"There is Nothing Good About this Work:" Identity and Unhappiness Among Nicaraguan Female Sex Workers

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Abstract In a study of life satisfaction in Nicaragua, Cox (2012) found that female sex workers had dramatically low subjective well-being (SWB) relative to other marginalized groups in Nicaragua. Moreover, the SWB of these female sex workers was possibly the lowest recorded in the life satisfaction literature. A novel theory linking life satisfaction with life stories is proposed, and a method not heretofore used in SWB research is employed, the life story interview, in order to better understand the dramatic unhappiness of this sample. Seeing life satisfaction as an identity invoking process, the sample's dramatically low life satisfaction judgments are framed within the larger context of narrative identity. Thematic analysis of the stories revealed a prototypical narrative arc: early family conflict, departure from home, a series of unsuccessful romantic relationships, birth of multiple children, dire economic crises, entry into sex work, and hope for a future exit from sex work. The life stories of these participants provided an identity and life course context to understand the dramatic unhappiness of this sample.

Keywords Developing world · Identity · Life satisfaction · Life story · Sex work

> All the people that work in this [sex work] have a lot of difficulties in being accepted by society. People tend to think that we are here because we like it, because we are bad people, and we like to do harm to other people. But we are just trying to survive…[A]fter you come into this life, its very difficult to get out; you feel uncomfortable with yourself; you feel like everybody is pointing at you and criticizing you.
> –Quote from the life story of Sheila, a Nicaraguan sex worker.

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1 Introduction

In a seminal study on life satisfaction among marginalized groups in the developing world, Biswas-Diener and Diener (2001) found that sex workers, along with other marginalized groups, in Calcutta, India showed relatively high (near the neutral point) levels of global life satisfaction. Moreover, these sex workers judged a number of specific domains in their life, such as the food they ate, and the friends they had, to be clearly satisfactory. These results surprised the researchers, as they expected lower levels of life satisfaction among these sex workers. From the perspective of an economically developed Western country (the vantage point of the researchers), it seemed like these women should be miserable. They lived in the slums of Calcutta and rented their bodies for sex. But they did not report being miserable. Instead, they reported that, on the whole and in a number of particular domains, their lives were neither greatly satisfying nor grossly unsatisfying. Later research has found (Biswas-Diener et al. 2005) that life satisfaction group means are rarely much below neutral. Slightly to clearly positive means are the norm for groups. In the context of such findings, the Calcutta sex workers' slightly negative mean of life satisfaction is noteworthy but not altogether surprising.

In a different developing world context, Nicaragua, Central America, Cox (2012) attempted to replicate and extend the Biswas-Diener and Diener (2001) findings of near neutral life satisfaction among marginalized groups. Cox (2012) investigated the life satisfaction of female sex workers, people who lived and worked in the city trash dump, urban poor, and rural peasants. At the level of the entire sample, Cox (2012) replicated the finding of near neutral life satisfaction. But one important group difference emerged. The sex workers, streetwalkers in the capital city of Managua, were significantly less satisfied than the three other groups in the sample. In addition, when statistically compared with the Calcuttan sex workers from the Biswas-Diener and Diener (2001) study, the Managuan sex workers were significantly less satisfied with their lives. In fact, to the researcher's knowledge, the Managuan sex workers' life satisfaction was lower than any other group mean found in the subjective well-being (SWB) literature. On a scale of one to seven, with responses of seven being the most positive, the Nicaraguan sex workers had an average response just above 1. In effect, they "bottomed out" the scale. These women were some of the most unhappy people studied in four decades of SWB research.

The dramatically low life satisfaction responses of these women is theoretically important for SWB research because it shows that positive response biases do not necessarily truncate the response range in life satisfaction self-reports. Large-scale SWB studies have suggested that humans, on average, judge their lives to be positively satisfying (Diener et al. 2010; Diener and Tov 2009). Indeed, Diener and Diener (1996), in a review paper which paid particular attention to disadvantaged groups, concluded that "most people are happy." These findings might suggest that individuals, across the world, have a strong bias against rating their life as highly unsatisfactory. If that is true, the response range on measures like the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) could be psychologically truncated. Instead of ratings from 1 (the worst) to 7 (the best) being fully available to individuals, the positive response bias could skew the range to the positive end of the scale. But the dramatically low responses of the Nicaraguan sex workers shows that the full range of the negative end of the scale is available, at least for some. Indeed, such low mean level responses appear to be very rare in the literature, but they do exist (e.g. Biswas-Diener and Diener 2005).

Given that these Nicaraguan sex workers report life satisfaction levels that are very rare in the empirical literature, understanding their unhappiness is theoretically important. If the

SWLS is almost never "bottomed-out," what are the psychological mechanisms or associations that help explain when it is? Said more broadly, if the vast amount of SWB research has focused on explaining the correlates and causes of the happiness of most people, what kind of account can be given of the well-being of individuals at the other end of the life satisfaction spectrum?

Cox (2012) found that income and social support were strongly associated with life satisfaction for the other marginalized groups in the Nicaraguan sample, the dump dwellers, and urban and rural poor, but this was not the case for the sex workers. In fact, income was negatively associated with life satisfaction for these women, and social support had no relationship with life satisfaction. Moreover, the personality dispositions of neuroticism and extraversion, which are often strongly associated with SWB, did not explain these women's low life satisfaction. Ultimately, standard predictors of life satisfaction did not account for these women's intense unhappiness.

In order to better understand the dramatic unhappiness of these sex workers, the current study employed a novel research design for investigating SWB. We used an in-depth life story method to explore these women's construction of their identity, to see if their sense of identity helped explain their global sense of misery. This method is sensitive to both cultural particularity, as life stories are cultural products (McAdams and Pals 2006), and idiographic concerns, as the individual constructs his or her own story. Moreover, given that the life story method is qualitative, it allows for a more expansive investigation of these women's dramatic unhappiness, which is appropriate because of the exploratory nature of this study.

