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Stigma Hierarchies: The Internal Dynamics of Stigmatization in the Sex Work Occupation

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Abstract

Scholars studying stigmatized, or ''dirty work,'' occupations have tended to characterize people outside of the occupation as the stigmatizers and those within the occupation as social supports who buffer each other from stigma. We argue that this characterization discounts the unique ways stigmatization can take place within heterogeneous occupations and the challenges it raises for finding support from other occupational members. Based on a six-year qualitative study of the sex work occupation in Canada, we explore the internal dynamics of stigmatization in the occupation. Our analysis reveals that sex workers are not just the stigmatized but also the stigmatizers, as they elaborate, borrow, and adapt perceptions of stigma to rank and place each other into a stigma hierarchy. To avoid the risks of being stigmatized based on this hierarchy, sex workers engage in stealth organizing to find safe others within the occupation to provide social support. Thus the occupation is not a stigma-free safe haven for its workers. Instead, the occupation as a whole is characterized by dissension among its members. Their efforts to find social support lead to what we call *bounded entitativity*: a sense of being grouplike that is confined to small community groups within a broader occupational context of dissension. We found bounded entitativity to be associated with challenges for occupational members in undertaking social change efforts.

Keywords: stigma, stigmatized occupations, occupational community, occupations, sex work

Stigma is a ''deeply discrediting'' (Goffman, 1963: 4) and ''persistent predicament'' (Link and Phelan, 2001: 363) that can impact individuals, occupations, organizations, and industries. Stigma often leads to a host of detrimental outcomes such as social exclusion, public sanctions, and the devaluation of

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one's identity (Goffman, 1963; Stone, Stone, and Dipboye, 1992; Baran et al., 2012). As a result, social interactions are risky for those who are stigmatized (Hudson and Okhuysen, 2009). Individuals involved in stigmatized, or ''dirty,'' occupations face the risk of stigmatization during social encounters because they do not know who will apply social sanctions, engage in shaming, and make other negative social evaluations of them (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; de Meis, 2002; Koken, 2012; Mavin and Grandy, 2013).

One way to manage this risk is to turn to fellow stigmatized workers for support (Goffman, 1963; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Soni-Sinha and Yates, 2013). As Van Maanen and Barley (1984: 326) argued:

> When an occupation is stigmatized or viewed by outsiders as marginal in society, members will turn to one another for aid and comfort and, through such interaction, sustain a view of the world that justifies and vindicates itself as a defense against outsiders.

Members of stigmatized occupations are expected to develop a sense of entitativity, a perception of unity and of being ''grouplike'' that comes from feeling stigmatized by others (Kreiner, Ashforth, and Sluss, 2006: 626). Scholars have assumed that such entitativity leads to stigma-free safe havens that shield their workers from stigmatizing outsiders (Kreiner, Ashforth, and Sluss, 2006; Ashforth et al., 2007; Lemmergaard and Muhr, 2012; Soni-Sinha and Yates, 2013).

Yet this notion of occupational safe havens is based on an assumption that the stigmatizers are exclusively outside the occupation. While this assumption is often true, it may not always be the case (Mavin and Grandy, 2013). Stigmatization may come from inside an occupation as well, and importantly, such stigmatization might look different than that cast by outsiders. This is because outsiders may not have the same depth of understanding of the work and thus the distinctions that can be made between workers. From the outside, people often perceive occupations to be more homogeneous than they actually are. For example, Van Maanen and colleagues' study of fishermen identified substantial differences between them that outsiders would not have known (Van Maanen, Miller, and Johnson, 1982; Van Maanen and Barley, 1984), and Howard-Grenville and colleagues (2017) explored differences among chemists based on emerging environmentalism that might be hidden from most people outside the occupation.

Acknowledging the heterogeneity within occupations, and that such differences often stem from internally created distinctions, suggests that our current theorizing about stigmatization and occupational response is likely incorrect when examining stigmatization within occupations. Unless we begin to examine intra-occupational stigma as a unique phenomenon, our theorizing about stigmatized work and stigmatization is going to be incomplete and misleading. Understanding the dynamics of stigmatization within occupations is important as they are likely to shape the ways in which workers organize and shield themselves from stigma. Finding support within such an occupation may be more challenging than ''turn[ing] to one another'' if stigmatization manifests—in distinct ways—inside the occupation. We need to understand how workers facing intra-occupational stigmatization organize to find social support to cope with the negative implications of stigma.

We therefore explore the following research questions: how do the dynamics of stigmatization unfold within stigmatized occupations, and what are the implications of such dynamics? We examine these questions through an in-depth qualitative study of the sex work occupation in Canada. Sex work is a highly stigmatized occupation that involves providing sexual services, including but not limited to prostitution, pornography, webcam work, stripping, and erotic domination (de Meis, 2002; Grandy, 2008; Tyler, 2011; Grandy and Mavin, 2012; Koken, 2012; Blithe and Wolfe, 2017). Sex work is thus a heterogeneous stigmatized occupation ideal for our research study. Our analysis reveals that the occupation is not characterized by entitativity but rather by internally elaborated, borrowed, and adapted perceptions of stigma used to construct a stigma hierarchy within the occupation. As a result, sex workers are at risk of experiencing stigmatization within the occupation, and to cope with such risk, they engage in stealth organizing to find similarly stigmatized others to provide social support. The result is an occupation characterized by *bounded entitativity*: social support and a sense of being grouplike that is confined to small community groups within a broader occupational context of dissension.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

"Dirty Work," Stigmatized Occupations

Occupations, like people, can be stigmatized for a variety of reasons. Proximity to dirt, death, or the body (physical stigma); the immorality of activities (moral stigma); and associations with stigmatized individuals and/or perceptions of servility (social stigma) can all lead to perceptions of diminished value (Hughes, 1958; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). Occupations stigmatized on these dimensions have been called "dirty work" because what is stigmatized "derive[s] primarily from the work done by individuals and groups, not from characteristics of individuals and groups themselves" (Kreiner, Ashforth, and Sluss, 2006: 621). Work may be "dirty" in different ways and to varying degrees. Morticians, dentists, social workers, taxi drivers, and sex workers may all be associated with some degree of taint, but the differences between the stigma experienced by a dentist or a social worker and that experienced by a sex worker are significant. Scholars have argued that sex workers are a highly stigmatized group because their occupation is characterized by physical, social, *and* moral stigma (Kreiner, Ashforth, and Sluss, 2006; Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014) that is also pervasive, or "core" to what they do (Hudson, 2008).

Research has extensively documented the stigmatization faced by those in "dirty" occupations (e.g., Mavin and Grandy, 2013; Rivera, 2015; Hughes et al., 2016; Blithe and Wolfe, 2017). But researchers have also found that stigmatized workers generate positive views of themselves by employing coping strategies such as reframing and refocusing (Dick, 2005; Tracy and Scott, 2006; Grandy and Mavin, 2012), passing or hiding (Kong, 2006; Koken, 2012; Brewis and Godfrey, 2018), and condemning condemners (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Grandy, 2008).

Scholars have documented that "social weighting" is a core strategy for coping with stigma (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2007; Mavin and Grandy, 2013; Brewis and Godfrey, 2018). This response involves making downward social comparisons to other referent groups that are perceived as

worse off (Slutskaya et al., 2016)—groups that are ''sufficiently similar that the comparison is informative, yet sufficiently 'inferior' to gratify the desire for self-esteem'' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999: 425). Individuals use social weighting as a means of projecting or ''transferring disgust to others'' (Mavin and Grandy, 2013: 247).

In addition to documenting these normalizing and identity-based tactics for coping with stigma (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2007), the literature has suggested that dirty work occupations, especially those facing the most pervasive types of stigma, would develop strong entitativity, ''a perception among individuals that they are grouplike'' (Kreiner, Ashforth, and Sluss, 2006: 626). The group should then be able to foster a collective language of normalization, an ''occupational ideology'' that outlines common justifications for their work (Goffman, 1963; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). For example, butchers have a sense of being part of a group due to the physical stigma facing their work, and they have developed a common ideology that depicts fellow butchers as braver than men performing less-stigmatized work (Meara, 1974; Mavin and Grandy, 2013). Entitativity thus enables a sense of validation and support:

> The most reliable validation tends to come from members of the occupation itself, as insiders turn to one another for the affirmation they are often denied externally. This is again likely to be particularly true of the members of morally stigmatized occupations, all else being equal, as the ''evil'' of moral stigma not only makes external validation less likely but the resulting entitativity of the occupations provides a more potent social resource for validation. (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014: 92)

As this quote indicates, the literature has assumed that stigmatizers are those exclusively outside of the occupation and that the stigmatized are those within the occupation who turn to each other for support. Building on the stigma literature (Pescosolido and Martin, 2015), the stigmatizers are ''normals'': those without the stigmatizing mark (Goffman, 1963; Stone, Stone, and Dipboye, 1992) who have the power to label, devalue, and discriminate against those who are marked (Link and Phelan, 2001). This distinction between stigmatized and stigmatizer is, however, oversimplified and potentially incorrect as it seems to be based on an assumption that occupations and their members are homogeneous. The literature does not yet fully acknowledge the ways in which workers may stigmatize each other based on intra-occupational differences. Our current theory is thus missing important dynamics of stigmatization that may be invisible to outsiders, making our understanding of stigmatization within occupations potentially inaccurate. To better understand the dynamics of stigmatization and how they affect workers and their organizing within stigmatized occupations, we need to look inside these occupations and at workers' own roles in stigmatization processes.

Occupational Communities

To study and understand occupations, we need to attend to their boundaries (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984; Abbott, 1988, 1993, 1995; Kellogg, Orlikowski, and Yates, 2006; Anteby, Chan, and DiBenigno, 2016). Accordingly, an extensive body of work has examined how occupational members differentiate

themselves from members of other occupations and establish divisions between members and non-members to form these boundaries (Gold, 1952; Goode, 1957; Hall, 1983; Bechky, 2003b; Truelove and Kellogg, 2016). In these studies, scholars have examined how occupations establish jurisdictions and construct mandates to claim legitimacy within a specific domain (Nelsen and Barley, 1997; Bechky, 2003a; Kellogg, Orlikowski, and Yates, 2006; Nelson and Irwin, 2014; Huising, 2015; Truelove and Kellogg, 2016; Fayard, Stigliani, and Bechky, 2017). The boundaries of occupations are formed through ongoing negotiations between those within the occupation, as well as with those outside the occupation who have a vested interest in it, such as regulatory bodies and stakeholders.

