interact with perceived danger (one salient working condition in this occupation) to predict desire to leave the sex work occupation.

We theorize that motivation for entering sex work has the potential to change the way that individuals weigh the costs of working in a particular occupation. In this way, we link theoretical predictions from social exchange theory with self-determination theory to investigate motivation for entering the occupation as a boundary condition of the relationship between perceived danger and desire to leave. More specifically, we investigate extrinsic (economic) and intrinsic (personal) motivation for working in this occupation as a moderator of this relationship. Our conceptualization (and operationalization) of extrinsic motivation is truly “external regulation” as it relates to “contingencies of reward and punishment” (Gagné & Deci, 2005, p. 336). In the current study, individuals working primarily for economic reasons or those who have been coerced into the occupation are working for reasons external to themselves and, if they could choose, should be more motivated to leave the occupation than those who entered sex work for intrinsic reasons. Although individuals who are extrinsically motivated to enter sex work may perceive less choice to leave the profession (e.g., they may be dependent on the money sex work provides), the experience of negative working conditions may nevertheless

exacerbate their desire to leave the occupation, regardless of whether actually leaving was an option.

The other group of workers we examine are those who entered sex work for intrinsic reasons (Gagné & Deci, 2005), such as interest and enjoyment of the task and autonomy over their own sexuality (Zatz, 1997). This type of motivation for entering the occupation involves “a full sense of willingness, volition, and choice” (Deci et al., 2017, p. 20). Examples of intrinsic motivation for entering sex work in our sample include curiosity and life experience. We further postulate that entering this occupation based on intrinsic motivation has the potential to buffer the relationship between perceptions of physical danger at work and desire to exit the profession. That is, if individuals enter into sex work for intrinsic reasons rather than extrinsic reasons, they may be less deterred by negative working conditions such as threats of physical danger and less likely to want to leave the occupation because they are attracted to other inherent parts of the job.

To situate our argument regarding self-determinants of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation within the social exchange framework, reasons for entering the occupation focused on intrinsic motivation may be conceptualized as perceived rewards (positive outcomes) from the occupation. Those individuals reporting intrinsic reasons would be more likely to perceive the rewards as exceeding the costs (e.g., perceived physical danger). That is, the relationship between costs and the desire to leave the occupation should decrease as rewards increase, particularly as intrinsic rewards increase because they are more inherently satisfying. Some empirical support for this theoretical explanation derives from Dupré et al.’s (2006) study on teenage part-time employees, which found that the negative effects of organizational injustice were stronger when the teenagers were employed for financial reasons (extrinsic motivation) rather than personal interest (intrinsic motivation).

In essence, we theorize that working for intrinsic reasons in the sex work occupation may reduce the likelihood that sex workers want to leave the job (if they could choose to), despite perceiving the work as equally as physically unsafe as their extrinsically-motivated counterparts:

*H2: Reasons for entering sex work will moderate the relationship between perceptions of physical danger and desire to leave the sex work occupation, such that when reasons for sex working are extrinsic, the relationship between perceptions of danger and desire to leave will be stronger than when reasons for sex working are intrinsic.*

## **Method**

### **Sample and Procedures**

The data used for this study are taken from the Sex Industry Survey conducted in Australia in 1994 (Pyett, Haste, & Snow, 1994 [computer file]). Both survey and interview methods were used to collect these data. The purpose of the original study was to obtain a profile of sex workers in an attempt to dislodge stereotypes, and to look at the sex practices of these workers to understand better what kinds of intervention strategies would work to reduce the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases.

The participants consisted of sex workers in legal brothels in the state of Victoria, as well as street workers and escort workers who contacted the Prostitutes' Collective of Victoria (PCV) during the sampling period (February 1994 to July 1994). The PCV is a community-based organization that represents sex workers' concerns as part of the world-wide prostitutes' rights movement (Prostitutes Collective of Victoria, n.d.). The total number of participants in the final data set was 351. As participation was based on availability, the total number of individuals who were asked to participate (and thus a response rate) cannot be calculated. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured, participants were told that they were not obligated to answer any

questions which made them feel uncomfortable or anxious, and assured that no one at their place of work would see their responses.