1.1 Identity, Life Satisfaction, and the Life Story

Judgments of global life satisfaction are not purely, or even primarily, based on bottom-up processes in which individuals calculate their satisfaction in numerous discrete domains in their life and then tabulate an overall rating (see Lucas and Diener (2008) for review). Instead, top-down processes, such as belief structures, play key roles in how an individual formulates life satisfaction judgments. We put forth that beliefs about the self, or issues of identity, are a key arena in the construction of life satisfaction judgments. To judge whether one is satisfied with one's life, one's accomplishments, and one's trajectory, one must invoke a more global conception of one's self, past, present, and future, and judge whether this invoked self-conception is attractive, palatable, or disappointing. These self-reflective processes implicate identity in life satisfaction judgments as self-reflection is the hallmark of identity (Giddens 1991), the "I" reflecting on the "me." Life satisfaction judgments are influenced by many processes, but identity is certainly one of them. Thus identity-focused research could help illuminate the dramatic unhappiness of these Nicaraguan sex workers.

Research in personality, developmental, and cognitive psychology suggests that the psychosocial construction of a life story is a key process for the making of adult identity (e.g. Habermans and Bluck 2000; McAdams 2008). The life story is the internalized and ever-evolving narrative of the self that reconstructs the past and imaginatively anticipates the future to provide a person with a measure of meaning and continuity. The story spells out how who I was in the past, became who I am now, and where my life is headed in the future.

As two identity-implicating processes, judgments of global life satisfaction, and the life story share many parallels. Both involve the invocation of a past, present, and future self, and both involve judgments about that invoked self. At the same time, they are clearly

distinct. Life satisfaction judgments rely more heavily on semantic generalizations about the self (Lucas and Diener 2008) while the life story more heavily relies on the particularities of episodic memory and anticipated scenes for the future (McAdams 2008). Still, multiple theorists (e.g. Shmotkin 2005; Gergen and Gergen 1988) have argued that the life story is key component of SWB, as it provides the diachronic context in which current SWB judgments are made. On this view, present SWB judgments are shaped by interactive engagement with memories of the personal past (Seidlitz et al. 1997).

In the last three decades psychologists (McAdams 2008; Hammack 2008; Bruner 1990) have become increasingly interested in narrative as an ecologically valid and plausibly pan-cultural mode of human thought for the construction of identity. While people may create identity through stories in nearly all human societies, the shape and content of life stories most likely varies widely across cultures (McAdams and Pals 2006). Hammack (2008) argues that the life story is an important form through which cultural psychology can investigate identity in diverse cultural contexts. The life story, Hammarck argues, brings together cognitive structures of belief, dominant cultural discourses, personal narratives of meaning making, developmental concerns of the life trajectory, and idiographic elements. Thus life stories are a rich psycho-social vehicle for investigating identity across diverse cultural contexts, including Nicaraguan female sex workers.

One benefit of the life story method is that it can directly address the repeated criticism that most research on sex workers, mostly public-health research, conceptualizes sex work as a monolithic entity. Researchers (e.g. Kempadoo 2001) have argued that sex work is heterogeneous and socially constructed, and that the cultural meanings assigned to sex work (Brennan 2004; Wardlow 2006) and the cultural capital of sex workers (Stoebenau 2009) are context dependent. Life stories are particularly well-suited to address the cultural specificity that these authors suggest is missing from most research on sex work. Indeed, cultural specificity might be crucial to understanding the misery of these Nicaraguan women.

1.2 Sex Work and Identity

Multiple researchers have investigated sex work and identity (e.g. Sanders 2005; O'Neill 2001). Phoenix (2000) examined life histories of English sex workers, a similar methodology as the current study. Phoenix (2000) found the sex worker's narratives contained fundamental contradictions about sex work. On the one hand, sex work was portrayed as a means to get ahead and have a better future; on the other hand, sex work was envisioned as a trap that victimized the sex worker. Both of these themes—sex worker as agent and sex worker as victim—are prominent in sex worker research. In a recent review, Weitzer (2009) referred to these opposing ideas as the oppression paradigm and the empowerment paradigm, respectively.[1] Weitzer (2009) concluded that neither paradigm adequately captures the complexity of sex work.

The themes of agency/empowerment versus victimhood/oppression have been found primarily using Western sex workers samples. Thus, one exploratory question for the

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[1] These paradigms can relate to different nomenclature. The term sex worker can signify an empowerment perspective as it highlights the activity as a kind of work as opposed to conjuring the moral conations that can come with the word prostitute. The current paper largely uses the term sex worker instead of prostitute. This is done not to stake an explicit position in favor of the empowerment paradigm, but rather because we find the term to describe the phenomenon more straightforwardly.

current study is if these themes will be present in this Nicaraguan sample, and if so, how they might relate to global life satisfaction.

Employing an intensive interview method, Dalla (2000, 2002) found strong themes of the victimhood paradigm among streetwalking sex workers from a Midwestern city in the US. These women described harsh beginnings in chaotic and abusive families, conflictual romantic relationships with men, and entry into sex work out of economic necessity, or as related to drug use. Murphy (2010) employed a similar methodology while investigating street-level prostitutes in Baltimore, MD, and found that most women described starting sex work to sustain a drug habit.

In a study employing intensive interviews with UK prostitutes, Gory et al. (2010) found that sex workers reported their work had a devastating impact on their identity. For example, Rachel stated, "[Sex work] makes you feel horrible, it makes you feel like you're nothing…it knocks your confidence, it makes you feel like you're just gross." (Gory et al. (2010), p. 495). As the women incorporated the role of sex worker into their identity, they internalized the sense of shame and debasement Rachel described. Relatedly, these women were keenly aware of the way they were stigmatized by others, even customers. To cope with these internal and external identity threats these women used distancing and dissociation.

Qualitative studies that privilege the perspective of street-level sex workers, reveal some common findings. First, the victimhood/oppression theme is very prominent in these women's accounts. Second, the themes of shame, perceived stigma, and perceived moral judgment by others appear to be crucial in how these women constructed their sense of self *vis a vis* others. The same themes may also be present in the life stories of the Nicaraguan sex workers in this study, but with a cultural inflection. Life story methods are sensitive to the cultural milieu in which they are constructed, and so we anticipate these life stories will be infused with the particurarilty of Nicaragua, a relatively traditional and conservative Catholic country in Central America.

