

IDENTITY DISCLOSURE OF SEX WORKERS: UNDERSTANDING HOW STIGMA IMPACTS DISCLOSURE

OVERVIEW

This study aims to investigate how shame-based stigma affects sex workers' communication, particularly in disclosure to partners and family. Examining the role of shame in shaping disclosure decisions, managing stigma, and navigating potential judgment or support. By analyzing feelings of shame and disclosure strategies, this research seeks to highlight how sex workers resist, negotiate, or internalize stigma, emphasizing the role of communication in both reinforcing shame and fostering understanding and agency.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: How do sex workers navigate decisions about disclosing their occupation to relational partners?

RQ2: What perceived risks of treatment discourage disclosure for sex workers?

H1: Increased feelings of shame associated with a sex worker identity will result in decreased disclosure with relational partners.

BACKGROUND

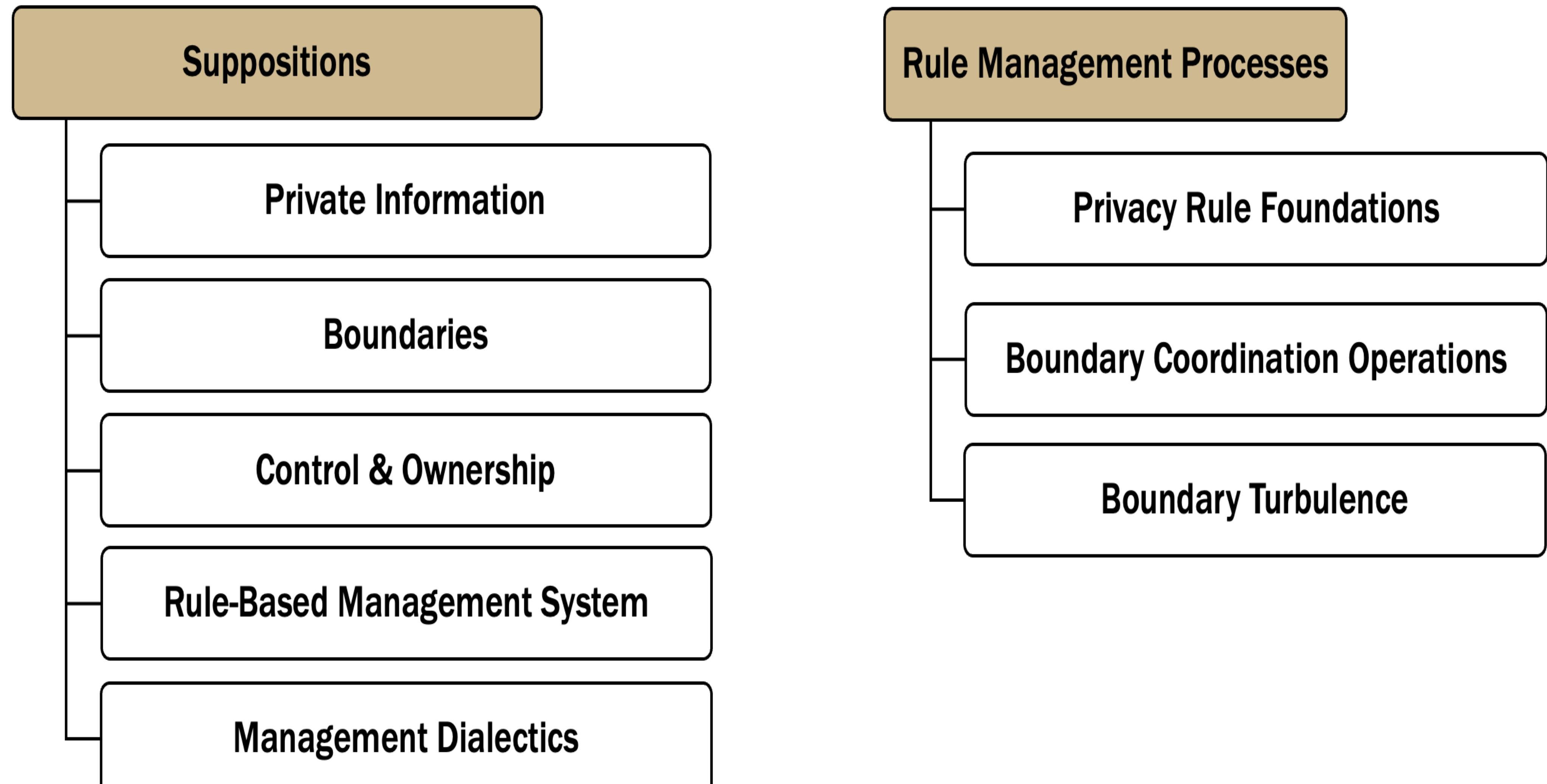
Sex work, defined as the exchange of sexual services for money⁴, is a growing industry with an estimated 1-2 million sex workers in the United States⁶. Stigma, which is seen as a deeply discrediting attribute², plays a significant role in shaping disclosure decisions for sex workers. According to Goffman's framework, sex work falls within "blemish of individual character" type of stigma, with courtesy stigma further complicating relational dynamics and influencing identity disclosure.

Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) concept of "dirty work" adds another layer, emphasizing how sex workers navigate the moral, social, and physical taint associated with their profession while managing their identities in a stigmatized context.

Given the increasing accessibility of sex work and the rise in participation, research on how stigma impacts disclosure is warranted. Literature underscores the compounded stigma sex workers face due to societal perceptions of "dirty work"¹, which heightens the risk of social and legal repercussions.

Petronio's (2002) Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory offers a framework to explore how sex workers manage privacy boundaries, balancing disclosure risks with relational closeness, cultural expectations, and personal comfort.

COMMUNICATION PRIVACY MANAGEMENT THEORY



Overview of Communication Privacy Management Theory. From *Boundaries of Privacy: Dialectics of Disclosure* (p. 4), by Sandra Petronio, 2002, SUNY Press.⁵

EXPECTED OUTCOMES & IMPLICATIONS

This study aims to shed light on how stigma influences sex workers' decisions to disclose their occupation, with particular emphasis on health-related consequences. For RQ1, the findings are expected to highlight nuanced strategies that sex workers employ when managing disclosure to relational partners. These strategies may reflect efforts to mitigate stigma while preserving access to emotional support, which can play a critical role in overall mental and physical health.

In addressing RQ2, it is anticipated that participants will identify perceived risks tied to disclosure, particularly regarding access to healthcare. Sex workers may report fears of stigma-based discrimination from providers, breaches of confidentiality, or receiving inadequate or biased care. These perceived risks could discourage disclosure to healthcare professionals, ultimately

limiting access to essential preventive services, mental health treatment, and other forms of care.

For H1, it is expected that internalized stigma and increased feelings of shame will correlate with reduced disclosure to both relational partners and healthcare providers. This outcome may reinforce how stigma perpetuates negative health outcomes by exacerbating isolation and discouraging help-seeking behaviors.

The broader implications of this research include the potential to inform interventions aimed at reducing stigma in healthcare settings, promoting culturally competent care, and supporting sex workers' overall health and well-being. Additionally, this study aims to contribute to existing research on stigma, disclosure, and health disparities in marginalized populations.

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METHODS

Participant recruitment is to be conducted via online forum(s) such as Reddit (r/SexWorkers) subreddits and/or another online forum called SAAFE (Support and Advice for Escorts).

To be eligible, participants must be at least 18 years old, be a current or former sex worker, and live in the United States (by self-report). Participants will be asked to complete a survey consisting of demographic questions, Likert-scale items, and open-ended questions.

At the start of the survey, demographic information will be collected regarding age, gender identity, education level, average annual income, and region of the country. Including these questions at the start of the survey will allow the researcher to contextualize participant responses and allow for subgroup analyses.

The study will assess participants' experiences of stigma using an adapted version of the Experiences of Sex Work Stigma scale (Kerrigan et al., 2021)³ and their likelihood of disclosure using Wheless's (1976)⁷ Self-Disclosure Scale.

Participants' experiences of stigma will be assessed on a total of 21 items across three domains: shame, silence, and treatment. In addition, self-disclosure and interpersonal solidarity will be measured through 32 items within five domains to identify the impact of stigma on the likelihood of disclosure.

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