

## Where Sex Ends and Emotions Begin

Jaime first saw Lucia in the Red Light District of Tijuana shortly after he was discharged from a drug rehabilitation center. He was enamored but initially too shy to speak to her. After he relapsed he got up the nerve to approach her when he saw her again. Lucia also used meth and injected heroin, and the two quickly formed a relationship. Within a few months they moved into a hotel room together. They used condoms in the beginning of the relationship but stopped after they established themselves as a couple because they loved and trusted each other. However, Lucia engaged in sex work, and Jaime pursued casual sexual partnerships apart from Lucia. Lucia's sex work was motivated by financial and material support, but Jaime sought outside sexual partners for pleasure. On the surface the sexual activity of both Jaime and Lucia complicates—and perhaps even contradicts—the notions of love and commitment that each of them proclaimed. How do we make sense of this?

Overlapping sexual relationships are often understood in terms of “sexual concurrency” in global public health research. Concurrency refers to overlapping sexual relationships that can facilitate transmission of HIV/STIs due to the shortened periods between multiple sexual contacts, in which inconsistent condom use among partners can exacerbate disease transmission and acquisition (Morris and Kretzschmar 1997). While diseases are clearly a concern, as explored later in this chapter, there is less scholarship theorizing the structural, social, and emotional contexts surrounding sexual concurrency. As a result, the voices of couples themselves often get lost in narratives of epidemiological risk and infection.

This chapter explores emotional intimacy within sex workers' primary relationships by reinterpreting patterns of sexual concurrency. Drawing on the stories of Lucia and Jaime and Julieta and Mateo, it shifts the narrative beyond individual, risk-based explanatory models of sexual behavior to a broader conceptualization bridging sociopolitical contexts with emotional lived experience. Through Lucia's relationship with Jaime, we learn that even while clients and outside sexual

partners are shrouded in secret, these partners have a different symbolic meaning than the primary relationship. As shown in Julieta's relationship with Mateo, the secrecy of such outside partnerships introduces real worries about health risks. This opens up questions about the weight of disclosing these risks, including HIV/STIs, given that couples try to preserve their collective emotional well-being amid ongoing physical health threats. Put another way, both couples' stories illustrate how the multiple meanings of sex, especially *outside* of the primary relationship, say something important about emotional intimacy *within* the primary relationship.

Importantly, studying sexual behavior lends itself to a unique set of challenges in research. Sex is a sensitive topic, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to validate self-reported information about sexual practices in standard data collection methods. I draw on fieldwork, multiple interviews, and photovoice projects with Lucia and Jaime and Julieta and Mateo, while contextualizing their stories within other findings from the Parejas study to show the commonality of their experiences. Integrating multiple sources of data lends rich, even if still incomplete, insight into the practice and social meaning of concurrent sexual relationships.

Of further note, working with couples on questions of sexual behavior and the potential consequences of testing positive for HIV/STIs introduces ethical questions around confidentiality and the sensitivity of data. For participant protection the couples presented here are "composite couples," meaning that all the experiences and direct quotes are grounded in data, but I obscured some of the potentially identifying partner characteristics and spliced together details from multiple couples to construct the stories.<sup>1</sup> As an example of an ethical quandary, Lucia and Jaime participated in my photovoice project. Like I did for all couples, I asked about their preferences for where they wanted to meet for the photo interviews and if they wanted to be interviewed together. I asked Lucia about how she wished to conduct our interviews, but she deferred to Jaime. When I asked him about his preference, he wanted to do individual interviews in the office in the Red Light District and apart from Lucia because "there are secrets."

#### LUCIA AND JAIME

At twenty-five, Lucia was one of the youngest women in the entire Parejas study. She always wore flowery dresses, and her long, dark hair was streaked with fuchsia and purple highlights. Her enviably clear skin and wide, light eyes exuded a youthful appearance. Lucia was from central Mexico, but her mother moved the family to Tijuana when she married an American man. Her mom had documentation to cross the border to the United States, but Lucia and her five sisters did not. When her stepfather died, her mother moved the family back south, but Lucia stayed behind. Although all of her family lived in their hometown, Lucia said she had



FIGURE 1. Inside Lucia and Jaime's dangerous safe haven, a decorated hotel room in the middle of the Red Light District of Tijuana. Photo by Lucia.

more autonomy in Tijuana. She called her lifestyle “fun and free,” whereas in her hometown people were “discreet” about engaging in socially stigmatized behaviors such as drug use.