Hammack (2008) and other researchers (Thorne and McLean 2003) have argued that particular cultural contexts provide corresponding *master narratives* for the making of identity. A master narrative is the primary narrative frame within which particular groups make sense of their own lives in a given culture. For example, in many Central American countries, including Nicaragua, the dominant cultural discourse about women centers around notions of purity and virginity for women who are not yet married, and home-keeping and making, rearing of children, and submissiveness and faithfulness to husbands, for women who are married. Stevens (1973) has termed this constellation of female characteristics, "Marianismo," whose correlative is male machismo.[2] From this dominant discourse a master narrative of the idealized female life can be constructed: pre-marital purity progresses to marriage; within marriage the woman is faithful and submissive to her husband; over the course of her marriage she bears and rears children; ultimately, she takes care of her family especially in the domestic sphere. We term this the traditional female master narrative for Nicaragua.[3]

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[2] Stevens' construct of Marianismo has been criticized as more descriptive of middle class Latin American women, a criticism we accept. But our pilot interviews in Nicaragua found evidence for a Marianismo-like conception of womanhood, which is why we invoke it here.

[3] Nicaragua is not a monolithic cultural entity. The Latinized central and western parts of the country are significantly different than the Caribbean East of the country. This study is exclusively concerned with a sample from the Latinized portion of the country.

Life-narrative researchers (McAdams and Pals 2006; Hammack 2008) have argued that individuals construct personal stories in a dynamic process of interaction with master narratives and culture factors. Consciously and unconsciously, the individual variously adopts, modifies, and/or subverts the multiple master narratives and dominant discourses extant in his or her culture as he or she constructs a life story. In the case of the Nicaraguan sex workers, we wanted to investigate the extent to which these women constructed their life stories in interaction with the master narrative of the traditional female. We also believed that stereotyped judgments of sex workers would be a second set of cultural factors that would play a role in this sample's self-conceptions, and therefore life stories. In Catholic and traditional Central America, sex workers hold a socially derogated status (Dittmore 2006). In Nicaragua, the predominant discourse about sex workers centers around notions of scorn,[4] derision, moral judgment, the attribution of outsider status, and possibly some level of pity for their plight.

To the extent that the participants in this study directly incorporate the dominant cultural views of the sex worker into their life stories, these women would be internalizing an almost exclusively negative construal of their selfhood and their life. The same is also largely true with regard to the master narrative of the traditional female. The sex worker breaks the taboos of sexual purity and is not considered a proper candidate for the role of mother or wife. The wholesale incorporation of both of these two cultural strains into their life stories would result in a narrative identity permeated with self-rejection and self-reproach. According to our theory, such an identity construction would have a potent impact on these women's life satisfaction and could readily explain their dramatically low SWB.

While we predicted this sample's life stories would show strong evidence of internalizing negative societal judgments, it is also possible that these life stories would include positive themes. Narrative identity is a capacious construct and has room for multiple valences (Gergen 1991). These sex workers might deploy other master narratives, or components of the ones above, in a fashion that regards the self positively. Alternatively, the sex workers might develop positive, idiosyncratic narratives that do not substantively draw on these cultural resources. High levels of such positive identity configurations in these life stories would run counter to our theory that the life story and life satisfaction are intimately connected. The dramatically low life satisfaction in this sample suggests there will be minimal positive content in their life stories.

Ultimately, we predicted that the life stories of these women would be high in negative content. What we were unsure of, and what our exploratory method would allow us to investigate, was the story of these women's unhappiness. How did they understand and articulate their own life—that life which they judged to be so lacking.

2 Method

As described in Cox (2012), thirty female sex workers were recruited from the primary commercial district in Managua, Nicaragua. From early evening until early morning, these sex workers walk along a major Managua boulevard, a known destination for the sex trade.

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[4] In Nicaraguan Spanish the phrase "hijo de puta" is a common insult. The word "puta" is a diminutive of "prostitute." Directly translated, the phrase means, "son of a prostitute," but it is better translated as, "son of a whore," or, "son of a bitch." The common curse illustrates the linguistic codification of scorn for sex workers.

Although *de jure* illegal, sex work is *de facto* accepted in Nicaragua. The female sex workers walk openly without concern of arrest.

The sex workers were recruited and interviewed by the second author, [Mr. Monte Casablanca].[5] [Mr. Monte Casablanca], Argentinean by birth, has lived most of his life in Central America, and the last 9 years in Nicaragua. [Mr. Monte Casablanca] recruited the sex workers to the study by approaching them on the street early in the evening, prior to customers' arriving. The sex workers were offered $15 for study participation, the standard charge for a customer. Appointments were set, with those interested in study participation, to meet at a local coffee shop at a later date. The coffee shop provided privacy for the interviews but was also a public venue, which was important so that the participants remained clear about the nature of their study participation, i.e. money for sex was not part of the study. The life story interview on average took two hours to complete.

2.1 Measures

2.1.1 Life Story Interview

The standard life story interview as developed by McAdams and colleagues (see McAdams et al. 2008) is an extensive exploration of an individual's personal history, sense of self, and understanding of his or her place in the world. The interview involves multiple components: life overview, key scenes in the life story, future script, life challenges, and personal beliefs/ideological setting. We modified the interview to include sections on conceptions of womanhood in Nicaragua, the story of their sex work, and their beliefs about sex work. Once the interviews were completed the life stories were translated into English.

2.1.2 Life Maps

The life map exercise yields a simple graphical representation of the entire life. Participants graph their life on an xy-coordinate plane, where the y-axis runs from "good" to "bad." The x-axis is time from birth to the present. Participants are instructed to draw a single line which represents their general well-being from birth to the present. It has been employed by multiple SWB researchers (e.g. Shmotkin 2005).

2.2 Life Story Analysis

The life stories were analyzed using an inductive approach modeled loosely on grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1994). The life stories were read by two readers who were different with respect to age, race, and gender. The readers performed three rounds of systematic reading of the life stories. In the first round, the two readers separately read the life stories and then met to develop a preliminary list of primary themes. This list was biased toward inclusivity. The narratives were then re-read and each instance of each theme was coded and compiled under a single heading. Each theme was then analyzed for

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5 We recognize that the fact that our interviewer was male most certainly affected the interview responses of the sex workers. A life story interview is a kind of social performance, an intimate one indeed, and the audience influences the content and nature of the performance. A female interviewer would have likely elicited somewhat different responses. But we do not take either kind of response as necessarily more or less true; they are simply rather somewhat different narrative performances for different audiences. .