Of the 351 participants, 321 (91.5%) identified as female, 16 (4.6%) identified as male, and 14 (4.0%) chose not to identify a biological sex. The analyses presented here are limited to participants who identified as female based on (a) theoretical arguments that suggest there might be differences expected across sexual identification groups and (b) the relatively small numbers of male respondents. Respondents' mean age was 27.51 years ( $SD = 7.24$ ; range = 18 to 52) and they had worked in the sex industry for an average of 3.61 years ( $SD = 4.36$ ; range = 1 month to 23 years) at the time of the survey. Approximately two-thirds of the sample were single (68%). Around two-thirds of the sample (64%) had completed less than 12 years of schooling, while the remainder had completed at least one post-secondary vocational (14%) or university-level course at the undergraduate (19%) or postgraduate level (3%).

## Measures

**Perceptions of physical danger.** We measured perceptions of physical danger using three items that asked participants about how unsafe they felt with various groups of people: police officers, taxi drivers, and clients. Participants' responses were measured on a five-point scale from 1 = never to 5 = always. We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis on these items in MPlus 8.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2019) to establish some measures of reliability and validity:  $\chi^2(1) = .78, p = .37$ ; comparative fit index = 1.00; root mean square error of approximation = 0; standardized root mean square residual = .02,  $H$  coefficient = .69, and average variance extracted = .46. The mean of these items formed the perceptions of physical danger score with higher scores indicating greater perceptions of physical danger.

**Desire to leave the sex work occupation.** We measured desire to leave the sex work occupation with a single item: “would you change occupation from sex worker if you could?” The scores on the item ranged from 1 (“no”) to 2 (“don’t know”) to 3 (“yes”), with higher scores reflecting higher desire to leave <sup>1</sup>.

**Reasons for entering sex work.** Reasons for working were conceptualized as either extrinsic (economic) or intrinsic (personal). Participants were asked: “Why did you become a sex worker?” The answers were coded in the original data file as follows: 1 = for the money, 2 = for sexual curiosity, 3 = for the sex, 4 = out of necessity or no other choice, 5 = flexible working conditions and hours, 6 = life curiosity or experience, 7 = I was coerced, and 8 = indifferent response. In this study, we coded ‘for the money’, ‘out of necessity or no other choice’, and ‘I was coerced’ as extrinsic reasons. ‘For sexual curiosity’, ‘for the sex’, and ‘life curiosity or experience’ were coded as intrinsic reasons. The two remaining reasons (i.e., ‘flexible working conditions and hours’ and ‘indifferent response’) were coded as missing and were not included in the analysis as they did not fit with either the extrinsic or intrinsic categories.

**Demographic variables.** In addition to measuring biological sex (male, female), we measured age (in years), length of time working in the sex industry (in months), marital status (single, married), and educational level (less than 12 years of schooling, and number of post-secondary, vocational, undergraduate, or postgraduate courses).

## Results

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among the study variables organized by motivation for entering sex work group appear in Table 1. The extrinsic category described the reasons for working for approximately 91% of the sample. Due to the large difference in size of the reasons for working sub-groups, we confirmed that there were no significant mean or

variance differences between these two groups on any of the study variables or demographic variables reported (see Table 2).

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Hypothesis 1 was tested using ordinary least squares regression in IBM SPSS Statistics Version 24 (IBM Corp., 2016) and Hypothesis 2 was tested using ordinary least squares regression analysis with Model 1 of the PROCESS macro ([www.afhayes.com](http://www.afhayes.com); version 2.16.3). The latter enabled a test of the interaction between perceptions of physical danger and reasons for choosing sex work as an occupation on explaining additional variance in desire to leave the occupation (see Table 3), over-and-above the conditional effects of perceptions of physical danger and motivation for entering sex work. As such, perceptions of physical danger were entered as the predictor variable, desire to leave the occupation as the criterion variable, and reasons for entering sex work as the binary moderator.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that perceptions of physical danger would be positively associated with desire to leave. The results of the regression indicated that perceptions of physical danger ( $\beta = .14, p < .05$ ) explained 2% of the variance,  $F(1, 290) = 5.34, p < .05$ . The interaction between perceptions of danger and reasons for working was significant ( $b = .35, p < .05$ ; see Table 3). Figure 1 depicts how the relationship between perceptions of physical danger and desire to leave is contingent on reasons for entering sex work. When reasons for entering are extrinsic (economic), there is a positive relationship between perceptions of physical danger and desire to leave ( $b = .13, t = 2.42, p < .05$ ). In contrast, when reasons for working are intrinsic (personal),

the relationship between perceptions of physical danger and desire to leave is negative, but statistically non-significant ( $b = -.22, t = -1.31, p > .05$ ). These results support Hypothesis 2.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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### **Discussion**

This study investigated perceptions of physical danger as a predictor of desire to leave the occupation among a sample of female sex workers, and motivation for entering sex work as a moderator of this relationship. We hypothesized that there would be a correlation between higher perceptions of physical danger and higher desire to leave sex work, but that this relationship would be stronger under conditions of extrinsic (economic) reasons for entering sex work. The results supported this moderation hypothesis: there was a significant relationship between perceptions of physical danger and desire to leave for sex workers who were engaged in this occupation for extrinsic (economic) reasons, but no significant relationship between perceptions of physical danger and desire to leave when participants reported engaging in sex work for intrinsic (personal) reasons.