Because the boundaries of an occupation can be negotiated between occupational members, an important insight from this literature is that more than one occupational community can exist within an occupation. An occupational community is a ''group of people who consider themselves to be engaged in the same sort of work; whose identity is drawn from the work; who share with one another a set of values, norms and perspectives that apply to but extend beyond work'' (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984: 294). Recognizing that more than one such community can exist within an occupation, scholars have begun to examine the boundaries *within* occupations. Anteby, Chan, and DiBenigno (2016: 204) pointed out that ''while many existing studies have generally regarded an occupation as a mostly coherent, relatively homogeneous set of tasks and practices, an emerging set of studies consider within-occupation heterogeneity.''

Occupational communities can be formed within occupations based on similarities in work tasks, the way such work is done, who does the work, or the values underlying such work (e.g., Fine, 1996; Anteby, 2010; Chan and Anteby, 2016; Wright, Zammuto, and Liesch, 2017; Pratt, Lepisto, and Dane, 2019). For example, ''green chemists'' differentiate themselves from traditional chemists (Howard-Grenville et al., 2017), and ''doctors of pain''—physicians specializing in pain management—form a community distinct from other medical specialties (Baszanger, 1990). Because these communities are socially constructed, distinct specialists within occupations can deny or be denied membership in the community, just as gynecological pelvic surgeons have been denied membership in the OB/GYN community (Zetka, 2011). Distinct communities are not necessarily equal within an occupation; certain groups may have more status, such as surgeons compared with primary care physicians or police sergeants compared with constables (Dick, 2005; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006). These distinctions may complicate the organization of and relationship between occupational communities within heterogeneous occupations.

This body of work has thus revealed that occupations can be heterogeneous and that their boundaries are socially constructed, composed of multiple occupational communities of unequal status. These features of occupations mean that it is unlikely all stigmatized occupations are homogeneous and as naturally grouplike as the dirty work literature has suggested. ''Finding the like-minded others'' (Fayard, Stigliani, and Bechky, 2017: 271) within an occupation who can act as social supports and buffer members from stigma is thus likely to be fraught with challenges and influenced by dynamics that are potentially invisible to those outside the occupation.

METHODS

Research Setting

We conducted a six-year qualitative study of sex work in Canada (2013–2019) to explore how the dynamics of stigmatization unfold within a stigmatized occupation and to identify the implications of such dynamics. Our initial purpose in studying sex work was to study social change processes in this contested arena during a period when laws were being redesigned in Canada. However, we realized during our initial fieldwork that this context was an ideal setting for studying stigmatization within occupations, as we were surprised to see that occupational members did not always buffer each other from stigma and in fact often stigmatized each other.

Sex work is ''a form of sexual or erotic labor that entails a variety of activities'' (Mavin and Grandy, 2013: 237). Heterogeneity exists within the occupation based on various specialties (Sanders, 2005; Scambler, 2007; Hubbard and Prior, 2013; Wolfe and Blithe, 2015), similar to other heterogeneous occupations (Dick, 2005; Gonzalez and Pérez-Floriano, 2015; Howard-Grenville et al., 2017). These specialties include but are not limited to prostitution (or escorting), erotic domination, webcam performance, pornography, stripping, and burlesque (Sanders, 2005; Weitzer, 2009; Grandy and Mavin, 2012). Importantly, sex work is also viewed as an occupation by those conducting the work; our participants categorized themselves as ''sex workers.''

In addition to being heterogeneous, sex work has been identified as one of the most highly stigmatized or ''dirty'' occupations (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014; Blithe and Wolfe, 2017). In a recent study of sex work in Canada, Benoit and colleagues (2014: 10) concluded that the ''prostitute or 'whore' stigma is one of the strongest societal stigmas an individual may ever face.'' Although sex work advertisements are often highly visible, workers themselves are generally hidden because of the intense stigma, as they carefully consider who to tell about their work (Scambler, 2007; Weitzer, 2010; Hubbard and Prior, 2013). Sex work thus provides an ideal setting in which to examine the internal dynamics of stigmatization.

Data

Our data sources include interviews, social media posts, media articles, and observations. We conducted 86 interviews with 71 people involved in the sex work occupation: 61 women and transgender sex workers (4 of whom were past sex workers) and 10 community allies (activists, support workers, and clients). When we began our investigation, we used purposeful sampling (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) of sex workers involved in activism, as the initial study was focused on social change. As the study progressed, however, we began to engage in more theoretical sampling (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), focusing on sex workers across a range of specialties to ensure we captured the heterogeneous nature of the occupation. In addition to the 4 past sex workers, we spoke with 13 escorts, 9 pornography performers, 3 erotic webcam performers, 9 strippers, 10 burlesque performers, 7 dominatrices (i.e., those who engage in erotic domination), and 6 sex workers who engaged in multiple specialties, which we label as hybrids. The hybrid sex workers had a unique perspective, as they could compare their own personal experiences in multiple

specialties. Our interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 3 hours, with an average interview length of 71 minutes. Interviews took place at locations each interviewee chose: some interviews were conducted in cafes, dungeons, or apartments; some occurred at events; and others were conducted by phone or through Skype, Zoom, or Google Meets. Almost all interviews were recorded and transcribed, and when this was not possible, we took detailed notes during and immediately following an interview.

Initially in our fieldwork, we focused on sex workers' social change efforts and management of stigma. Therefore, in our first set of 39 interviews, we asked participants questions about their work, their involvement in efforts to fight the law and societal perceptions about sex work, and how they personally dealt with the stigma of their work.[1] We noticed during our interviews that participants repeatedly brought up the dynamics of stigmatization within the occupation as a whole, as well as the importance of having a community to support them. Therefore, as is common in qualitative research (e.g., Pratt, Lepisto, and Dane, 2019), we pivoted our focus to reflect their concerns; in the second set of 32 interviews, we followed up on questions related to the internal dynamics of stigmatization and support communities. We probed why interviewees felt community membership was important, who was in their support community, who was not, and why. We also asked about intra-occupational perceptions of stigma, how interviewees found supportive community members within the occupation, and any difficulties they faced. This line of questioning triggered extensive commentary on the nature of stigmatization within the occupation. We conducted a final set of 15 interviews, including second interviews with a few participants (Escort1, Escort6, Escort11, Hybrid3, Webcam1, Webcam3), to test our emerging themes and further develop theory about the internal dynamics of stigmatization.

Throughout the interviews, many sex workers mentioned online elements of the occupation, so we collected online data to supplement our interviews and potentially observe the stigmatizing dynamics they were describing. To do so, we began to follow the online activities of each sex worker we interviewed who had an active online presence. We collected data from Twitter and Facebook posts, sex work community blogs (such as Tits and Sass, and Fetlife), industry forums (such as Canadian Escort Review Forum), and any other forms of media produced by or written about the sex workers. This resulted in 972 pages of archival data from blogs and media, 1,107 pages of Facebook data, and 63,679 tweets. These supplemental data were helpful for us to observe stigmatization in action and how workers interact with others within the occupation, present themselves, and speak about their work.

In working with stigmatized or marginalized populations, developing trust is crucial (Rogers, Toubiana, and DeCelles, 2016), and so ensuring our participants' confidentiality was of the utmost importance. While the media and social media data were essential for us to understand the dynamics of stigmatization in practice, to protect the confidentiality of our participants we do

[1] Providing sexual services is not actually illegal in Canada, although the national laws in place until 2013 prohibited communicating for the purposes of selling sexual services, running a common bawdy house, and profiting off the sexual services of others. The new laws passed in 2015 criminalize the purchase of sexual services, as well as profiting off the sexual services of others and advertising sexual services. It is generally understood that these laws apply to prostitution (including erotic massage) but not to pornography, erotic webcam, stripping, or erotic domination.

not present these data verbatim. Our interviewees' online presence is technically public, but their participation in our research was based on anonymity. Direct quotations from social media or other media sources would jeopardize this anonymity, as search engines can link the quotations to our participants, who could then be connected to quotations from their anonymous interviews. Thus we have treated the online data as we would treat observations, and when necessary, we have paraphrased tweets or media articles to ensure they cannot be linked back to the participants. We believe this allows us to demonstrate the trustworthiness of our data without compromising our participants' anonymity.

Throughout the research process, we also engaged in 98 hours of observation at 32 events, including public protests, fundraisers, sexuality conferences, porn shoots, movie festivals, and award ceremonies. Because of the stigmatized nature of the work, observation was a helpful way to connect with potential interview participants early in the research process, as workers were often skeptical of less personal forms of contact such as email. Later in the process, observation enabled us to witness occupational interactions and confirm the emerging themes. The data-gathering process ended when we reached theoretical saturation across the combined data sources (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Table 1 provides an overview of the data sources we used and how they informed our study.

Table 1. Description of Data

Data Type	Amount	Use in Analysis
Primary data		
Interviews:		
69 semi-structured interviews with 61 sex workers (4 of whom were past sex workers) lasting between 30 minutes and 3 hours	1,305 single-spaced pages of transcripts	Provided insights into individuals' experiences with stigma in their work, the internal dynamics of stigmatization, and any challenges they faced because of these stigma dynamics
17 semi-structured interviews with 10 community allies (activists, support workers, and clients) lasting between 50 minutes and 2 hours	194 single-spaced pages of transcripts	Provided insights into the community dynamics and into the fight for legitimacy
Secondary data		
Social media and media:		
Twitter data	63,679 tweets	Provided insights into the nature of interactions in the community, confirmation of activities described during the interviews, and insights into the unfolding of stigmatization and legitimacy efforts
Facebook data	1,107 pages	
Blogs, forums, media articles written by the sex workers	972 pages	
Observations:		
20 community events (movie festivals, award ceremonies, semi-public porn shoots) lasting between 1.5 and 6 hours	58 hours of observation 68 single-spaced pages of notes	Provided access to participants and allowed observation of dynamics occurring in occupational communities
12 social change events (protests, fundraisers, workshops, planning meetings) lasting between 1.5 and 9 hours	40 hours of observation 92 single-spaced pages of notes	Confirmed insights about challenges for the occupation as a whole

Data Analysis

Reflecting the inductive and qualitative nature of our research, our analysis process involved engaging our data, our hunches, and existing theory in iterative cycles (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2007; Pratt, 2009). After conducting the first set of interviews, each of us independently reviewed the transcripts, noting emerging themes. As we discussed these themes, we realized that the internal dynamics of stigmatization were central to the workers' lived experiences and the support they received (or did not receive) from other occupational members. We thus identified these stigmatization dynamics as a crucial part of the story that cut across other issues of interest, such as stigma management and social change.