Table 1 Primary themes in sex worker life stories

Trauma	Shame/stigma	Moral judgment of the self
Family conflict	Conceptions of womanhood	Motherhood and generativity
Downward trajectory of narrative arc	Entry into sex work	Future redemption

frequency and common characteristics. For instance, substantive *family conflict* appeared in every single life story. The common characteristics of the *family conflict* stories were as follows: conflict beginning in childhood, instigated and maintained by someone else (with a few notable exceptions), and resulting in serious rupture in family relationships.

After the second round of reading the life stories, some themes were dropped because of infrequent occurrence. The edited list of primary themes, and examples of them, were presented to a narrative research group who provided feedback and insights. A final list of themes was then developed (see Table 1). The life stories were then read a third time with this final list of themes, using the same coding and compiling method described above.

3 Results

3.1 Life Maps

Figure 1 gives typical examples of life maps from this sample. The life maps were analyzed using a straightforward method. The percentage of the entire time in the "good" and "bad" range was calculated. The average (mean) time in the "good" range was 10 % (SD = 21 %), with 90 % in the "bad" range. Thus, these women (currently) judged a majority of their life as having been negative.

Shmotkin (2005) delineates different standard trajectories for life maps. Most participants in this study fall into his categories of descending (i.e. continuous negative slope) or downward spiral (i.e. scattered points with overall downward trajectory). Shmotkin (2005) argues that SWB trajectories have an "underlying message." The underlying message here appears to be: a long descent or spiral into current misery.

3.2 Narrative Results

There were two components to the narrative results, the primary themes and the prototypical narrative arc. The primary themes will be presented first and the prototypical narrative arc second.

3.3 Family Conflict

The women in this sample consistently narrated substantive and persistent family conflict. This conflict began early in life and continued to the present. In Nicaragua, as in most of Central America, the family is the paramount social context. The family is central for obtaining a diverse range of psychological, social, material, educational, and vocational resources. Substantive family conflict compromises the individual's ability to access these key resources. There are limited resources outside the family. Government agencies, civic organizations, schools, and churches, all together provide a limited social net for those who fall out of the family.

Fig. 1 Life maps of female sex workers
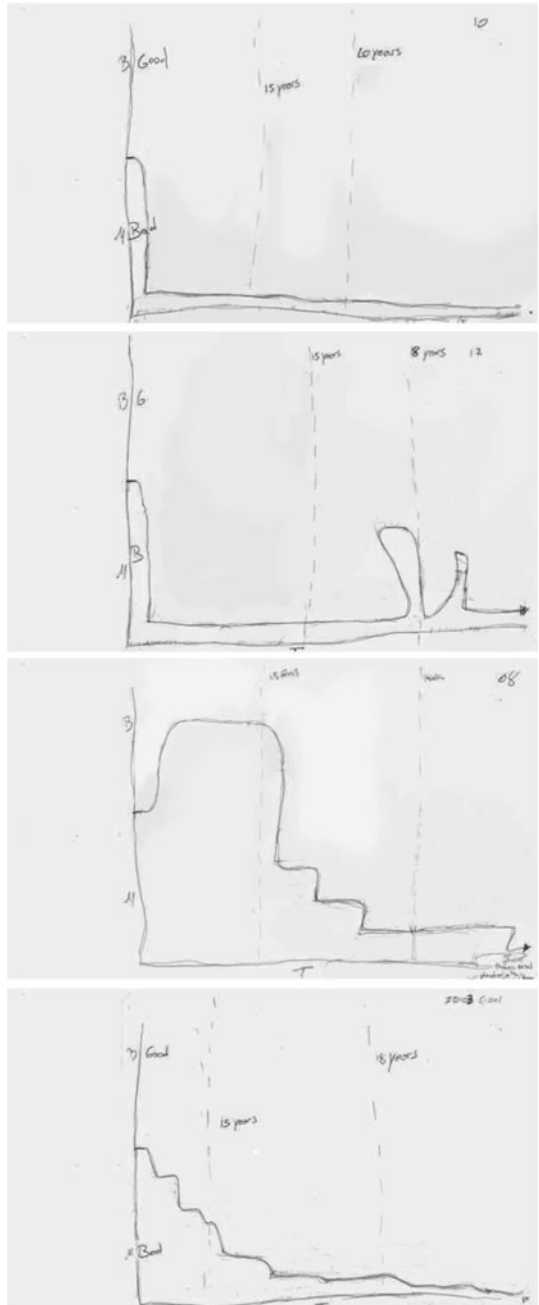
The women in this sample narrated a wide range of family conflicts. Some examples centered on parental actions: domestic violence, parental physical abuse, or parental desertion. Other examples included non-parental family members: grandmother abandoning grandchildren, sibling violence, or uncle sexually abusing niece. The conflicts with

family of destination generally revolved around the women being mistreated by their husbands. Those examples included: physical abuse, adultery, abandonment, and substance abuse. What unites these diverse kinds of recalled experiences is a sense of instability and insecurity in the family unit. Positive aspects of early and current family life were narrated, but these bright moments were largely outweighed by negative recollections.

Sexual abuse within the family, one form of family conflict, appeared many times. Childhood sexual abuse has been repeatedly connected with adult prostitution (e.g. Abramovich 2005). In this sample, the abuser was always a male non-nuclear family member, usually an uncle. Below, Ingrid tells the story of her uncle's abuse and how it affected her conception of herself as a developing woman and her ability to celebrate her Quinceaños, an important coming-of-age ritual for Hispanic females on their fifteenth birthday.