Also a migrant, Jaime, thirty, grew up in a small city in western Mexico. He had been living in Tijuana since he was deported from the United States on drug charges several years ago. He spent nearly a decade in Los Angeles, where he loved the anonymity of the big city and the freedom to live his life as he wanted rather than conforming to familial expectations. Jaime said that where he grew up, people “worked all the time” and that people who used drugs were judged. After Jaime was deported he settled in Tijuana, where he met other deportees who helped him navigate his way in a new city. Although he spoke about wanting to be open about his life, he also portrayed a carefully managed image. Jaime always presented for his interviews impeccably dressed in a crisp button-down shirt neatly tucked into jeans, with his long hair shiny and greased back into a ponytail.

Lucia and Jaime lived in a hotel room in the middle of the Red Light District. They recently moved there after their previous residence was broken into and nearly all of their belongings were stolen. They felt more secure in this new location, which had staff working the front desk twenty-four hours a day. It was a small space, but they liked spending time there. Juxtaposed to the noisy chaos and frequent violence outside of their walls, their room had a whimsical feel, almost like a child's bedroom or a college dorm room. Lucia had a significant hand



FIGURE 2. A poster of Minnie Mouse that Lucia colored herself. This was one of Lucia's favorite photos. Photo by Lucia.

in decorating it with all types of accoutrements like stuffed animals, dolls, and flowers. The Virgin of Guadalupe on the wall was an important cultural symbol of their religious beliefs, except that Jaime refused to attend mass, which worried Lucia that the devil will torment him. Other than this, their walls were adorned with secular items, such as colorful construction paper, a poster of Tinkerbell, and Lucia's drawings. One of Lucia's favorites was a poster of Minnie Mouse that she had hand-colored with crayons and wrote, "Te Amo" (I Love You). Jaime and Lucia spent most of their time alone together in the dangerous safe haven that they had cocreated. As migrants apart from their families in the city, they provided comfort, support, and care for each other in the physical and emotional safety of their dangerous safe haven.

Like many couples in Parejas, Lucia and Jaime loved each other. "I have a heart for her," Jaime told me, "and I love her [*la quiero*]." When I asked him what

he considered to be most important to him in an intimate relationship, he said “respect” and “love” were key and defining characteristics of what they shared as a couple: “Respect is the most important thing . . . and love, right? Because where there is love and there is respect, the couple can move on. But if there is disrespect and bad words, then it is as if it were a toy. I would just play with her . . . but there has always been respect and love between us.” Here Jaime signaled the commitment in his relationship; she was not a “toy” but rather a partner with whom to build a life. Even in having outside sexual partners, in his mind, he was not “playing” with Lucia in this relationship.

Prior to Lucia, Jaime never had a long-term relationship, nor a relationship serious enough to let his family know. Even in their shared drug use, Lucia was different:

The other partners I have had have been a maximum of four months, but I have now been with her for two and a half years. We understand each other well, and I know when she wants something, and she also knows when I want something, and we try to give that to each other. We have a good time. With the other partners, I’ve only been accustomed to them and that’s it, but not with her; with her it is different. In other words, despite the fact that we use drugs, she is a different person than the other partners that I have had. She talks to my family on the phone, and we talk with her family; we have communication between the families. But my family does not use drugs, and neither does her family. What we try to do [is] to lead another normal life, as they do, but for two and a half years, we haven’t stopped using drugs.

For Jaime and Lucia, their “fun and free” life in Tijuana had to be managed in relation with “another normal life” that would be accepted by their families. However, “it is the life that one lives here in Tijuana,” Jaime said, explaining that they passed much of their time injecting heroin and smoking meth together in their hotel room. Within the perceived safety of their dangerous safe haven, they had always used drugs together. In their ambivalence and difficulties in cutting down or stopping their drug use, they found ways to navigate their shared addictions and cultivate a socially acceptable script of their relationship to outsiders.