After we had compiled data from a larger set of participants, we began a more systematic analysis. We performed the analysis and all other coding in the qualitative software program QDA Miner. The first phase of analysis involved an open-coding process whereby the first author coded the interviews for all issues of interest, using codes about stigma and stigma management, such as ''shaming,'' ''isolation,'' and ''comparing to others''; codes related to community, such as ''community support,'' ''belonging,'' ''those who do not belong,'' and ''contestation''; and codes about social change, such as ''challenges of making change'' and ''fighting for legitimacy.'' We met after every few interviews had been coded to discuss and refine the emerging codes; if we were not in agreement, we discussed and refined the coding until we were.

After this initial round of coding, we returned to the literature to identify what was most interesting, unusual, or exciting in the data in relation to existing theory. At this point, we recognized that our data were challenging existing assumptions in the literature regarding dirty work occupations and were able to shed light on the internal dynamics of stigmatization. We then identified our codes on stigma and iterated with the literature to make sense of the distinct ways in which stigma was manifesting within the occupation. We discovered that perceptions of stigma within the occupation were based on three dimensions: physical (corporeality of the work), demographic (socioeconomic status and race), and moral (purpose in conducting the work). These perceptions were largely consistent across sex workers, forming the basis of what participants called the ''whorearchy.''

We began our second phase of analysis with an orienting focus around understanding the particulars of these internal dynamics of stigmatization and their impacts on the occupation and workers. We probed the idea of a ''whorearchy'' by jointly interrogating existing codes and determining how they fit together into a bigger picture by identifying themes and aggregate categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In doing so, we identified two internal mechanisms of stigmatization that generate a stigma hierarchy (our label for the whorearchy) within the occupation: ordering and detaching. Ordering is the ranking of workers based on intra-occupational perceptions of stigma, and detaching comprises efforts to categorically exclude certain forms of work from the occupation based on these perceptions of stigma. Importantly, the internal perceptions of stigma were not the same as those cast on sex workers from the broader society—they were elaborated, borrowed, and adapted.

Next, we looked for implications of these activities and returned to a hunch that had emerged early in data collection through our engagement with the social media data and observations. We discovered that the stigma hierarchy means workers risk experiencing stigmatization during interactions with other occupational members. To avoid these risks, occupational members engage in stealth organizing: activities that help them find supportive others while avoiding stigmatization. The stigma hierarchy is also associated with fragmenting around the perceptions of stigma, which generates broader occupational dissension. Thus we characterize the occupation as having *bounded entitativity*: social support and a sense of being grouplike that is confined to small community groups within a broader occupational context of dissension.

During the final stage of analysis, we looked for comparisons that could challenge our theorizing and add greater nuance to our findings. We considered the emerging theory in relation to our observations from events and social media data. We pored over the media and social media data to see if we could observe these activities in workers' online interactions and verify whether the codes held up across this supplementary data source. These data supported our theorizing, providing assurance that our findings were robust across data sources.

THE INTERNAL DYNAMICS OF STIGMATIZATION WITHIN THE SEX WORK OCCUPATION

Our analysis reveals that although our participants feel stigmatized by outsiders, there are also internal mechanisms of stigmatization that affect how they organize to find social support. We identify these internal mechanisms of stigmatization as ordering and detaching, and we illustrate that they are not merely strategies for projecting a more positive and less stigmatized position for oneself. Instead they involve upward and downward social comparisons whereby workers project and accept stigma and the placement of oneself and others in a hierarchy by elaborating, borrowing, and adapting perceptions of stigma within the occupation. Thus the stigmatized are also the stigmatizers, and the risk of stigmatization exists even when interacting with others within the occupation. This risk creates challenges in finding social support from other occupational members as the workers do not know who may stigmatize them.

In response, sex workers engage in what we conceptualize as stealth organizing in order to find safe others to interact with and to manage the risks of stigmatization by distancing themselves from more- and less-stigmatized workers in the occupation. Stealth organizing efforts result in occupational members organizing into small groups of sex workers who provide positive support to each other. However, this means that the occupation is fragmented around perceptions of stigma, which generates dissension across the occupation as a whole. Thus workers' sense of entitativity is bounded to small, supportive community groups rather than the broader occupation, and we found that occupational members have difficulty coming together to create social change. We elaborate these findings below and provide representative quotes from the data in Table 2.

Table 2. Illustrative Data

Themes	Representative Quotes from the Data
Internal mechanisms of stigmatization	
Ordering	*Physical: Corporeality*
	I mean, burlesque you don't get fully naked. Stripping, you get fully naked, but it's still just dancing. Porn is porn, and then escorting is escorting. (Strip4)
	I think that escorts definitely [are the most stigmatized]. Because people have a hard time processing that physical aspect of it. I guess that's why. It's the same service, but I don't know. I guess that's why. To me to go. . . . That's a line . . . that's a different line that you cross. The online and the real. And the real is part of it to me. But I don't see it as bad. . . . I think escorting is more . . . is not as well seen as camming. (Webcam4)
	Demographic: Socioeconomic status and race
	Within any kind of profession, there's people who have different rates and there's definitely folks that come from privilege, and folks that definitely have more struggle than other people, right? And what has brought us to the industry, like we all have our own story, right? And some people come for the money, some come to feed their families, some people come because of disabilities, not being able to function as like say, with my mental health. (Escort13)
	So if you're having financial issues and you're somebody who don't have . . . like you're very wealthy, there's very clear classism. The struggle isn't a good look . . . it's a very demeaning thing. . . . And that's the other thing is that pre-existing class structures come into work. If you're somebody who's escorting who had parents who were wealthy growing up, chances are you're going to be able to portray wealth and success. . . . So I'd say realistically, what's actually stigmatized is your class, your wealth level. (Escort6)
	Moral: Purpose
	I feel that there's definitely . . . a difference, suffice to say, between those that do sex work who wouldn't have to materially rely on it otherwise, and those who do [it] because they don't have the ability to be upwardly mobile, whether that means for employment or socially. . . . Yeah, I would consider myself someone who does it more for survival. I make it look good. I make it look marketable, but . . . materially speaking, I don't have post-secondary [education], I don't have family, I don't have access to other funds other than my credit cards. I'm actually in receipt of disability because I am a person with some psychosocial disabilities, so there's that. (Porn9)
	Every day I walk around the stage with my hands and do back flips. . . . These girls are doing acrobatic, old tricks, they're doing crazy, insane stuff, dressed like different costumes, and themes to the music that they choose. . . . The girls that are starting to do it, and the girls that are working just take it to the next level because they love their job. (Strip6)
Detaching	We're not talking about trafficking, right? Like, that is a whole other issue, right? We're not even talking about trafficking. Like, sex work, you—when we're talking about sex work, yeah, I don't see it. (Escort3)
	. . . some could argue otherwise, and I could definitely see their point of view. But for the most part, like I don't consider it as part of the sex industry . . . the fact that like burlesque doesn't always go straight down nude. (Burles7)
Fragmenting	
	The problem is that we're really fragmented. . . . So we can't always agree on what the solutions are. (Dom2)
	I noticed that there was a lot of separation. (Escort3)
Stealth organizing	
Scoping	I didn't see that before I created my Twitter account. . . . We all connect over social media, but re: social media, and through watching each other online. I mean girls can come watch a chat room just like guys can, you know? And [a] lot of models will come in. (Webcam1)
	They [other sex workers] look at your stuff and they comment on your stuff and then sometimes, you start chatting. (Hybrid6, porn, webcam)

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Themes	Representative Quotes from the Data
Screening	It's an energy thing. I don't even need to communicate; I don't need to use words. If I sit in a room and I feel you and I can feel what you're trying to say, your energy, I already know that at least in some capacity. (Porn6)
	There's that live interaction online, which can also lead to meeting in real life. . . . A lot of people are more open about communicating their ideas and stuff like that, because it's online and you're kind of hiding behind a computer . . . things that, you know, might not always be suggested face-to-face and stuff. (Webcam1)
Bounded entitativity	
Supportive community groups	[There are] little cohorts of people you interact with. It's like . . . little friend groups. . . . We interact a lot with each other. (Escort6)
	[W]e as [a] community help each other . . . our community is super—quite tight, actually. Even little pods of people are . . . by email, coming together in lots of different ways. (Hybrid2, escort, burlesque)
Occupational dissension	I actually find it [sex work] very fragmented. . . . I don't think people talk to each other enough. (Escort3)
	I don't think sex workers have anything in common [*laughing*]. There's this illusion of commonality, and that commonality does not exist and should exist. But [in] any group of people, if you're uniting on the basis of work, and work alone, or identity, and identity alone, different movements will fragment off and be created: sex workers of color, or indigenous sex workers, or safe sex workers, or indoor sex workers. . . . I think a lot of the time groups splinter off because they do not feel that their needs or their demands are being represented. . . . And it's infuriating as well, because I think the sex workers rights movements have been so desperate to find common messaging. (Escort5)

Internal Mechanisms of Stigmatization and the Construction of a Stigma Hierarchy

> We realize there's people that are in adult film, you know, nude modeling, escorting, dominatrix—dominatrices, I should say. Or people that work in the BDSM world.[2] People who work in webcam, phone sex. Sex workers is a big, broad umbrella. (Dom3)

Our participants explained that sex work is a heterogeneous occupation and that all parts of the occupation are highly stigmatized. ''Unfortunately, . . . feeling that . . . stigma, like, the shame that people have put on the work, . . . put on me, it permeates'' (Hybrid2, escort, burlesque). Our findings show that all of our participants personally feel stigma from outsiders as a result of their work, regardless of their particular specialty within the occupation:

> I have people that are telling me I'm some sort of whore . . . there definitely have been times where it really, really got to me. There have been times when I've come out of cam [off camera] and just started crying. . . . I don't usually talk [about] it in my personal life a lot. Actually, I think one of the biggest struggles is all the hate we get. (Webcam2)

[2] BDSM, or erotic domination, is an acronym that is used to describe the activities involved: bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism.