> When I was almost 15 years old, I had a lot of dreams… I had dreams about how they would celebrate my Quinceaños. The thing is that I was raped; I was raped early by an uncle of mine and I didn't say anything because I was afraid. He was my mother's brother and with the way he treated me, I was living all nervous. I saw my mother gathering the money [for the Quinceaños]. She bought me a dress, but I didn't want her to spend more money. I felt bad because she was so very happy to celebrate my Quinceaños. One night I told her to not celebrate my Quinceaños because my uncle had raped me. She started crying. It was a horrible moment for both of us because he was her brother; he was my uncle and we gave him our trust. That was the hardest time of my life, the time when my uncle did that.

Ingrid's statement that the familial sexual abuse was the hardest part of her life was echoed by Pia, who described the long term impact of her uncle and cousin sexual abusing her by stating, "The central theme of my life is when they raped me. I feel like they took something that belonged to me, and I was never able to get it back."

The narrated family conflict was not always just from childhood. For most of the women the familial rifts that begin in childhood or adolescences still existed today. For some, the rifts were still intensifying. For example, Maria related that the low point of her life was the recent discovery that her mother was sexually involved with the father of her son.

Across the sample, the family conflict was usually instigated and maintained by someone else. In their view, these women are passive victims of the action of others. Agency in life stories has been connected to greater well-being (Adler 2012). The women in this sample displayed little agency in their life stories, a fact that could help explain their very low life satisfaction. If one's social world is intensely tumultuous, and one perceives oneself as a passive subject in the grip of that tumult, a sense of misery is a likely outcome.

3.4 Entry into Sex Work

All the women in this sample, save one, narrated the entry into sex work as the culmination of a downward spiral of life events. The most common form of this downward spiral begins with the familial conflict described above. The teenager, or sometimes even girl, attempts to move away from the nuclear family to escape the conflict. Dalla (2000) found a similar trope of "escape from family conflict" among sex workers in the American Midwest. In this Nicaraguan sample, the movement away from the family took multiple forms: living on the streets, moving to another town, or moving in with a boyfriend. If the initial movement away from family was not directly into a romantic relationship with a man, ultimately such a relationship developed. And these women, as they told it, ended up with

mates who were as unstable and volatile as their families of origin. Even as they father children with these women, these men beat them, cheat on them, and likely abandon them. This sequence of mate selection, birth of a child, mate trouble, and dissolution of the relationship was often repeated two or three times, resulting in two to four children. Here is Angela's summary of how, having left her family of origin, she went through two relationships and had one child:

> I was 15 [when I met him]. He was 31… I got pregnant pretty fast, like three months after [we got together], before I was 16. I had my first son and I lived with him for four years. He drank and used drugs. I didn't know about the drugs. You know, back then I didn't know anything about that.

> He treated me very bad. He was always drunk… I was a kid. So now I have a lot of scars on my face and body that he gave me. I decided to leave him when I was 19. After that, I had a relationship with a man for three years. My son was older then, he was like 5 or 6, but [my boyfriend] didn't like my son…Our fights were around the fact that I didn't give him a son…In the end, he punched my son one day, so we broke up.

At this point, there might be an interlude in the woman's story in which she is able to find work and support her children. But then the job is lost, or the sister can no longer take care of the kids during the day. Thus comes a crucial juncture in the woman's life story, the entry into sex work. Nearly every single woman framed the decision to become a sex worker as a "necessity." They understood the decision as: become a sex worker and be able to feed my kids, or face the unthinkable. In this sample, the sex worker victimhood theme was ubiquitous (Phoenix 2000). As they relate it, their life circumstances had an ineluctable quality. They had no option but to turn to sex work.[6]

Even in the face of their universal dislike of the work, these women do not second guess the factors they understand to have brought them to it. Here is a typical explanation, from Eva, of the entry into sex work:

> I didn't want to do this [sex work], but a girlfriend of mine told me, "Look, I am going to take you with me, let's go." And I said "No, I am ashamed and I can't do it", but she replied, "No girl, but it is easy." And I said, "Maybe it is easy for you, but I have never done that." And she said, "That's the way to learn." In the end, I entered this profession because of the *necessity* I had. I didn't have a job and not one of my kids fathers wanted to take responsibility of them. There was only me to pay for their school and their food, and I had and still have to help my mother.

This story is typical in three ways. First, Eva uses the concept of "necessity" as described above, and as such her agency is diminished. Second, the necessity is explained in terms of those whom Eva is obligated to support, children and mother, and in terms of those who are failing in their support of Eva, the fathers of her children. Third, a friend is the gateway to the profession. Friends are often designated in these stories as the ones who suggest the work, endorse that the work can be done, and importantly, instruct the novice in the hows and wheres of the business. Murphy (2010) found a similar phenomenon among Baltimore, MD streetwalkers.

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[6] Research has often found that poverty (e.g. Benoit and Milnar 2001) and drug use (Baker et al. 2003) are key factors in many women starting sex work. While most of the women in this sample cited poverty as the reason for starting sex work, none gave drug use as a reason.

The life story interview protocol asked the women to give specific stories of their starting work, but few women offered detailed stories of their first experiences. One exception came from Rose:

The first night I came to the highway, a great car stops in front of me…but it was an old man, and I tell you, he was horribly ugly! My legs and my hands were trembling and he asked "how much?" and I told him [$15] just to try, but he said it was fine, and we went to the hotel. I was really nervous and I looked at the old man, and I was really disgusted. I didn't even want to get my clothes off, and he said, "Hey, you know what we came for?" And I said, "Yes, but could you please turn the light off?" I was really ashamed in that moment, it was my first time. When he realized it was my first time he was very good and caring. In the end, we didn't do anything, and he asked why I was doing this and I explained the whole story… He took me back and he stopped in a gas station to buy some stuff for me and my daughter. That same night, I went out with another man, and I really had to do the job then. So we went; we got naked, and we did what we had to do. In the end, I looked at the bills and I told my sister "You know, you make fast money on this, but it is hard!"

One noteworthy component of this story is the kindness of Rose's first customer. A sizable minority of the women narrated stories of customers showing kindness towards them. But the kindness was always time limited and did not resolve the "necessity" that brought the women to sex work.