Despite the centrality of drugs to their relationship, Lucia and Jaime were the only couple in the photovoice project who did not take any photographs of drug use. Lucia did not want to risk her family members finding any drug photos when they came to visit. Jaime did not take any photos of his drug use either, which he claimed was out of respect for Lucia’s wishes. Related to Jaime’s concerns with respect and image management, the couple took a whole series of photos of him well-dressed in button-down shirts, with the intent to share these “respectable” photos with his family. But he also posed for a series of photos wearing Los Angeles Dodgers gear and throwing gang signs; one photo depicts him opening his jacket to reveal the sizeable tattoo across his stomach in homage to his former gang life in Los Angeles.

By capturing and avoiding certain images on film, Jaime curated a specific personal image he wanted to project in real life. While both of them may have felt young and free in Tijuana to do as they pleased, they were also still careful to manage their reputations back home.<sup>2</sup> Thus far at least, they had been able to manage their drug use without breaking their familial relationships. In the same way, they were just as careful to manage their outside sexual partnerships without spoiling their own relationship and the image of the good partner that they projected to each other.

### SEX WORK AND SECRETS

Lucia supported the couple primarily through sex work. Although Jaime contributed as he could, she had more flexibility and earning power than he did. While the couple had learned to navigate the complex and potentially volatile dynamics of the arrangement, this does not mean it was easy for either partner. Each deployed a set of strategic practices in relation to sex work to ensure their emotional well-being. I start by contextualizing Lucia's sex work strategies within the larger Parejas study to show the commonality and meaning of these practices.

Lucia, like other women in Parejas, had to negotiate her work without it interfering in her intimate relationship. As one key strategy, women exerted considerable autonomy and agency in their work that they kept separate from their partners. Lucia and most of the other women enrolled in Parejas could be considered in the category of "freelance" sex workers. In our larger study just 10 out of 212 women surveyed reported having a "manager, administrator, or pimp" (*supervisor, administrador, o padrote*), 5 of whom said it was their intimate partner with whom they were enrolled in the Parejas study. Most women reported sharing their earnings from sex work with their steady male partner and exerted substantial individual control over everyday decisions, including when to work, how much to charge, what type of sex acts they were willing to engage in, and negotiations around condom use. We asked these survey questions separately of women and men, and their answers speaking to women's autonomy matched remarkably well (Mittal et al. 2018). For Lucia and others, her decisions in her sex working life were her own, and it was important that she maintain a separation between her clients and Jaime.

Within the autonomy of sex work, client selection is another important strategy for women to both provide financially and maintain their health and relationships. The women in Parejas described different types of clients whom they assessed as posing both health and social risks. On a scale of least to most desirable clients, "one-time" clients posed the greatest potential harm through their unknown health status and threats of violence, while regular, steady clients women had known for some time were considered the safest (and all the better if these were wealthy men

from the United States). However, women had to balance the physical safety and financial security that regular clients provided while preempting the social risks of these clients “falling in love” with them. Crossing such emotional borders could render client condom negotiation difficult and jeopardize their primary relationship (Robertson et al. 2014b). Overwhelmingly, women like Lucia considered their clients to be sources of income and not pursuits of love or intimacy, but any illusion as such to women’s intimate partners could create emotional harm and jealousy within their relationship.

Lucia’s youth and beauty attracted a range of clients, particularly much older men. Lucia’s three regular clients were important sources of steady income. One older American client had erectile dysfunction and paid her US\$50 in cash per hour for her to take off her clothes. Another regular is a Mexican man who paid 400 pesos (about US\$33 at the time) for forty minutes, and they always used condoms. Her final regular client was most lucrative—and problematic—from the standpoint of managing emotions. This fifty-year-old American crossed the border every Friday night to have sex with her at least three times over the weekend, for which he paid \$US100 in cash per interaction. He insisted that they not use condoms, and Lucia relented not because she had feelings for him but because such consistent and relatively well-paying arrangements were difficult to come by. However, she had to balance her negotiations with him to let him know that she did not love him without threatening the business arrangement. As she reflected, “I guess sometimes having regulars is good because you know it is there and it is for sure, but at the same time I am like, ‘No, no, no, I have a partner that I love. I don’t love anybody else apart from him. I am not trying to make you love me.’”