> Stigma's definitely first and foremost. It's very hard to have relationships. . . . You constantly have to defend it. People always have a million questions and even a lot of customers come in here, they pay the cover, they buy the dances and during the whole dance they're saying, ''You're so much better than this. Why do you do this?'' Yeah, it's pretty constant. (Strip7)

> I find my favorite and most common question is like, ''Do you consider yourself a feminist? And if so, how? Because you go up there and you essentially take your clothes off for people.''. . . So there's an assumption made. And then we fight that battle, possibly, and the stigma behind it: ''You like to be naked in front of people.'' And it's like, ''Well, no. I go up there because it's my body, and that's what makes me feel good about myself.'' Yeah, I'd say that's what the biggest challenge is. (Burles4)

> The stigma—I mean, as I said, it's terrible. . . . I try to be open to try and normalize about sex work because I don't really have family. So, I don't really see much liability to me other than being murdered, as usual. (Porn9)

We expected this finding: that sex workers consistently experience stigmatization by people outside of the occupation. However, we discovered that stigmatization is also prevalent within the occupation, and we identified two internal mechanisms of stigmatization that construct a stigma hierarchy within the sex work occupation: ordering and detaching.

Ordering. Whereas people outside the occupation often see all sex work as highly stigmatized, sex workers themselves have intra-occupational perceptions of stigma that are elaborated, borrowed, and adapted within the occupation to order workers into a stigma hierarchy. Sex workers rank each other into more or less stigmatized positions within the occupation based on their perceptions of physical, demographic, and moral stigma.

Elaborating perceptions of physical stigma. The foundation of the ordering mechanism, and thus the stigma hierarchy, is the corporeality of the sex work activities performed. The individuals who are the most stigmatized by other sex workers (i.e., those at the bottom of the hierarchy) are those whose work activities are the most corporeal. This means that evaluations of relative stigma are made based on the degree of nudity and the extent to which the sex worker's body is involved in the sexual act, as well as the proximity of the sex worker's body to the client. As this participant explained, there is a ranking from least to most stigmatized within the occupation, a ''whorearchy'' based on the corporeality of the activities in the work:

> You can be a sex worker and have your boundaries. You can be a sex worker and not even ever get naked. You can be a dominatrix; you can do foot fetish stuff. Then the next level would be getting naked and not touching anyone. Only strictly working in no-contact clubs. Then the next level would be, ''I am a full nude stripper and I do contact.'' There could be more levels, right up to full-service sex work. . . . Sometimes I even catch myself being like, ''Oh, those dirty hookers,'' or . . . ''She's a ho,'' or ''She's doing this,'' or ''She's doing that.'' I try to stop myself from doing that, but yeah, there really is. It's called the whorearchy. I'm sure you've heard that term lots in this study. (Strip9)

The least stigmatized workers are performers who do not get completely naked, such as burlesque performers: ''I feel like strippers get a lot more stigma than burlesque performers. . . . It's all about how much of the female body you're showing'' (Burles2). They are followed in the hierarchy by those who get naked but are not touched by others:

> There's a level of acceptable sluttiness, for want of a better term. There's the ''good'' sex work, and there's the ''bad'' sex work. Even as a stripper, there's a lot of strippers who will trash-talk escorts, like they're somehow lesser. And, working as a stripper, there were go-go dancers who would trash-talk us, because they're just dancing in a skimpy outfit—they're not actually stripping or having to hustle dances. (Strip1)

Those who are naked and touched are more stigmatized, such as sex workers in pornography and escorting who engage in intercourse. Our interviews demonstrated that the sex workers clearly recognize where they exist in this hierarchy:

> I think strippers is definitely one example, an erotic model or a webcam model, . . . or even a phone sex operator, I think a lot of those are seen as less stigmatized. I definitely feel that people who fuck for a living receive a lot more material harm and consequence as a result of stigma than those who don't fuck for a living, or only do a gradient or a degree of sex work. (Porn9)

Perceptions of physical stigma are also elaborated beyond the level of nudity or touch. Workers who do erotic webcam work, for example, are differentiated from those who have physical contact with clients. In webcam work, sex workers do not have intercourse or physically touch clients; they engage in masturbation for the public. This is perceived as less stigmatized than more corporeal forms of sex work, such as traditional pornography:

> I don't have to interact with anybody, let's say, as those who do full-on pornography and stuff like that. I mean, I love this aspect. . . . I entertain for a living. I describe myself as an erotic model as opposed to a . . . porn star. (Webcam1)

Additionally, porn is less stigmatized than escorting even though they both involve intercourse, because the sex is with another performer and not a client: ''In porn, you're kind of in this tower detached from everyone else. You're filming this stuff, but you're not interacting with anyone,'' whereas when ''you're interacting with people in real life [clients], it's seen as more, because there's touch involved'' (Hybrid6, porn, webcam). In this way, the physical stigma facing sex workers is elaborated by sex workers by making distinctions between touch with outsiders (clients) versus insiders (other sex workers). The most stigmatized workers are therefore those who have intercourse with clients: ''escorts are most stigmatized'' (Escort11) and placed at the bottom of the stigma hierarchy because of the physical nature of the work and who they touch. Escorts themselves accept this stigmatized position within the occupation:

> I'd say what we do is probably the most stigmatized, because it is dealing with the obvious sex. . . . My family found out. Originally, I told them I was in porn and I was

> a pro-domme [professional dominatrix]. I didn't tell them that I saw my own clients. (Escort6)

Sex workers thus order themselves and others based on the varying degrees of an elaborated corporeality, the physical stigma relevant to the work. The resultant hierarchy is based on the corporeality of the activity, which at times aligns with the various specialties of sex work, but not always. The boundaries are blurry between specialties because sex workers can choose to take on different activities within a given specialty. For example, many people working in erotic domination explained that "true" dominatrices do not have intercourse with clients; they may touch the client's body, but typically the clients do not touch the dominatrix. In fact, dominatrices often warn those new to the specialty not to allow touching because it is less stigmatized and more respected: "We told them, 'No nudity. No one's allowed to touch you ever, and no sex. You keep your clothes on. They'll respect you forever. Don't show your boobs, nothing'" (Dom4). However, some dominatrices do allow clients to touch or even have sex with them:

> He came in, and she said, "Oh. I love the rings, the cock rings that he's wearing. . . . Oh, aren't they beautiful?" She said, "Here, take them off and give them to the mistress as a gift for helping you today." He took them off, and he gave them to me. I said, "Thank you." She started to suck his penis. I was like, "Wow!" I didn't say anything at the moment, but I thought, "You're a mistress. You're a really well-known mistress. Why are you doing that?" (Dom6)

If a worker does allow contact, particularly with a client, this is seen as a "lower" and more stigmatized form of work by other sex workers within the specialty. As one dominatrix explained in a derogatory tone, projecting stigma, dominatrices who have sex with clients are "hookers with whips" (Dom4). Similarly, if strippers decide to engage in more corporeal activities (i.e., allowing themselves to be touched by clients), their relative position in the hierarchy falls as other workers project enhanced stigma onto their activities:

> The way that I look at it is either do one or the other because . . . a lot of the times if girls get into stripping it's because they just wanna strip. It's really easy to make money if you're not comfortable escorting, doing extras and stuff. [It's] just dancing, which is what stripping here is supposed to be . . . the girls that genuinely want to strip are there just to strip, and you don't wanna have to deal with that headache. . . . We're not gonna like beat them up in the parking lot, but we're gonna get them fired as soon as we can. Get proof and just make sure that they're not there anymore. . . . I don't wanna say, "Stay in your territory," but you know what I mean. (Strip4)

Accordingly, ordering is based on the activity rather than the specialty. Changes in the corporeality of the activities result in enhanced or reduced perceptions of physical stigma from other sex workers. Our analysis revealed that this relative ordering of those within the occupation is known broadly and remains uncontested; it is acknowledged by all workers we spoke with.

Borrowing demographic stigma and adapting moral stigma. While most outsiders attribute stigma to sex workers based on the corporeality of the work, we found a secondary ordering mechanism that is based on demographic and moral perceptions of stigma. For workers who are at the same level of the hierarchy based on physical stigma, this secondary ordering further

differentiates their ranking based on demographic and moral stigma. Stigma based on demographics is borrowed from society and used to order workers based on individuals' socioeconomic status and race. The moral stigma attached to sex work is adapted from a focus on the immorality of selling sex to the moral rationale for the work, ordering occupational members based on their purpose for engaging in sex work. Sex workers thus perceive themselves as more stigmatized if they have a lower socioeconomic status, are not White, and/or engage in sex work for the money. They are less stigmatized if they have higher socioeconomic status, are White, and/or perform the work for a "higher" purpose, such as social change, empowerment, or enjoyment.

The following quote highlights socioeconomic difference as a criterion that helps determine relative stigma between different types of workers:

> Even in just escorting alone, there is a huge difference between somebody who puts up a free ad and offers a $40 blow-and-go for 15 minutes in the back of someone's car, and somebody who's probably closer to me who is flying to Europe and charging tens of thousands of dollars. The easiest way to segment it out is . . . hourly rates, but that has so many things tied into it, right? You can charge more if you come from a different socioeconomic class; you can stay in that socioeconomic class if you charge for it. (Escort11)

A similar sentiment was expressed by a participant who told us that her peers "never charge less than $300 per hour. . . . There's a hierarchy; most of the girls who charge that are educated" (Escort9). And the following quote demonstrates how ordering also involves perceptions of stigma based on race:

> To give you a good example, there was this 19-year-old when I still worked in the massage parlor. . . . I'd been there for a year; a lot of people had been there for a year. And she came in here, prancing around like she was the shit. And she was just, like, "I'm going to go into business. Like a VIP escort." And we were, like, "Sure, honey. Of course you are." . . . It might sound racist, but I promise you that is not my intention. And we were all, like, "Even if you do, you're still a Black girl in the sex trade. Like, 'cause—you know, like, you're not very educated." (Escort8)

This secondary ordering based on demographics occurred at all levels of the stigma hierarchy, not just at the bottom, as this quote shows:

> It's similar in the porn industry, right? Like White porn performers who are doing sex work in the porn industry get paid more than Black performers who are in the same industry. Yeah, I think that when Black burlesque performers are performing, words like urban, ratchet, or ghetto seem to come up a lot in the description. . . . There's a class separation. . . . In burlesque, there's a stigma that attaches itself to Black performers that we're not as classy as White burlesque performers, and that's incredibly racist, obviously. (Burles5)

Thus our findings show that sex workers borrow broader societal stigmas associated with demographics and integrate them into the ordering process; the stigma hierarchy is not merely about the work they do but is also about who they are.