It is important to note that a few women did not narrate their entry into sex work in terms of "necessity." Two women described being rejected by men and becoming depressed. They started drinking heavily and frequenting nightclubs to treat their pain. While in the clubs, both were propositioned for paid sex, accepted, and so entered the trade. One other participant described beginning sex work when propositioned at a nightclub, but her story did not include depression or romantic rejection as precursors to frequenting nightclubs. These narratives deviate from the storyline of economic necessity and bear some parallels to Western sex worker stories of entering the trade because of drug use (Baker et al. 2003; Dalla 2000). But even with these three women, the entrance into sex work is not narrated in agentic or pro-active terms. Like the other women, these women articulate this momentous juncture in their lives with passivity and reactivity.

3.5 Trauma

In western nations, sex workers have been found to have experienced high rates of trauma prior to entering the trade and while in the profession (Farley and Barkan 1998). Similarly, the life stories in this sample were replete with physical and sexual assaults. The following is an example of a recent trauma that Gabriela experienced while doing sex work.

On September 18, it will be a year since a man raped me. Well, some people say that it is not a rape, that I had it coming. Look, I am going to tell you something, if a person puts a gun in your face, it is a rape! Right? It is true that he didn't fire the gun, but everything that he was doing to me was done by force because I didn't want to. I didn't want to open my legs. But he got closer and he put the gun in my face. To me that's a rape…I didn't know him, he just came and picked me up in his truck, but he was pointing the gun at me the whole time.

Note that Gabriela's status as a sex worker calls into question for others the idea that she could be raped. She has told this story before and others have contested her claim to being

raped. This is a consequence of becoming a sex worker. In the eye's of others, having exchanged sex for money, their body is no longer fully their own, and so the category of rape becomes inapplicable.

3.6 Shame, Concealment, and Moral Judgment

When asked about their views of sex work prior to entering the profession, many of the women related that they had previously condemned sex work and sex workers. One woman stated, "I always judged them really harshly. I thought they were making easy money." Another said, "I thought the worst about it. I used to say how can they be like that?" A few women reported having a degree of compassion and understanding for sex workers. "To be honest, I used to feel sadness for them because I couldn't imagine having sex with someone without any desire to do so." One woman held an almost positive initial view, "I didn't have a bad idea about them. I always understood that if that was the way they could access money, it was fine."

This last woman notwithstanding, most of the women stated that prior to entering the profession they believed sex work was immoral. Expressing this kind of pre-sex work judgment could have strategic benefits. It aligns the sex workers with the views of their social milieu. By articulating such views, the sex worker can say in effect, "Look, I see this is bad, but I was still forced into it."

When it came to their current moral judgment about sex work, not a single woman expressed approval. Some were terse and simple in their moral evaluations. "I don't morally approve of this work." Some stated disapproval but invoked the notion of "necessity" in justifying their continued practice of it. "I can morally disapprove of it, but I have to keep doing it." And some had more elaborate articulations of their moral disapproval. "I don't approve of this work…[I want to change] because I am not satisfied with myself, and I am not giving [my children] a good moral example."

Moral disapproval of one's own action, and a sense of the moral disapproval of specific others, such as family members, are components of the negative emotion of shame, as modulated through the looking-glass self (Mead 1934). All of the women stated that to the extent that their family members knew of their work, the family members morally disapproved. This familial disapproval was distressing for them. For example, one woman explained that she felt bad about her work, "because it is not the education that my mother gave to me. These are not the values she taught me during my childhood, and this is not the life she expected for me." Concealment is a characteristic behavioral response to shame, and many of the women concealed their work from significant others. Concealment from their children was most common. Below Karina relates concealing her work from her children.

> [My kids] are starting to ask where do I go every night, what is my work, why am I always out late…and I'm starting to have problems in lying to them because they are starting to understand things better, and one day when they are older my daughters might come and say "Mom, why didn't you tell the truth?"

Another woman reported her hopes for future concealment from her daughter, "I expect that my daughter will never find out about what I do," and with regard to her daughter's father, "I really wish that [he]…will never know about what I do because it would never be the same if he finds out." Thus shame-fueled concealment infects not just the present but the indefinite future. These women also reported concealing their profession from other family members such as mothers and brothers. One woman, whose boyfriend broke up

with her when she finally admitted her profession, has come to the conclusion that, "maybe whores don't have the right to have a stable relationship with someone, to have somebody that loves you." Some women expressed more visceral and bodily expressions of shame. One such woman reported that she tries to put herself in the right mood for work, but in the end, "we feel dirty." Or more specifically illustrating the hiding tendency that shame induces, "No, I don't approve of it [sex work]… It makes me feel bad, I see my own body and I feel bad. Sometimes I start crying, or sometimes I cover myself."

The study participants consistently expressed awareness of how the generalized other perceived and judged them (Mead 1934). One woman articulated a reaction to the negative judgment of the generalized other that was not shame but the pang of ostracism. In response to a query about the difficult aspects of sex work, she responded, "[As for right now], it would be the loneliness that I live because of how society corners you as a sex worker. They don't understand that you do it mainly for *necessity* and to support your kids." The clearest expression of an awareness of the negative judgment of the generalized other, and the sense of shame and stigma that accompanied that judgment, came in the response from Sheila quoted at the beginning of this paper. As a follow-up question to that response, Sheila was asked about leaving the sex trade. She responded by saying,

> Why? Because my children are growing old and I don't want them to see me as an undervalued person. I don't want them to be ashamed of me. If one day someone tells them "your mom was a prostitute," I want them to say, "but she isn't anymore, she changed for us."

These themes of shame can be seen as life story instantiations of the cultural stereotype of the sex worker. Such cultural deliverances suggest that these women are properly objects of shame. But these women do not recapitulate these attributions without personalizing them with their own sense of hurt and rejection. Moreover, while admitting the immoral nature of their work, they contest the notion of moral responsibility for this immorality. "Necessity" pushed them into the work. They did not choose it because of their loose character or lack of morals. They are in the grip of the irresistible gravity of their life's downward spiral. In this way, they subvert the cultural stereotype of the sex worker and construct a personal narrative that attempts to make sense of their desperate situation.