Lucia also sometimes engaged in two to four transactions per day with one-time clients to supplement her income, but she insisted on using condoms in these circumstances because the men were unfamiliar to her. The most annoying clients in this category were those who used meth. They had a hard time “finishing” and wanted additional time beyond the standard fifteen minutes. “But I can’t be taking care of them as long as they want,” she explained. For Lucia sex with clients was strictly a business transaction, while sex with Jaime was “different” because there was “*feeling* in it.”

Although it was strictly a job to Lucia, and Jaime knew about her sex work, they rarely discussed it directly. Tactics of avoidance, telling little lies, and glossing over sex work were common among couples in Parejas, and consistent with larger and pervasive forms of “sexual silence” in many parts of Latin America (Carrillo 2002; Padilla 2007). Sexual silence refers to the complicated set of strategies that individuals employ to avoid speaking directly about sex, while simultaneously maintaining a thinly guised communication about it. Silence creates an illusion of fidelity, preserves the emotional integrity of the relationship, and diffuses any questions that might shatter this mirage. It upholds ideals of culturally acceptable

social and sexual identities in contexts in which “normal” sexual behavior is narrowly defined. In this sense couples’ unspoken acceptance of sex work is based on a “mutual pretense,” or a social permission for certain sexual behaviors to coexist, so long as it was not discussed openly (Padilla 2007, 50). Essentially, sexual silence is a strategic tactic employed by socially marginalized individuals to avoid certain kinds of sexual disclosure. As we will see, in addition to sex work, these forms of silence also apply to the pursuit of outside sexual partners for pleasure and HIV/STI disclosure within relationships.

Jaime found out about Lucia’s sex work a few weeks into their relationship, right after being released from a short stint in the *pinta* (jail). While they were handwashing their clothes one day, Lucia confessed that she had been with clients to earn money while he was gone. At first Jaime was furious and impulsively threw the bucket of cold, dirty laundry water at her. But as Lucia reminded him, “I’m going with clients not because I love them. . . . Would you rather sell meth and go to jail?”

Given his clean-cut appearance and basic English proficiency, Jaime sometimes sold drugs to US tourists who crossed the border to wander around the Red Light District looking for a good time. However, this put Jaime at constant risk of police surveillance, and he had been arrested multiple times but always released for lack of evidence. He also worked odd jobs, including earning money from working at a “swap meet” (an adopted English name for informal places that sell a variety of used and recycled items, akin to a flea market). However, his informal and unsteady employment was not enough to support their expenses of rent, food, drugs, and other basic needs. Lucia’s job brought in steady income and created less risk from law enforcement, reducing the chance they would be separated through incarceration. The one time Lucia was stopped by the police trying to sell things in the border-crossing area without a permit, she sobbed and pleaded with the authorities not to be taken to jail. She and Jaime made a pact not to leave each other if one were jailed.

From Jaime’s perspective, sex work was something to reluctantly accept as part of their relationship. Although he wanted to cultivate “another kind of life for her to get out of prostituting,” he had to become accustomed to Lucia’s sex work because they needed the money and selling drugs was risky. Although he learned to tolerate it, that doesn’t mean that he felt good about it:

Well, like my wife, she has relationships with other people, right? Because for money or drugs. And then one, as a man, has to put up with that, right? I have also had relationships only with women, but never in exchange for drugs or in exchange for nothing, just always for pleasure. But, well, it is a bit difficult for your partner to be with another man—that is, one feels bad, but then one cannot do anything. If one wants to do something, then he has to have to work to be able to give her a house or give her comforts.

All at once Jaime remained frustrated that he couldn't provide more, internalized the blame for his inadequate provision, and tacitly justified his own acting out in pursuit of other pleasures because of the difficulty of the situation. While he never outright admitted he was jealous of Lucia's clients, Lucia confirmed it: "It's true—he's super jealous," she said, which is why she never talked about her work with him. It upset him and in turn further damaged his self-perceptions of worth. In grappling with the fears and anxieties embedded in jealousy and love, French philosopher Roland Barthes writes, "As a jealous man, I suffer four times over: because I am jealous, because I blame myself for being so, because I fear that my jealousy will wound the other, because I allow myself to be subject to a banality: I suffer from being excluded, from being aggressive, from being crazy, and from being common" (1977, 146). In other words, jealousy is not just about the act of sex; it is embedded in multiple forms of social and emotional injury. As Jaime internalized his defeat in accepting Lucia's sex work, he struggled with his relationship and his life circumstances and found other outlets to reconcile his jealousy and restore some sense of his masculinity.