There are at least three implications of these findings. First, compared to individuals working for extrinsic reasons, those working for intrinsic reasons may not be as deterred by perceptions of physical danger and therefore may work in ways that are less safe. Second, those working for intrinsic reasons exhibit the same desire to leave regardless of perceptions of physical danger. Potential physical dangers associated with the work, such as interpersonal violence, may not factor into leaving the occupation when the motivation to enter sex work was intrinsic. Third, for individuals who entered sex work for economic reasons and were coerced

into sex work, perceptions of physical danger are associated with desire to leave the occupation of sex work. Given that in our sample (and in general) the likelihood is high that women working in the sex industry enter primarily for economic reasons (e.g., Vanwesenbeeck, 2001), creating physically safer working conditions for sex workers should be a priority.

From a theoretical perspective, our findings suggest that researchers may need to re-evaluate the universally positive connotation associated with intrinsic motivation. As Hughes (1951) discussed, it is often the case that research with lower status occupations uncovers relationships that are not found in higher status occupations. While past research demonstrates that intrinsic motivation has benefits for employees in the sense of increased fulfillment, health, well-being and higher performance (Deci et al., 2017), and the relationship between interpersonal injustice and abusive supervision was lowered when teenagers worked for personal fulfillment reasons (Dupré et al., 2006), our findings suggest that in some contexts, intrinsic motivation may have unintended consequences. Intrinsically motivated women in this sample did not report an association between perceptions of physical danger and a greater desire to leave. Employees in this situation may be at greater risk for injury, as although they may perceive the same situation as being as dangerous as extrinsically motivated individuals would, they may be carrying out their work in a different way. We assume here that when an individual perceives a situation at work as physically dangerous, they will be more likely to take appropriate action to protect themselves from this danger, with one action being contemplating exiting (Tucker & Turner, 2011). While we were not able to consider situations in which motivation to enter the occupation was both extrinsic and intrinsic (respondents had to indicate the reason they primarily entered the occupation of sex work for), this would be an avenue for future research, suggesting

that somewhere in the middle of the self-determination continuum might produce different findings.

From a practical perspective, the findings, much like other research (e.g., Deering et al., 2014), call for policies that create safer working conditions for sex workers, and specifically address the issue of women being coerced into sex work. The intrinsically motivated sex worker may be less likely than the extrinsically motivated sex worker to want to leave the occupation when perceiving unsafe working conditions. The extrinsically motivated sex worker, on the other hand, may be more likely to want to leave the occupation if conditions are physically unsafe. While this may be a positive outcome for personal physical safety, it could have negative financial consequences for the worker. If we assume that objective levels of danger and perceptions of danger are positively correlated, our findings suggest that lessening objective levels of physical danger would create conditions that would benefit workers engaging in sex work for economic reasons, as well as those working for intrinsic reasons. Policies that help establish safer working conditions for this marginalized occupation remain warranted.

### **Study Limitations**

As with any study, the current study has several limitations. First, we faced the standard problems encountered in using archival data (Barnes et al., 2018), such as being limited by the sampling strategy and resulting sample size. In addition, we were not involved in what questions to include in the survey, because of which we had a limited range of physical danger perceptions and a single item indicating desire to leave the occupation. While such truncated measures like this are often an issue when using archival data, our measures do have face validity and single item measures are not necessarily always as problematic as we might suspect (Fisher, Matthews, & Gibbons, 2016). If participants in this study all have limited choices to leave the occupation,

for those women who said ‘yes’ to the item assessing desire to leave, we can interpret this as a signal they have a higher desire to leave than women who have said ‘no’ or ‘unsure’.