Moral stigma is the second element that determines sex workers' place in the secondary ordering of the stigma hierarchy. While outsiders often

stigmatize all sex workers for the immorality of selling sex, members of the occupation adapt this moral stigma to differentiate between themselves, basing this distinction on the individual's purpose for undertaking the work. Sex workers who do the work purely for money are more stigmatized than those who engage in the work for a ''higher'' purpose. That higher purpose may be enjoyment: ''I'm more about the lifestyle; I actually, you know, hang out at a sex club. . . . Not that I'm just some girl that needs to make money'' (Webcam2). The purpose may be empowerment:

> You have to know if you're doing something that's honorable to yourself, that you feel good about, that you feel respectful, that empowers you. If it doesn't empower you, then you shouldn't be there. Don't do porn if you don't love it. Don't do prostitution if you don't love it. You have to love it to be there, otherwise you're just. . . . If you're there and you're feeling like a victim, then you shouldn't be there. Don't knock the whole industry for people who, like myself, I fight to get to the top. (Porn5)

The purpose may be artistic, or for social change:

> There's some people who I don't want to work with, just because I think they're either trash humans, or they haven't put the effort into improving their art. They don't value their performance, so I don't see why I should. Which sounds mean, but, if you're not putting in the effort to improve your art, then what are you doing? (Strip1)

> For most of the companies that produce trans porn, it's about money, it's a business. It is not about educating the world. It is not about what I do and what I stand for at all. (Porn1)

The key distinction is between a focus on making money and a focus on a ''higher'' purpose for doing the work. We found that secondary ordering based on moral stigma, like that based on demographics, occurs at all levels of the hierarchy. Some of our interviewees explained that, when interacting with other sex workers, they hide the fact that they do not always enjoy the work, or they try to appear like they are working for reasons other than money:

> She couldn't come out and say, but actually she's, you know, very much like me. She's a drug user. She hates sex work. . . . For a while [she] was in a social work program and then overdosed. . . . None of that she was allowed to say. (Escort2)

We also found that the two types of secondary ordering can overlap, as this quote demonstrates:

> I do see a lot of privileged sex workers saying that ''I love my job. . . . I can do this, and this is why I can do this. I love it.'' And I'm like, ''You know what? I fucking hate it sometimes.'' . . . [A]nd it is problematic because usually the people who do say that are usually White people. (Escort4)

We observed ordering as a two-tiered mechanism that ranks workers based on perceptions of stigma. The result of ordering is that sex workers both project and accept stigma, acting as both the stigmatized and stigmatizers within the occupation.

Detaching

The second mechanism of internal stigmatization we observed is detaching. Detaching involves efforts to categorically remove certain forms of work from the occupation based on the intra-occupational perceptions of physical and moral stigma. We found that our participants sought to detach from two groups: (1) coerced sex workers, who cannot be ordered in the stigma hierarchy based on moral dimensions because they do not have a choice in what they do, and (2) burlesque performers, who other sex workers perceive as not facing enough physical stigma to be included in the occupation.

The sex workers in all specialties sought to make a clear distinction between those in the sex work occupation and those who are coerced:

> I think that people are starting to understand who we are as sex workers. I think they're starting to understand that not all sex work is forced, that not all sex workers are on drugs, that not all sex workers are little under-aged girls that are beholden to pimps, things like that. I think we're starting to get that message out. I think we have a long ways to go. When . . . I was [in another city], I was talking to frontline workers, and I made a comment about being in sex work for more than five years and I'd never seen a pimp, and they were shocked. (Dom2)

Our interviewees consistently described coerced workers as separate, as outside the occupation. They explained that coercion is trafficking or slavery—a categorically different activity that is not sex work: ''I think in the actual industry of sex work, for the most part, we're not talking about people who are in sex slavery situations or have a pimp or something'' (Dom7). Many of the workers expressed frustration that people conflate sex work with trafficking:

> Yeah, it baffles me that people can't separate things. They separate, you know, someone going to a mine and having fair labor versus being a slave in a mine, but they can't do the same when it comes to sex work. (Hybrid1, escort, burlesque)

> I really find it offensive that they would say all sex work is trafficking. . . . It just shows a complete misunderstanding of it, and it requires such an ostrich-like ability to bury your head in the sand and pretend that women like me simply do not exist. I don't pretend that traumatized survivors do not exist. (Escort1)

Thus our participants categorically detach themselves from those who are coerced. This distinction is built off the moral dimension of the stigma hierarchy, as individuals who do not have a choice clearly cannot be evaluated based on the purpose and motivation for their work.

We also found that, for quite different reasons, our participants sought to detach burlesque performers from the sex work occupation. This detachment came from the burlesque performers: ''I guess I never considered myself as a sex worker, because what I do as an art isn't selling sex'' (Burles6).[3] But it also came from some other sex workers, all of whom are more stigmatized (lower on the hierarchy) than burlesque performers:

[3] Because the revival of burlesque is relatively recent, the detaching of burlesque is contested and not consistently agreed upon by all participants.

> This is actually gonna be really crass, and I do apologize. . . . When burlesque dancers flip it around and say, ''Oh, I'm a stripper, because I'm a burlesque dancer,'' it's like, ''Until someone is trying to sneak a finger into your fuckhole, you're not a stripper. And you're not a sex worker.'' . . . Even though you break that fourth wall, and you have that connection with your audience, . . . the point of burlesque is to make eye contact with people and be like, ''Yeah, I know you're watching me doing the show,'' and engaging the audience. There's still a physical safety barrier, for the most part. . . . Whereas, in the strip club, no. You're just a stripper. What's wrong with someone reaching out to slap you or grab you like this? It's par for the course, kind of thing. So, yeah, burlesque is not sex work. It's sexy work, but not sex work. (Strip1)

> The reason I don't consider [burlesque to be] a part of the sex industry is because I am in the sex industry, and I can tell you, being a burlesque dancer, I never felt the same feelings as being a stripper. (Hybrid4, stripping, burlesque)

The other sex workers in our study recognize their own higher level of stigmatization based on the degree of corporeality relative to burlesque performers, and many claim that burlesque is categorically distinct and not part of the occupation. Nudity, touch, and physical interaction with clients or other sex workers are not part of burlesque performance, and many sex workers do not consider burlesque to be corporeal enough to face the same level of stigmatization that all others in the occupation face.

Importantly, we found that detaching is based only on physical and moral perceptions of stigma, indicating that these dimensions are core to the boundaries of the occupation and one's place within it. Ordering based on demographic perceptions of stigma, in contrast, seems to be relevant to placing one on the hierarchy but not positioning anyone outside of it.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STIGMA HIERARCHY: BOUNDED ENTITATIVITY

Due to the internal mechanisms of stigmatization and the resulting stigma hierarchy, workers face a risk when interacting with others in the occupation: a risk of receiving or being associated with stigma. Reaching out to others is threatening because sex workers do not know who might stigmatize them: ''You really need to be careful who knows what you do and who doesn't'' (Escort8).

> The disclosure of who I disclose to is like . . . because of the stigma and the hierarchy and all of those issues within sex work, right? Like I had a girlfriend, she was a stripper, and I thought that I was safe in disclosing to her. . . . We're no longer friends anymore because of the . . . undertoned kind of stigma that she had against me because of . . . doing full-service work, you know? (Escort13)

Workers not only want to avoid being stigmatized by those in higher positions in the hierarchy but also want to avoid interacting with those lower in the hierarchy for fear of being associated with their stigma: ''In escorting—which is my field—alone, you'll find that women often socialize exclusively with those in their class, or hourly rate, for fear of damaging their reputations'' (Escort11).

As a result of these risks of stigmatization we found that workers could not find social support simply by finding similar others by specialty or demographics as we might expect occupational members to do in heterogeneous work.

Nevertheless, sex workers do desire social support from other workers; they want the ''colleagueship'' that occupational communities can provide:

> This is a very isolating job, because you can't just talk to anybody about it. You're gonna have bad day[s] at work. You're gonna have a client that just frustrated you in some way or another, and that emotional labor can weigh you down. And you need to have someone that knows what you do that you can talk to about it, say, ''This is what a client told me, this is what happened today.'' To release it from you, because you've got to release it somewhere. (Escort12)

Since not all dimensions of the stigma hierarchy are visible, workers had to find ways to determine who to approach for support while avoiding those who might stigmatize them.

Stealth Organizing around Dimensions of Stigma

We found that sex workers use stealth organizing to find safe others to interact with. Safe others are those who are similarly stigmatized based on physical, demographic, and moral perceptions of stigma. Stealth organizing allows the sex workers to find supportive community.

Stealth organizing involves first scoping and then screening workers within the occupation to find similarly stigmatized others to interact with. Scoping involves discreetly assessing and investigating other sex workers to determine the risk of reaching out. For those who work in organizations (e.g., strippers), scoping involves watching and observing other sex workers' activities, language, and purpose. For example, a stripper who also has sex with clients does not just turn to all other strippers in the organization; they instead watch for signs that others in their organization also offer ''full service'' to clients—signs such as leaving the club with a client or giving a client a business card so they can meet later. In contrast, independent sex workers who are dispersed tend to engage in scoping in online spaces, often by observing other sex workers' interactions with clients via online platforms. That is, they go onto others' professional pages where they sell, advertise, or provide services, as this interview interaction shows:

> **Q:** So you said you have groups that you connect with. Are those sort of like organized meetings, or is it more casual or is it through an organization?
> **A:** No, it's just casual—people that I've met, that we keep in contact.
> **Q:** How?
> **A:** Twitter is quite helpful to find people's professional pages. . . . (Dom7)

Scoping can also involve observing other sex workers on discussion boards or social media platforms to determine the risk of reaching out:

> The internet was very much a game changer for the industry . . . because it created . . . physical distance, such that you don't have to put yourself in a vulnerable position to determine risk. The majority of community building is done in online circles. And a lot of that happens in internet spaces known as discussion boards and review boards. (Escort1)

Scoping is a strategy used by sex workers to get a sense of other people before they connect. To determine the risk of interacting with others, sex workers use scoping to discover whether they are similarly stigmatized, and

they investigate others based on the dimensions of the stigma hierarchy. For example, workers watch for the corporeality of others' activities: ''I would watch different rooms, mostly, see what other models were doing'' (Webcam2). Workers also look for other dimensions of the hierarchy, such as socioeconomic markers: ''I look at every other website that I can see, [to] see what I like, see what I don't like . . . obviously, the girls that market themselves as more high end'' (Hybrid3, escort, massage). Our participants were, of course, attracted to those similar to them on multiple dimensions, but what we observed them speaking about most frequently when they discussed scoping was assessing the dimensions of the stigma hierarchy.