3.7 Motherhood, Future Redemption, and Generativity

It is important to realize that most people (including many Nicaraguans) primarily see the participants in this study as prostitutes, with the attendant judgments that come with that label. But these women largely see themselves as *mothers* providing for their children. As these women tell it, their lives are about caring for their children. Multiple lines of evidence support this conclusion. First, 27 of the 30 (90 %) women in this sample entered sex work to provide for the needs of their children. In an impoverished country such as Nicaragua,[7] parental abandonment of children is not unheard of. In addition, Nicaragua has a number of orphanages which temporarily care for children without termination of parental rights, and which also allow regular visitation. None of the women discussed considering these options. As they tell it, they never considered relinquishing or diminishing their roles as mothers. Instead, they made the choice to become a sex worker, a choice they saw as a heavy sacrifice, for the sake of being able to remain active mothers to

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[7] The UNDF ranks Nicaragua as one of the three poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere.

their children. Second, the primary reason nearly every woman gave for wanting to *get out of* sex work was their children. Sex work is physically dangerous and so imperils their ability to provide maternal care in the future. They also see it as morally hazardous for their children to have the example of a sex worker mother. Moreover, many women reported fear that a rift would occur in the relationship with their children if and when the children found out about their work.

Thus sex work and motherhood are inextricably linked in these stories. The women see sex work as a "necessity" for remaining mothers, so they are drawn to it. But once in it, they see sex work as destructive of their ability to be a good mother, so they are repelled by it. This push–pull of sex work produces tremendous tension in these women's life stories. The paradox of prostitution as empowerment versus victimhood (Phoenix 2000) bears a strong consonance with the push–pull found here.

The third aspect of these life stories that illustrates the centrality of motherhood for these women was the high frequency with which they told high point stories about their children. When asked about the high point in their lives, the most common story was the birth of their first child. Many of these women judge the birth of their children, and the attendant role of mothering, as the most important aspect of their lives. An excerpt from Iris' high point illustrates this:

> The first thing I did [when my son was born] was to thank God when they put him here on my belly [points to belly]. I was thankful because he came out alright, and because I was so happy to become a mother, and because I gave birth correctly to him. I felt very happy to have a little, fragile baby in my arms. I thank God for that because I never thought that I would be a mother.

The strong theme of motherhood that runs throughout these life stories is a primary way in which this study presents a different perspective on sex worker identity. In the western samples reviewed above (e.g. Dalla 2000; Murphy 2010), motherhood is mentioned, but it is not a dominant factor in the construction of the identity of the sex workers (at least as presented in those papers). But in these Nicaraguan sex worker narratives, motherhood is central.

These narratives of motherhood can be read as reproductions of part of the master narrative of the idealized female life in Nicaragua. The women are appropriating the mothering components of this narrative while leaving aside the sexual purity and devoted wife components of the story. Ultimately, they reject the logic that all three components— sexual purity before marriage, being a devoted wife, and being a devoted mother—are essentially linked. Instead they appropriate the part of the master narrative that they can successfully deploy in their own story and use it to develop their personal narrative identity.

Another way of conceiving of this focus on motherhood is through the Eriksonian developmental concept of generativity (Erikson 1950; McAdams and de St. Aubin 1998). In its broadest sense, generativity is the adult's concern and care for the well being and welfare of the next generation. In its most basic and biological sense, generativity is parenting. Erikson conceived of generativity as a central developmental task of adulthood. A fully functioning and mature adult is one who is invested in the interests of the next generation. Many of the women in this sample have achieved a generative self-conception as mothers. For example, in a passage that reflects the centrality of generativity in her life, Georgina imagines a future script whereby she is able to quit sex work in order to be a good mother:

> I want to be with my kids in the future, taking care of them and staying home with them, and dedicate myself to them night and day. I would like to not be in this life or
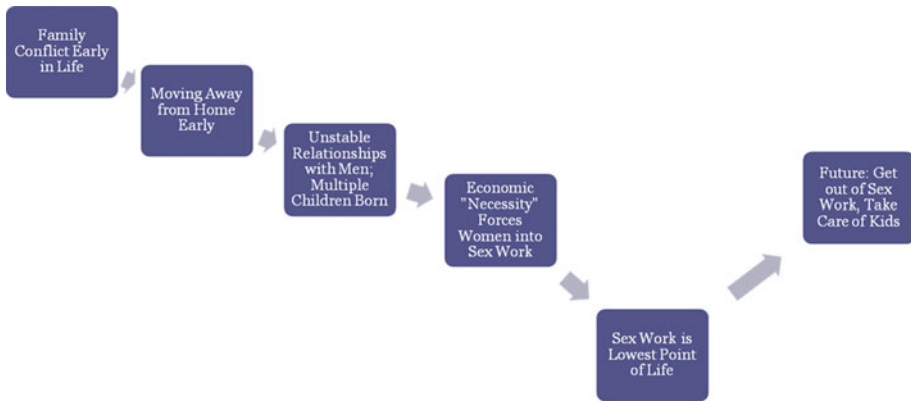
Fig. 2 Prototypical narrative arc

this work that I am doing now, and I want to change everything. I want to dedicate myself more to my babies, I would like to be the Georgina that I used to be, the woman who was dedicated to make the food for her kids, to wash their clothes, the one that ironed for her kids, that's what I want in the immediate future.

In Georgina's narrative there is a strong redemptive hope for the future. In its most basic form, redemption involves going from a negative state to a positive one (McAdams 2006). Georgina is imagining the redemptive move from the negative state of sex work to the positive state of active and virtuous mothering. Many, if not most, of the participants envisioned a similar kind of future redemption. Redemptive narratives have been linked with higher self-reported well-being (McAdams et al. 2001), so their presence in this sample might be surprising. But two caveats are important. First, greater life satisfaction has been linked with redemption in personal stories about the past, not the future. Second, the expectation that the future is going to be dramatically better than the present has been linked with lower life satisfaction in the present and the future (Busseri et al. 2009). Indeed, Busseri et al. 2009 concluded that expectations of steep increases in future life satisfaction could be characterized better as "fantasy" than as "functional."

3.8 The Prototypical Life Story

When these life stories are considered as a whole, a prototypical narrative arc emerges. This prototypical narrative arc was instantiated in large part, and sometimes in full, in nearly every life story in this sample.