Nevertheless, we have no data to support whether the participants ‘objectively’ could leave the occupation or not (almost 25% of the women in this sample reported having no choice or being coerced into sex work). In addition, as we described above, the single item we used to measure desire to leave the sex work occupation was adapted for general respondents and correlated highly in an unrelated survey with items used previously to measure turnover intentions; this served as a form of validity check <sup>1</sup>. As for limited sample size, a post hoc power analysis suggests that the regression for the full study model was likely underpowered, with some evidence of this coming from the absolute size of the slope for the intrinsic group being larger than that of the extrinsic group, yet the latter was statistically significant but the former was not.

Second, the data were collected over 25 years ago and some contextual aspects of sex work in Australia may have changed over this period (e.g., legislation and/or attitudes affecting the safety of sex workers), affecting the relevance of the current findings. While we cannot refute this entirely, we can point to some evidence that alleviates this concern. A history of prostitution in Australia outlines that the last major shift in law related to prostitution in Victoria was in October 1994, when ‘The Prostitution Control Act (PCA)’ was passed, making indoor prostitution legal in the state (Parliament of Victoria, 2011). In 2010, this act was renamed to the Sex Work Act 1994, but the legal context remains very similar today (Parliament of Victoria, 2011). Despite the legalization of indoor brothels, the literature continues to document connections between sex work and organized crime, as well as the stigma attached to prostitution, that have not been affected by this form of legalization (Bindel & Kelly, 2003). All

told, we would have little reason to suspect different findings had we collected data from Melbourne sex workers today.

Third, the study model may not generalize to sex workers who organize and even perform their work in different ways (e.g., over the Internet), or those who perform their work in different settings (e.g., sex clubs). However, we might expect that the model might generalize to individuals employed in physically dangerous work to which stigma is attached (e.g., slaughterhouse workers: Ackroyd & Crowdy, 1990; prison guards: Jacobs & Retsky, 1975; Ross, 1981). As sex work is tainted on all three dimensions of dirty work--physical, social, and moral--it remains to be seen whether these relationships would hold in other dirty work contexts that might be tainted on only one or two of these three dimensions.

A fourth limitation is that the data are cross-sectional and are entirely self-reported, introducing concerns about the common method variance artifacts (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). However, Siemsen, Roth, and Oliveira (2010) report that there is an attenuated likelihood of finding a significant interaction using all mono-method data due to lower reliability of the measures, suggesting that if one is indeed found, this is strong evidence for a true interaction effect. Our sample also is composed mainly of individuals working in the profession for extrinsic motivations. While the vastly different sub-sample sizes of the extrinsic (91.4% of the sample) and intrinsic groups would reduce the likelihood of finding a significant moderator of a dichotomous variable from the outset (Stone-Romero, Alliger, & Agunis, 1994), this proportion likely reflects a reality of the sex work occupation: the majority of sex workers work for the money or are forced into it by other circumstances. In this sense, the proportion of the sample choosing sex work for extrinsic reasons may reflect the ecological reality.

While there are limitations inherent in the use of archival data, there are also important strengths. The major benefit of the use of these archival data is access to a large number of participants engaged in sex work—a sample quite rare in safety-related research, and, more generally, studies of sex workers and their job attitudes.

### **Future Research**

Several avenues for future research are suggested by the results of this study. First, replication in other samples of workers is warranted. If our model generalizes to physically dangerous work in general, establishing boundary conditions demonstrating when motives for entering an occupation might moderate perceptions of physical danger will be key. While organizations want their workers to be motivated intrinsically, we may need to be more cognizant of the downsides intrinsic motivation may bring in specific contexts. Studies of individuals in other physically dangerous occupations are merited. Relatedly, we should also consider in future research the role of continuance commitment—staying because one needs to and is aware of the costs of leaving (Meyer & Allen, 1991)—and the negative association that this could have with employees in dangerous occupations who are unable to leave. The item we used to measure desire to leave in the current study (i.e., “would you change occupation from sex worker if you could?”) contained the possibility that respondents were not able to leave the occupation because of various constraints. Second, using measures other than a desire to leave the occupation that focus on positive job attitudes and outcomes (i.e., hope, resilience) could be used in future research of safety in stigmatized occupations.

Third, we investigated perceptions of physical danger, but there are also psychological hazards in this type of work. Despite the documented dangers of working in this occupation, studies generally find that sex workers are not necessarily at higher risk for increased mental

health difficulties. For example, there is some research showing that female sex workers experienced rates of psychiatric morbidity similar to women in the general community (Boyle et al., 1997) and no differences in mental health or self-esteem as compared to women in other occupations (Romans, Potter, Martin, & Herbison, 2001). This is intriguing. On one hand, the physical dangers faced by women working in this profession, compared to others, are much higher; however, psychological outcomes for this same occupation seem to be equivalent with women working in other occupations in certain circumstances. One possible explanation for this could be that for those women who entered sex work for intrinsic reasons (as opposed to extrinsic reasons), the consequences of potentially dangerous work are not as psychologically damaging as for those who were forced into or who chose the occupation for extrinsic reasons. Further investigation into perceptions of psychosocial hazards (compared to physical hazards) and the relationship between the two types of hazards would be interesting.