After scoping reveals visible similarities in stigma, workers may employ screening: careful interactions that help them subtly evaluate unidentified dimensions of stigma. For example, they may express support, such as by liking or sharing a social media post or even by offering assistance:

> You reach out, you compliment people, you volunteer to help. So all you have to do is you throw your name in a hat, right? You're just like, ''I would love to help you.'' [It's about] making those connections . . . making sure that you build relationships. (Burles8)

Screening is a gradual process wherein test interactions help determine whether sex workers align on the more difficult-to-assess dimensions of the hierarchy, such as the purpose for doing the work. After reaching out, workers may have prolonged virtual conversations and then eventually meet in person, or they may be invited to a more exclusive email group:

> I've met so many people off of Twitter. It's normally where, if I'm going to meet somebody for coffee or lunch, I can . . . connect to your Twitter, like through your DMs [direct messages]. . . . My friend organized a dinner . . . so we all did that over the group conversation. (Escort6)

> There's a group of us that sort of really stick together. I think there's about like 15 of us, maybe, and we're all independent [escort] workers. . . . So how I got involved with this particular group was, I got invited to an email listserv by one of the workers, and you had to be vouched [for] by two of the workers who were already on the list. (Escort10)

During test interactions, sex workers screen one another ''to spot the women that don't fit in right and properly, you know what I mean?'' (Dom6). Since the purpose of the work is the dimension of stigma that is the most difficult to see, screening often involves attempting to discover the sex workers' reasons for engaging in sex work:

> I can usually tell in the same amount of time that I can with a client. A lot of it's gut. . . . I meet for coffee first. So, I decide usually by talking to them . . . asking them what their goals are, getting an idea as to what they're all about. Once in a while . . . [I had] this nagging feeling that the person wasn't going to be a good fit. . . . There's some people that I refer to as mercs . . . mercenaries that are basically just there to make as much money as they can. (Escort1)

> What I do is consult with them, ask why they want to do it . . . what their reasons that they want to do it are. 'Cause sometimes you get folks who are more in it for

> themselves. . . . You can be in it for yourself in a certain way, but there needs to be a certain amount of the person that is doing it to make change as well. So I'd be, like . . . so usually sit down, have lunch with the person or something like that, and see how our values line up. (Porn4)

Stealth organizing enables sex workers to find safe others who can provide them with invaluable social support.

Supportive community groups. Many participants described having support systems of small groups of people, often between 5 and 20 others, who engage in similar work based on perceptions of stigma and thus occupy the same location on the stigma hierarchy. These small, supportive community groups become occupational communities that provide safe spaces for sex workers:

> It's really more like several different communities. The community that I exist in mostly exists on social media. . . . Within my subsection, we all know each other . . . we're all over the world. Specifically, I'm a part of the indie, trans porn community. . . . I think I exist in such a small niche community that I don't receive a lot of [stigma]. . . . If people are not with me, they're usually not there. (Hybrid6, porn, webcam)

> In the city, there's a group of very, very privileged independent escorts who get together once a month for a potluck. I go to those sometimes if they need some help around the laws. . . . They're just the loveliest, warmest group of people, and they really value these opportunities to get together. (PastSexWorker2)

As a result of their shared place in the hierarchy, workers feel a sense of entitativity—a sense of being a part of the same group, which helps protect against stigma from both within and outside the occupation:

> [Community members] gave me a sense of, ''It's okay, what you're doing. And if anything, we're behind you. We support you.'' . . . For a while it was kind of like—at the beginning I was a little secretive about things. . . . [Then] I came out and said, ''Listen, I'm a domme [dominatrix]. I own a dungeon. I'm proud of what we do. We don't do anything wrong. We're not having sex with any of our clients. There's none of that.'' (Dom4)

Fragmenting around Dimensions of Stigma

While most workers do ultimately find social support, the formation of the stigma hierarchy means that perceptions of stigma permeate the occupation and that there is fragmentation around physical, demographic, and moral stigma. Corporeality in the stigma hierarchy, for example, creates a barrier between groups based on physical stigma:

> [The dungeon owner] didn't want the dungeon, and me by extension—like, by representing the dungeon—to be associated with those hookers . . . because, you know, dominatrices, traditional dominatrices, don't have sex with their clients. And so, to associate with such a lower form of worker . . . (Dom2)[4]

[4] While many dominatrices work independently, some work for other dommes who own a dungeon.

> There are porn models who will discriminate against cam models, who would discriminate against full service, who will discriminate against strippers, who will discriminate against . . . (Hybrid6, porn, webcam)

Fragmentation also occurs based on demographic and moral perceptions of stigma. For example, one participant was asked to leave her supportive community group when she admitted that she does not enjoy or find sex work empowering and does not engage in the work for ''higher'' purposes:

> I really hated sex work. Even when I was still saying that yes, I chose to be a sex worker, I could never say I love it. I would put forward . . . what I thought . . . I was supposed to say—that I could choose my own hours and make a lot of money. And that much is true. But it's really unpleasant work. Or it can be really unpleasant work. . . . And so [a woman within the group] said, ''The group doesn't want you.'' (Escort2)

Workers who might otherwise see themselves as part of the same group are fragmented around the dimensions of stigma outlined in the stigma hierarchy. While stealth organizing allows the sex workers to find supportive community groups, the larger occupation is fragmented.

As a result, we found that the occupation as a whole is characterized by dissension. One participant explained that ''There's so many different factions'' (Burles2), and the different groups do not get along:

> [T]here was a lot of exclusion of certain people. There was a lot of infighting, and it wasn't the sort of perfect world that I thought that it was. . . . Sometimes it can feel like high school where popular people get to tell you what to do. I think that, yeah, I think that it's . . . it's far from perfect, and . . . there's a lot of exclusion, which may be even be like unknowing exclusion, [but also] like I think that there's blatant exclusion. (Escort3)

> I would say it's more like there's cliques of girls who . . . hang out together. . . . I don't think there's much of a sisterhood anymore. I've definitely seen some girls throw other girls [from other cliques] under the bus. (Hybrid4, stripper, burlesque)

> I definitely had that [high-class, empowerment] narrative, too. And part of it . . . for me was the stigma. It was about proving that I was more than just a prostitute, a lot of the time. But in the process of doing that, I often threw other sex workers who were exactly like that under the bus. (Escort10)

The fragmentation around perceptions of stigma appeared to generate dissension across the occupation, as this interviewee reflected:

> Yeah, it's disgusting, and it's not okay. And we need to figure out why that is. I think a lot of times we just don't . . . we don't love each other. In our own community, there's a lot of hate. (Porn1)

Occupational Dissension and Challenges for Social Change Efforts

During the time of our study, the occupation was in the midst of a legitimacy battle that vividly illustrated its fragmentation and dissension. In December 2013, the Supreme Court of Canada struck down the laws against prostitution

and gave the government a year to enact new legislation. During this time, the government held senate hearings and conducted public opinion surveys to determine the best course of action. As a result, sex workers and abolitionists were trying to sway government and public opinion in different directions: abolitionists sought to delegitimize and recriminalize sex work, and sex workers sought to legitimize and decriminalize the occupation. As several participants in our study expressed on their Twitter feeds [quotes paraphrased for anonymity]:

> Sex work is real work. . . . Together, we want to fully decriminalize all types of sex work; the goal is to fight the stigma and discrimination that sex workers face and to challenge the laws and policies that harm sex workers; instead sex work should be valued as legitimate and fulfilling work, making an important contribution to society.

However, fragmentation in the occupation complicated the efforts to sway public opinion. One participant told us that she did not want to get involved in social change efforts because doing so would put her in contact with the types of sex workers she did not want to interact with: ''I didn't really want to get involved in sex work activism 'cause it seemed to be a lot of those kind of women, and they drove me out of my fucking mind'' (Hybrid1, escort, burlesque). When workers overcame their hesitation and engaged in activist work, they were often confronted with dissension because of their differences, which hindered their efforts. As Escort1 explained, she attempted to get involved but in the end ''couldn't take the in-fighting.''

This dissension revolved around the perceptions of stigma outlined in the hierarchy. For example, escorts from a higher socioeconomic group were criticized for pushing a change agenda that excluded those lower in the hierarchy, as the focus on ''overpriced whores'' denied the experiences and needs of the ''blue-collar'' sex workers (Escort2). Similarly, at a protest, sex workers distributed buttons that showed a picture of a whip with a caption that read ''This is not a sex ad''—an imitation of the famous painting of a pipe by René Magritte. On the surface, the workers distributing the buttons were criticizing the lack of clarity around what is legal and illegal when advertising sexual services. But their argument also emphasized that dominatrices do not have sex with clients, thereby differentiating that group of sex workers as less stigmatized than other groups of sex workers.