Unbeknown to Lucia, Jaime had three other sexual partners during the course of their relationship. He claimed he always used condoms with these other women because he did not love them nor have the same trust in them as he shared with Lucia. With these partners he indulged in sex only for pleasure in the context of drug use. Indeed, the "secrets" Jaime alluded to as part of his photovoice project turned out to be a series of photographs of one of his outside partners. This partner was an American woman living in Tijuana, who dated a much older American man who smoked meth and often became violent with her. They had a particularly nasty fight that day, so she went to Jaime's room to seek condolence and smoke meth with him. Although they did not have sex on that occasion, they did several months prior in an open hotel room down the hall from Jaime's room. Jaime said he would do it again if the opportunity presented itself, but he spent so much time with Lucia that it had not been feasible.

Jaime explained that he engaged in these outside sexual pursuits to satisfy his appetite for sexual variety and adventure: "And with the others, it's like for pleasure, right? It's like feeling, oh, like a man, good! [*Laughs.*] Right? With Lucia, I only do it for love, and with the other ones I don't. I'm like a bull, right? One does different things. . . . I'm not as forward with my wife as I am with them. With them, if you want, you can do it like this, or this, and this, or that, but with Lucia, it's only like this, and that's it." Jaime emphasized that there were distinctions between his casual sex partners and Lucia. His outside partners were purely for sexual pleasure. Jaime framed his discussion of sex with Lucia as typical sex, whereas outside partners allowed him to feel masculine and indulge, experiment, and enjoy a variety of activities incongruent with a stereotypical image of the good wife, even if the wife herself led another sexual life (Castañeda and Ortiz 1996; Hirsch et al. 2002).

Lucia did not know about the American woman or any of the other outside partners that Jaime had been with. However, further complicating their story, she

was suspicious that he had other sexual relationships with men. She had seen him talking to men on the street, which Jaime had claimed to be in relation to his small-scale drug dealing, but Lucia was unsure: “If I ask him, ‘Are you gay, or what?’ ¡*Nombre, chale!* [*Oh God, wow! (implying a feeling of simultaneous surprise and disappointment)*]. I ask him, ‘Why do these men come to look for you? No one just gives you free money.’ Then I stop asking questions because that’s how we start arguing.” Just like Jaime, Lucia’s own approach to sexual concurrency was to resort to silence to avoid arguments and keep herself from getting hurt. “I don’t keep on about it because I know it’s the drugs,” she later rationalized. “Everybody who uses drugs at some point or another exchanges sex for drugs.”

Jaime claimed to sell meth to several gay men who called him to meet at a hotel downtown, but he never told me about any outside male sexual partners. Although Lucia read beyond his script, she did not have any concrete evidence of his outside sexual conduct. If neither partner asked or offered details, the secrets and little lies kept each other socially and emotionally safe in their relationship.

As bell hooks (2001a) notes, men’s lies are often forgiven, which is part of the power, privilege, and demand of patriarchal societies in which being a “real man” means being above the law, whether that be an actual political framework or the rules of intimate relationships. Further, hooks notes that it is not an accident that a greater cultural acceptance of lying coincides with women gaining greater social equality; as women’s earning power increases, and we become more economically self-sufficient, men often deploy subtler strategies to retain a sense of masculinity and some level of social control.

Read within the broader sociopolitical and cultural context, it thus “makes sense” for Jaime to pursue outside sexual encounters and lie about it. His behavior is rooted in oppression, poverty, feelings of inferiority, and a loss of dignity and self-worth, which can trigger men to act out in harmful ways (Anzaldúa [1987] 2012). He truly felt bad he couldn’t give Lucia more, and her sex work tormented him. Outside sexual partners enabled him to recapture some semblance of his masculinity and control, while the little lies and silence around such pursuits didn’t risk what he had with Lucia.