### **Conclusion**

A major challenge in furthering our knowledge of work has been understanding non-traditional work. To this end, researchers have long focused, for example, on part-time work (Barling & Gallagher, 1996) and non-standard work conditions (Connelly & Gallagher, 2004). More recently, research attention is being directed toward contingent (or contract) workers and those in the gig economy (Heller, 2017). Increasing our knowledge of the predictors of sex workers' desire to leave the occupation is important as results of studies such as this suggest a connection between interventions that governments and organizations can take to improve workplace safety and sex workers' motivation to remain in the occupation despite it being physically dangerous work. Our understanding of organizations and organizational behavior will be advanced by the extent to which we gain more knowledge about the nature and consequences

of dirty work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), and whether the processes observed in studies of traditional employees hold for individuals in stigmatized jobs. Our study represents another step in this important direction.

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**Footnote**

<sup>1</sup> Using a separate cross-sectional sample ( $n = 209$ ) of employees collected through a Qualtrics survey, we included a very similar item to the one used in the current study to measure desire to leave (“I would change my occupation if I could”): it had a zero-order correlation of .72 (disattenuated  $r = .80$ ) with the mean score of two items (i.e., “I will probably look for a new job next year” and “I often think about quitting”) ( $\alpha = .80$ ) commonly used in turnover intentions scales, indicating the strong relationship between desire to leave the occupation and turnover intentions.

Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-Order Correlations between Study Variables Divided by Motivation for Entering Sex Work Group*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.
1. Perceptions of danger	2.88 (3.04)	1.02 (1.04)		
2. Desire to leave occupation	2.15 (1.89)	.85 (.89)	.15*	
<i>N</i>	273 (27)			

*Notes.* \*  $p < .05$ , pairwise deletion. Extrinsic motivation group below the diagonal; intrinsic motivation group above the diagonal.

Means, standard deviations, and sub-sample size in parentheses are for the intrinsic motivation group.

Table 2  
*Comparison of Mean and Variance Differences Between Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation Groups*

Variable	Category	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Difference Tests
Perceptions of physical danger	Intrinsic	3.04	1.07	$t(292) = -.92, p = .36$
	Extrinsic	2.85	1.01	
Levene's test of equality of variances, $F(1, 292) = .18, p = .67$				
Desire to leave	Intrinsic	1.96	.91	$t(280) = 1.68, p = .24$
	Extrinsic	2.17	.85	
Levene's test of equality of variances, $F(1, 280) = .25, p = .62$				
Education	Intrinsic	12 < 12 years of schooling; 13 ≥ 12 years schooling		$\chi^2(1) = .033, ns$
	Extrinsic	124 < 12 years schooling; 145 ≥ 12 years schooling		
Marital status	Intrinsic	17 single; 9 married		$\chi^2(1) = .044, ns$
	Extrinsic	184 single; 89 married		
Age (in years)	Intrinsic	26.73	7.33	$t(297) = -.61, ns$
	Extrinsic	27.66	7.33	
Levene's test of equality of variances, $F(1, 297) = .06, p = .81$				
Length of time in the sex industry (in months)	Intrinsic	45.04	55.08	$t(291) = .15, ns$
	Extrinsic	43.35	52.29	
Levene's test of equality of variances, $F(1, 291) = 1.08, p = .30$				

Table 3

Ordinary Least Squares Regression Analysis Using PROCESS Model 1

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	2.62	.53	4.92	< .001
Reasons for entering occupation	-.82	.55	-1.48	> .05
Perceptions of physical danger	-.22	.17	-1.31	> .05
Reasons for entering occupation × Perceptions of physical danger	.35	.18	1.97	< .05

*Notes.*  $N = 275$ , listwise deletion. Model summary:  $R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(3, 271) = 2.95$ ,  $p < .05$ .  $R^2$  increase due to interaction:  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $F(1, 271) = 2.95$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Figure 1

Moderating Effect of Reasons for Working on the Relationship between Perceptions of Physical Danger and Desire to Leave Occupation.