Participants clearly identified these dynamics as inhibiting the occupation's ability to establish a shared voice and agenda for collective action. Activists observed that the sex work occupation lacked ''common messaging,'' while ''the anti–sex workers' rights movement . . . or whatever you want to call them, have a very clear message'' (Escort5). A former sex worker and activist lamented:

> Why we cannot work together? In the perfect world, I would sit at the table with . . . women from two positions, and we will talk. . . . I think that's the better world we can have, being together. . . . We all been in the same place. We all been sex worker[s]. . . . If we all come from the same place, I think we don't need to fight. . . . I think that that's a really big problem, 'cause nobody's . . . going to take us seriously if we do that. . . . I saw that a lot on social media. That really pissed me off. (PastSexWorker1)

Developing a common message or agenda requires establishing agreement on why sex work should be viewed as a legitimate occupation. Yet due to the internal dynamics of stigmatization, sex workers found reasons why their particular occupational community should be legitimate but not the occupation as a whole. The arguments for one group often undermined another group's claim for legitimacy: arguing that sex work should be legitimate because sex workers are empowered implies that performing sex work just for the money is illegitimate (moral stigma); arguing that some sex work does not involve intercourse illegitimates sex work involving intercourse (physical stigma). Core to these debates were issues related to corporeality and purpose, perceptions of physical and moral stigma. Demographics influenced the particulars of the support groups but seemed to play a fairly minor role in the dissension associated with challenges in undertaking social change efforts. Overall, sex workers struggled to find arguments for legitimacy that did not worsen the position of other groups within the occupation, failing to identify a coherent occupational ideology that legitimated all of their work.

In December 2015, the Canadian government passed Bill C-36 into law, which criminalizes the advertising, purchase of, and third-party support for sexual services. The efforts by sex workers were not successful in legitimating sex work or preventing the new laws. While we cannot suggest that the new laws are a direct result of the dynamics we observed, our data clearly show that the stigma hierarchy was associated with dissension that shaped the ways in which sex workers engaged in social change efforts.

The implication of the stigma hierarchy is thus an occupation characterized by bounded entitativity: social support and a sense of being grouplike that is confined to small community groups within a broader occupational context of dissension.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to examine the internal dynamics of stigmatization within a stigmatized occupation and to explore the implications of these dynamics. We describe how workers in a stigmatized occupation elaborate and adapt outsiders' perceptions of stigma attached to their work and borrow demographic stigmas as well. Workers then rank each other (ordering) and define the boundaries of the occupation (detaching), leading to the construction of a stigma hierarchy: a framework that outlines everyone's place within the occupation based on intra-occupational perceptions of stigma.

Workers in stigmatized occupations seek to find peers who can provide social support, but they want to minimize the risk that they will experience further stigmatization by reaching out to workers who do not share their place in the hierarchy. We discovered that to find supportive community groups, they engage in stealth organizing. However, while each small community group may be high in entitativity, the occupation as a whole is characterized by dissension—it is fragmented based on intra-occupational perceptions of stigma outlined in the stigma hierarchy. An important implication of the internal dynamics of stigmatization within the occupation is bounded entitativity, which limits how effectively workers can join together to fight for occupational legitimacy.

Contributions to the Dirty Work and Stigma Literature

In developing theory and outlining a model of the internal dynamics of stigmatization, we make important contributions to the dirty work and stigma literature.

Stigmatizers vs. the stigmatized. Researchers have suggested that when work is stigmatized, occupational members act as important social buffers, shielding each other from the stigma that outsiders attribute to them (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984; Lucas, 2011; Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014). The occupation thus provides ''a space of resistance to the perception of their work as 'dirty' and a means to reclaim pride in their work'' (Soni-Sinha and Yates, 2013: 737). Sex work as an occupation is pervasively stigmatized by outsiders (Weitzer, 2010; Blithe and Wolfe, 2017), yet within the occupation, perceptions of stigma do not disappear.

Instead, sex workers use two mechanisms of stigmatization—ordering and detaching—to elaborate, borrow, and adapt perceptions of stigma, generating a hierarchy of *internal* stigma that ranks workers and defines whether they fit into the occupation. What our participants referred to as a ''whorearchy'' is based on physical, moral, and demographic stigma. Interestingly, their perceptions of stigma differ from what we would have expected as outsiders. Physical stigma is not just about nudity or sex but also with whom the naked body is interacting. Moral stigma is not about the moral wrong of selling sex or one's body but about the reason for engaging in the work. Furthermore, participants brought in individual-level stigmas around socioeconomic status and race to complicate these occupational-level stigmas. Stigmatized workers thus may not be only receivers (or blockers) of stigma; they may actively contribute to stigmatization of their peers. While our data do not reveal the intent behind these actions, we see our participants as active rather than passive players in the stigmatization processes within the occupation.

Our findings challenge current conceptualizations of occupational outsiders who stigmatize and occupational insiders who cope with stigma (Kreiner, Ashforth, and Sluss, 2006; Lemmergaard and Muhr, 2012; Rivera, 2015), an assumption that aligns with the stigma literature more broadly in contrasting ''normal'' and ''stigmatized'' actors (e.g., Goffman, 1963; Stone, Stone, and Dipboye, 1992; Link and Phelan, 2001; Pescosolido and Martin, 2015). By blurring the distinction between the stigmatized and the stigmatizers, we enhance the dirty work and stigma literature. Our findings invite consideration of not only how stigmatized actors respond to external stigma but also how stigmatized occupations, groups, or individuals engage with and contribute to processes of stigmatization.

Bounded entitativity. The internal dynamics of stigmatization we document reveal that the extant view of dirty work occupations as inherently entitative is not always accurate (e.g., Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Lemmergaard and Muhr, 2012). Despite a high degree of stigma facing sex workers, which has been predicted to lead to higher levels of entitativity (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014), the occupation as a whole is not entitative but instead characterized by dissension. Our theorizing reveals that the internal dynamics of stigmatization can undermine the development of feeling grouplike, as the occupation fragments

into smaller communities. Small occupational communities are highly entitative: members have a sense of unity and of ''shar[ing] a common fate'' and common ''occupational ideology'' (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999: 419). However, the divide between ''us'' and ''them'' that strengthens group ties can exist not only between occupational outsiders and insiders but also between members of the occupation.

We conceptualize the entitativity in the small occupational communities and absence of it across the occupation as a whole as bounded entitativity. We expect that bounded entitativity is likely to emerge in a variety of stigmatized occupations, especially in occupations that are heterogeneous. Heterogeneity likely provides ''fuel'' for the internal mechanisms of stigmatization (i.e., by providing the basis for ordering and detaching), as these workers are not all ''in the same boat'' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999: 419).

However, we also expect that differences within occupations will be socially constructed by occupational members in a variety of ways to structure such stigma hierarchies. Funeral directors (Cahill, 1996), gynecological nurses (Bolton, 2005), corrections officers (Lemmergaard and Muhr, 2012), garbage collectors (Hughes et al., 2016), and bounty hunters (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014), while less stigmatized and heterogeneous than sex workers, may engage in both ordering and detaching based on intra-occupational perceptions of stigma. For example, workers' internal perceptions of stigma may be based on differences in training, education, style, and purpose, thereby establishing a stigma hierarchy based on these dimensions. Some of these dimensions may be core to the occupation's boundaries, as physical and moral stigma are in sex work, while others may be more peripheral, such as demographic differences. Researchers could greatly extend and enrich the stigma literature by examining how heterogeneity, in varying degrees and types, affects stigmatized occupations and the entitativity and social support experienced by workers within them.

The stigma facing ''dirty work'' occupations has been described as distinct from that facing individuals because ''the stigmas derive primarily from the work done by individuals and groups, not from characteristics of individuals and groups themselves'' (Kreiner, Ashforth, and Sluss, 2006: 621). In many ways, this core assumption is true: the corporeality and ''immorality'' of sex work activities lead to sex workers being stigmatized. However, while we found that sex workers are stigmatized based on their work activities, we also discovered that internal perceptions of stigma are not limited to the ''work done'' but also include why the workers do the work. Furthermore, internal perceptions of stigma involve borrowing societal stigmas around demographics. Thus workers in stigmatized occupations may face multiple intersecting stigmas that come from both outside and inside the occupation and that are based on the work *and* the individuals who are conducting it. This finding challenges the fundamental ways in which we have previously conceptualized stigmatized occupations.

Internal stigmatization and coping. The dirty work and stigma literature has often focused on how stigmatized individuals or workers respond to and cope with stigmatization (Cahill, 1996; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Bolton, 2005; Dick, 2005; Simpson et al., 2012). Researchers have shown that one of

the key mechanisms for coping is ''social weighting'' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2007; Mavin and Grandy, 2013; Brewis and Godfrey, 2018), which allows workers to feel better about their stigmatized status by comparing themselves to others they perceive to be more stigmatized or worse off. This coping mechanism enables workers to ''reevaluate the credibility of outsiders to the profession'' and focus on favorable comparisons (Kreiner, Ashforth, and Sluss, 2006: 627). For example, refuse collectors make favorable comparisons by contrasting themselves to migrant workers (Slutskaya et al., 2016). While sex workers do compare themselves to others, what we documented involves something unexpected: both upward *and* downward social comparisons to those *within* the occupation. This finding is not just about high-end escorts throwing ''streetwalkers'' under the bus (Bryan, 1965) but is a more complex dynamic of stigmatization involving accepting and projecting stigma. Our participants recognize their level of stigma relative to those above and below them on the hierarchy. The end result is not just that they feel better about themselves because of these accepted rankings but that they know how stigmatized they are and how stigmatized others are in relation to them.

Based on our findings, we suggest that other coping strategies documented in the literature may also do more than improve one's sense of self. For example, projecting heightened degrees of femininity (Bolton, 2005) or masculinity (Tracy and Scott, 2006) or ''appropriating the stigmatizing label'' (Toyoki and Brown, 2014) may also enhance stigmatization internally for others in the occupation. In other words, coping with stigma and stigmatizing others may not be distinct processes, as the literature has often implied. Instead, as workers cope with stigma, they may simultaneously contribute to stigmatization through the very strategies that make them feel better. Conceptualizing such responses purely as coping mechanisms may underestimate their role in these occupations. We encourage researchers to revisit existing coping strategies and examine their role in stigmatization processes.

In addition, existing research has suggested that if a stigma is concealable, as occupational stigmas often are, individuals can choose to ''pass''—to pretend not to have the stigmatizing attribute—or they can reveal and share their stigma (Clair, Beatty, and MacLean, 2005; Kong, 2006; Ragins, Singh, and Cornwell, 2007; Ragins, 2008; Jones and King, 2014). Scholars have theorized that factors such as the supportiveness of the institutional environment and whether individuals receive social acceptance cues can predict when they might disclose stigma (Pachankis, 2007; Ragins, 2008; King et al., 2017). Indeed, determining who might be supportive is a key challenge for stigmatized actors (King et al., 2017). Our findings provide specific strategies that stigmatized workers use to determine with whom it is safe to disclose and interact. Scoping involves observing an individual from a distance. If a person meets the scoping criteria, a stigmatized individual may proceed to screening, which involves engaging in test interactions and slowly getting a feel for the person. The stigmatized individual increases interactions until it becomes clear whether the person can become a source of support. This slow and deliberate process allows workers to determine risk through scoping before having to ''signal'' or drop hints during screening. Such stealth organizing is appropriate when the potential consequences of disclosure can be detrimental. Importantly, the strategies we have documented can be deployed by stigmatized actors who are dispersed and not confined to the boundaries of an organization. This is

significant, because researchers have tended to focus on occupations that are housed in organizations, thereby missing the ways in which dispersed stigmatized workers might have to do things differently.