Lucia and Jaime’s story also speaks to the methodological and ethical difficulties of conducting sexual research: Whose version of these events is “true”? If lies are told with good intentions, are they necessarily harmful? If Jaime was concerned about his image, did he hide sexual transactions with men and take photos of an American female sex partner to curate a specific heterosexual image for me, an American female researcher probing into his sex life? Regardless, Jaime’s photo project revealed something important about the meaning of dangerous safe havens. In contrast to his secrets, Jaime took a series of photos of Lucia, which he looked at in a very different light. There are photos of her goofing off in the hotel room, eating ice cream, and making faces at him. He deeply belly laughed several times throughout his interview at a selfie of them lying in bed together. She wore a wide-eyed, surprised expression on her face that appeared so childlike and

innocent even though she was high on meth. When I asked him if there were any differences between the American woman and Lucia, he looked deeply at Lucia's photo, clenched his fist to his heart, and said that she was the one he really loved. The other woman was just sex. But Lucia represented an emotional connection: "She is my life."

### JULIETA AND MATEO

The story of Julieta, thirty, and Mateo, thirty-six, further illustrates the complexity of outside sexual partnerships in terms of how we assess risk. I met the couple when they returned to the project office to retrieve their HIV/STI test results as part of their participation in Parejas. Julieta later admitted to me that she was terrified to receive her results but had to play it cool in front of her partner. Their story reveals how physical health threats and conditions of chronic illness become entangled in the silences of concurrent sexual relationships.

Julieta had a tattoo of three tiny dots in a triangular formation to signify *la vida loca*. She was tall and slim, with expressive hazel eyes and an animated style of communicating. Mateo was the more reserved partner of the pair; he had a slight build and slender face that often wore a serious expression. Mateo had lived in the United States, and most of his family was still there, but he was convicted of murder (which he claimed he was framed for), spent eight years in prison, and eventually was deported to Tijuana.

Julieta and Mateo first met in a drug rehabilitation center in Tijuana several years ago. At the time Mateo was "tired" of his heroin use and wanted a change. On the other hand, Julieta was forced into rehab after family tragedy: when her young son died in a motorcycle accident, she fell into a profound depression, began to drink heavily and use drugs, and lost her will to live. Her family forced her to enter an inpatient rehabilitation program, as is permitted by Mexican law. But Julieta was not particularly interested in rehab, and she described horrible, abusive living conditions and tactics of humiliation as part of her "treatment," which has been reported in facilities across Mexico.<sup>3</sup> The experience did not help her. She marked her child's death as a turning point in her life and said she has never been the same.

After she was released from rehab, she went back to her hometown in western Mexico. Mateo was released soon after and promptly followed her there. He spent nearly two years searching for her before they reconnected and eventually became a couple. After living there for five years, they recently moved back to Tijuana. After a brief stay in a rat-infested apartment in the Zona Norte where Julieta witnessed someone get shot in the street, they moved to a modest apartment in the quieter outskirts of the city.

A major reason for the couple moving back to Tijuana was Mateo's chronic illness. Mateo said he had advanced cirrhosis. Every day he took up to twelve

pills and vitamins to treat his condition and related health issues, but he still often vomited blood and had bloody bowel movements. He required blood transfusions and recently almost died during a lengthy period of hospitalization. They wanted to be closer to advanced medical care and his family for support, but in reality they did not see them very often. Mateo's family sent money to help with rent, and his sister lived near them, so they could often rely on her for material support. But the rest of his family was on the other side of the border; since he could not cross into the United States, he had to wait until they came to Tijuana to visit.

Their collective traumatic experiences intensified their relationship on many levels, as they increasingly came to count on each other. Mateo acknowledged the role of love in their relationship and explained how their emotional bond strengthened over time: "Love is very important because if there was no love we would not be together. And then if the only thing that keeps us together is because of money—but we do not have money, right? In other words, she is not with me for anything but for love, right? Over time I think I love her more [*la quiero más*]. I take care for her more. When we started together, we were okay for a while, but today I think I take more care of her, and I appreciate her more." Reflecting on the role of illness in their relationship, he continued, "I love her a lot [*la quiero mucho*]; she has supported me a lot through my illness, in everything. I count only on her; she's for me. I can now say that she's everything for me. I don't have anyone else, in my mind and everywhere it's only her."