The prototypical narrative arc found in this sample bore many similarities to previous research on the difficult past histories of sex workers (Hoigard and Finstad 1992). The arc is schematized in Fig. 2. The arc begins with a troubled and conflict ridden early home life. As found in other samples (Dalla 2000), these woman leave home at an early age to escape the conflict. The movement away from the family is followed by a series of unstable and conflict ridden relationships with men. These relationships produce children, and children require financial support. The men abandon these women, and so these mothers are left to fend for themselves and their children on their own. It is at this point that the ineluctable "necessity" of beginning sex work arises. To be good mothers, and care for their children, these women bend to fate and enter the trade. Once there, they universally disdain their

work and who they are as sex workers. They feel intense shame and so conceal their work from family and friends. Ultimately, they know they will not be able to conceal their work from their children forever, so they feel the push to get out of the trade. The vision for the future is straightforward and consistent: get out of sex work, get a regular job, and take care of the children.

The prototypical narrative arc, while starting in difficult circumstances, still has an overall downward trajectory. A review of the life maps confirms that these women believe that, though, their life has been difficult in the past, things are worse now. Additionally, there is a stage-wise descent in these narratives (as illustrated in Fig. 2). One stage in life is problematized, which results in the development of a new and more difficult stage. Then this progression repeats.

In terms of narrative theory, this stage-wise descent is a version of a contamination script (McAdams et al. 2001; McAdams 2006). In a contamination script the protagonist narrates a trajectory from good to bad, or bad to worse. Contamination scripts have been analyzed in particular scenes within a life narrative, but the contamination in these life stories are trajectories that run from scene to scene through the entire story. Indeed, the prototypical narrative is an extended contamination script, with the nadir of sex work as the contamination acme. Contamination scripts have been empirically linked to lower SWB and higher levels of depression (Adler et al. 2006).[8]

The prototypical narrative arc has clear ramifications for life satisfaction judgments. While the Life Maps show an overall downward trajectory in SWB, the prototypical narrative arc provides the episodic content and semantic judgments that flesh out the exact nature of that perceived downward spiral. If one is living out the story of one of these downward spirals, it is hard to imagine anything but highly negative judgments about global life satisfaction.

4 Discussion

Diener and Diener (1996) concluded that "most people are happy." Entailed in that statement is the fact that some people are unhappy. This study focuses on a very select group of unhappy people to better understand the nature of their misery. Though a small and very particular sample, the Nicaraguan sex workers in this study provide an important data point for SWB research. They give a window onto what is happening at the other end of the SWB scale, the extremely unhappy. Indeed, these women might just be the most unhappy group ever studied in the SWB literature, as they "bottomed out" the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS).

Given that the standard predictors of income, social support, and personality dispositions did little to explain the misery of these women (Cox 2012), we employed a novel research design for SWB research, the life story method. An examination of their life stories provided a broader identity and life course context in which to understand their extremely low judgments of life satisfaction. The primary elements in these women's life stories is betrayal, societal judgment, shame, trauma, the push–pull of sex work, and deep economic insecurity. Moreover, they tell the story of their lives with a prototypical narrative arc characterized by an overarching downward spiral. Given such life stories, it is not surprising that when these women consider the statement, "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing" (SWLS item 5), they respond by stating they would

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[8] The prototypical narrative arc resembles theories of the downward spiral (Schumm et al. 2006).

change everything. Or when they consider the statement, "In most ways my life is close to my ideal" (SWLS item 1), they respond that their lives are not like their ideal in any way.

The life story method employed in this study provides a culturally-sensitive and ideo-graphically-informed investigation of how these women construct their identity. In so doing, it sheds light on the particular concerns that frame their life satisfaction judgments. The findings with regard to motherhood highlight this point. Motherhood has not been found to be a central identity construct in the narrative identity of sex workers in Western samples. In contrast, motherhood was a paramount identity concern for these Nicaraguan sex workers, as they framed their life story as a struggle to be good mothers. Most importantly, they see their lives as inexorably caught in the push–pull of sex work exactly because they are trying to be faithful mothers. They are *pulled* toward sex work to provide for their children, but they are *pushed* away from it because they believe they cannot be *good* mothers as prostitutes. With this life story perspective, we return to the question of their unhappiness more informed. Their unhappiness is explainable, at least partially, via their identity as mothers in crisis. In this way, we get a detailed and ideographically-indexed explanation of the extreme unhappiness of this sample. While traditional predictors of life satisfaction, such as income, social support, and personality dispositions, did little to account for their misery (Cox 2012), the life story theme of motherhood in crisis proved to be revealing.

Most generally, this paper hinges upon the argument that judgments of global life satisfaction are deeply related to identity processes. Life satisfaction judgments are informed by numerous sources (Lucas and Diener 2008), but identity processes, such as the life story, can be particularly helpful for understanding evaluations of the life course. To judge whether one is satisfied with one's life, one's accomplishments, and one's trajectory, one must invoke a more global conception of one's self, past, present, and future, and determine whether one finds this invoked self-conception to be attractive, palatable, or disappointing. The life story is an episodically-rich version of this invoked self, past, present, and future. Thus the life story and life satisfaction judgments bear a strong relationship to each other. The current paper employed this relationship to understand the dramatic unhappiness of these Nicaraguan sex workers. In so doing, it revealed the story behind their life dissatisfaction.

5 Limitations

This paper proposed a novel theoretical framing of the relationship between life satisfaction and the life story. Given the nature of this data set, this study was only able to demonstrate the hypothesized connection between life satisfaction and the life story in a limited fashion. The current project could only show that dramatically low life satisfaction related to highly negative life stories. Data sets with greater variance in life satisfaction, and a much less idiosyncratic sample, would be needed to show a more general relationship between life satisfaction and the life story.

6 Conclusion

This paper provides an in-depth look at a very unique data point in the SWB literature. Forty years of well-being research has produced few, if any, investigations of groups as unhappy as these women. Employing a life story method illuminated the complex and culturally specific ways in which these participants constructed an identity consistent with

their extreme unhappiness. More broadly, considering the connection between the life story and life satisfaction provides a novel theoretical approach for studying SWB. Investigating life satisfaction with the aid of the life story gives a fine-grained and psychologically rich perspective on the construction of human happiness and unhappiness.

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