Contributions to the Occupational Literature

Our findings also contribute to the literature on occupations, which has shown that occupational members differentiate themselves from outsiders (Abbott, 1988; Bechky, 2003b; DiBenigno and Kellogg, 2014; Anteby, Chan, and DiBenigno, 2016; Truelove and Kellogg, 2016) and, although less frequently studied, from other occupational members (e.g., Van Maanen, Miller, and Johnson, 1982; Chan and Anteby, 2016; Howard-Grenville et al., 2017; Pratt, Lepisto, and Dane, 2019). Our work extends the recent focus on intra-occupational differentiation and highlights the importance of considering occupational communities within occupations.

Impacts of stigma on occupational communities. Tasks and how they are conducted are among the most-examined elements of within-occupation differentiation, but occupations can be differentiated by other elements as well (Rothman, 1979; Bechky, 2003a; Anteby, 2010; Chan and Anteby, 2016; Howard-Grenville et al., 2017). Occupational community boundaries may be formed based on a variety of dimensions, and our findings suggest that the outcome of such distinctions may differ based on the dimensions used. For example, the consequences facing occupational communities based on perceptions of stigma, as in our study, likely differ from those based on dimensions such as tasks because stigma is particularly emotionally charged and polarizing. When group distinctions are based on stigma, members are exposed to the risk of stigmatization merely by interacting with others (Goffman, 1963; Hudson and Okhuysen, 2009). Thus we argue that stigma fault lines—''division[s] between actors based on stigmatizing attributes'' (Phung et al., 2021: 1129)—are some of the most potent means of separating subgroups and are the most likely to lead to within-occupation dissension, conflict, and challenges in coming together.

This argument can clarify why other researchers have found that different community groups within occupations have been able to come together for social change efforts (even if doing so is challenging) and to fight threats to the occupation as a whole. For example, Van Maanen and colleagues (1982: 207) found that despite the heterogeneity within the fishing occupation, ''fishermen demonstrated that they were able to band together and negotiate with canneries as a collective unit.'' Howard-Grenville and colleagues (2017: 549) revealed that the heterogeneity within the chemistry occupation was ''a supportive condition for enabling occupations to change'' even though achieving the change involved concerted efforts and contention. In contrast, we discovered that the stigma hierarchy is associated with occupational dissension that impeded sex workers from coming together in their social change efforts to legitimate the occupation. The sex workers in our sample could not find common ground, such as a common message or ideology, in their efforts to legitimate the occupation. Instead, any one occupational community's attempt to legitimate itself aggravated the stigma facing another community; for example, trying to

legitimize sex work based on arguments about empowerment undermined those who do not perform the work for this "higher" purpose.

In some occupations, people may find common ground around tasks or other distinctions when doing so is necessary for achieving occupational change. But stigma is quite polarizing, and stigmatization that originates from within an occupation may create especially high barriers to occupational change efforts. When the source of stigmatization is primarily outsiders and the internal occupation is relatively homogeneous, workers may be able to find common ground or an occupational ideology to refute such stigmatization and justify their work. For example, mixed martial artists have been able to come together to legitimize the sport in the eyes of the public by developing a common ideology for their work, i.e., by describing themselves as disciplined fighters (Helms and Patterson, 2014). However, when an occupation comprises multiple occupational communities of individuals who perceive each other as having different levels of stigma, stigma-based fault lines may emerge that prevent them from coming together. In addition to sex work, this argument may apply to other stigmatized occupations, such as police officers or nurses engaged in jobs that vary in the degree of physical stigma (Bolton, 2005; Dick, 2005; Gonzalez and Pérez-Floriano, 2015). Attempts to associate with differently stigmatized others within the occupation are threatening, because workers can become stigmatized by merely interacting with someone who is more stigmatized, or they may be stigmatized by someone who is less stigmatized. Any efforts to unite the occupation with a common ideology can threaten to bring certain groups down. Our findings suggest that stigma is an important and understudied dimension of intra-occupational heterogeneity that can contribute to the construction of occupational communities with distinct dynamics and impacts. Broadening the research lens to include stigmatized occupations in the occupational literature will enable us to develop a better understanding of occupational phenomena.

Finding others. As "organizational affiliation wanes" and "occupational forms of organizing become more prominent" (Anteby, Chan, and DiBenigno, 2016: 184), occupations are becoming crucial sources of meaning and support for modern workers. Scholars have shown that the first part of community formation is finding like-minded others (Bucher, 1988; Fayard, Stigliani, and Bechky, 2017), but existing theorizing has largely overlooked how this step occurs—perhaps because finding one's occupational community members has been assumed to be relatively clear, as most occupations have been located within organizations or associations (Barley, 1986; Bechky, 2003a, 2003b; O'Mahony and Ferraro, 2007; Truelove and Kellogg, 2016).

We expect that workers in heterogeneous occupations want to find similar others—those doing the same activity or task or those who share one's demographic category. We found that this desire to find similar others also includes similarity based on perceptions of stigma. Importantly, stigma can dictate which workers to avoid and thus limits workers' organizing around other dimensions of similarity. A worker may find someone similar on one dimension, such as work activity, but avoid that person because they are stigmatized on another dimension, such as their reason for engaging in the work. In our study, stealth organizing helped workers find safe others to interact with and establish supportive communities based on perceptions of stigma. Stealth organizing

may be shaped by the desire to find similar others in the occupation, but our findings suggest it is fundamentally shaped by stigma, as perceptions of stigma in the occupational context narrow and redefine what similarity means. Our study thus demonstrates how occupational members find colleagueship when interactions with other workers threaten to expose them to stigma.

Although stealth organizing strategies may be particularly relevant for stigmatized occupations, they may have practical relevance for other dispersed workers seeking to find colleagueship. For example, online video game developers (Weststar, 2015) may watch and play games developed by others to see if they have similarly respected styles, and then they may reach out via discussion boards or online platforms, engage in test interactions, and perhaps establish partnerships or join community groups. Roberts and Zietsma (2018) found that Uber drivers sought out other drivers on discussion boards and used them as social supports; we speculate that these workers may have scoped and screened other drivers on various dimensions (i.e., student drivers, ''lifers''). To test the applicability of our findings across a range of occupations, we encourage scholars to explore how other workers might use stealth organizing to find colleagueship.

Limitations and Future Research

As we conducted an in-depth qualitative study of the sex work occupation, ''the strength of our investigation lies in capturing realism rather than allowing for statistical generalizability'' (Pratt, Lepisto, and Dane, 2019: 427). Yet, although we have explored a context with an extreme and pervasive type of stigma, we believe that our case sheds light on dynamics that occur in other stigmatized occupations, indicating transferability beyond our extreme context (Bamberger and Pratt, 2010).

Our model may have relevance for a wide range of stigmatized occupations, such as truck driving, defense contracting, cadaver brokering, hacking, or drug dealing (Goodwin, 2006; Anteby, 2010; Bennett, 2013; Scott, 2013; Brewis and Godfrey, 2018; Gray and Lindsay, 2019; Lashley and Pollock, 2020). Even if the degree of stigma involved in such work may be less than that facing sex workers, workers in these occupations may face similar challenges, as the stigmatization may come not only from outsiders but also from other occupational members. Internal mechanisms of stigmatization may create stigma hierarchies that lead to interaction risks within the occupation. Since the heterogeneity in the stigma hierarchy is not just based on different activities, we believe our model has broad relevance and implications for many stigmatized occupations.

To examine the internal dynamics of stigmatization within a ''dirty work'' occupation, we interviewed a cross-section of female and transgender sex workers involved in a wide range of specialties. This enabled us to reveal the internal mechanisms of stigmatization deployed by these workers and the implications of the resulting stigma hierarchy. However, we were not able to follow each supportive community group in depth and over time. Doing so may reveal important shifts in dynamics, including the strengthening and weakening of the occupational community based on internal changes and changes in the broader institutional landscape. We also did not explore how the internal dynamics of stigmatization are impacted by gender for male sex workers. We

encourage researchers to delve deeper into these dynamics by exploring additional sources of heterogeneity over time.

Additionally, our sample largely comprised dispersed workers operating outside the bounds of organizations. Not all stigmatized occupations are dispersed, and many operate within the boundaries of an organization. Exploring how the stigma hierarchy plays out within organizations is important, as bounded entitativity likely creates unique challenges for organizations. For example, bounded entitativity may generate difficulties for organizational change efforts, just as it does for social change efforts. How might an organization manage bounded entitativity? Organizations may be better positioned than dispersed and independent workers to deal with occupational dissension; they may be able to help create occupational ideologies that transcend the lines of difference emerging from the stigma hierarchy and/or to create safe spaces for interactions between all workers. Future research could examine how stigma hierarchies might be productively managed within organizations to harness the benefits of social support while minimizing the dangers of dissension.

Conclusion

Stigmatized occupations can undermine workers' abilities to derive meaning and a positive sense of self from work (Hughes, 1958). One way these workers can overcome the negative consequences of stigma is by establishing occupational communities that provide social support and a safe haven for interactions. Our work has important practical implications, as it reveals not only how difficult it may be to find this much-needed support but also a potential way to organize so that workers can overcome these difficulties. Stealth organizing provides two concrete strategies (scoping and screening) stigmatized workers can use to find social support while minimizing their risk of stigmatization in interactions. In addition, we reveal the crucial role that social media technology plays in enabling stealth organizing for workers who are dispersed and vulnerable to stigma. Over time, as physical interaction and contact between workers become more restricted and less necessary, platforms that support stealth organizing are crucial to ensure they can find occupational support. As governments increasingly look to regulate such online spaces, it is important that stigmatized workers maintain access to them in order to facilitate the organizing efforts that enable finding supportive communities.

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