Separately, Julieta described a similar evolution of her feelings over time. Early on in the relationship, he was the pursuer. She cared for him, but she was not as serious about him as he felt for her. However, over time she came to love him, which intensified in the course of his illness: "I've changed with him—that is, now I feel like I have more responsibility because he is very good to me. Now since he is sick I feel that I love him more [*lo quiero más*]. His disease has brought us closer together."

Mateo's health condition dramatically shaped their relationship, both emotionally and materially. Due to his illness, he could no longer work as an electrician. Julieta took on the role as the primary financial provider, which made Mateo upset. According to Julieta, "He wants to be well because he wants to go back to work. He gets depressed, he feels bad that I work and he does not work. He thinks that I'm going to get angry and that I'm going to go away and I'm going to leave him here. And he gets sad about it because he can't work and help me."

But Julieta was not angry. In fact, she too often felt sad because she thought "he is going to die." She accepted the need to be a provider and had no plans to leave. Instead, their situation shifted their roles and the forms of care and support they provided for each other. Mateo stayed home and cooked (Julieta hated to cook), while Julieta became the primary breadwinner. In turn, they joked that he was a *mandilón*—connoting a man who does as he is told by his female partner and takes on "traditional" gender roles often reserved for women.

The complexity of shifting gender roles and notions of masculinity interwoven into both couples' stories in this chapter represent emergent themes across the stories of couples enrolled in Parejas. Like other couples, Julieta and Mateo's relationship pushes back against a reification of masculinity. Their story highlights the need for historicized understandings of gender relations in local contexts.<sup>4</sup> Matthew Gutmann (1996) offers one such example in his work on masculinity in Mexico City, in which he deconstructs the social complexity underlying categories used to describe men, including *mandilón*, which is often thought of in diminutive and disparaging ways. But Julieta and Mateo reclaimed this term.

Even though Mateo was sick, Julieta said that she would always take care of him "no matter what." To Julieta "*Somos uno, no somos dos, somos uno* [We are one, not two, we are one]." As Gutmann notes, ideas about masculinity "make sense only in relation to other identities" (1996, 238). Julieta and Mateo's relationship worked because they were "one" in relation to each other and against a world where they lacked social support and sufficient material means to attend to his serious medical condition. The couple loved each other and met each other's needs, even if it defied "traditional" understandings of masculinity. These gendered dynamics played out in several ways, including their shared heroin use and concurrent sexual relationships.

As it turns out, part of the "no matter what" that Julieta committed to in the relationship was their mutual relapse into heroin use. It was much easier for the couple to remain abstinent when they lived farther from the border because the heroin market was not well developed there compared to Tijuana, where drugs were "everywhere." They turned back to injecting heroin shortly after they arrived in Tijuana because of easy availability and the temptation to soothe their struggles with depression and illness. Now Julieta's new role as the main provider included both earning money and purchasing heroin for the couple, a traditional male role among drug-using couples.

My colleague and I caught a glimpse of the gendered dynamics of their drug use when visiting their home nestled in the crackled hillsides outside of the city. From the office downtown we rode in a communal van along the narrow and steep roads snaking underneath homes perched precariously on cliffs. When we reached a corner market, we disembarked and Julieta headed to a *connecta*, a nondescript house, where some young males milled about outside. A man wearing a San Diego Padres jacket rode up on a bike and stopped in while she was inside. She emerged and we piled into a taxi and took off up another impossibly steep hill until we reached their modest apartment building at the crest.

Their front door opened up into a kitchen, with one large window facing out front. Underneath was a counter and sink full of dirty dishes, even though they cooked at his sister's home and sometimes at the neighbor's apartment because they did not have a stove or refrigerator. We walked through to the living area, adorned with two red couches, wooden dressers, a memorial for Julieta's son, and



FIGURE 3. Two syringes and a shared heroin spoon posed on the couple's couch. Many of Julieta and Mateo's photos depicted their drug use. Photo by Julieta.



FIGURE 4. Julieta at home in bed with the TV remote, Oreo cookies, and a syringe of heroin. Photo by Mateo.

a bed in the far corner next to the bathroom, in which the door handle was falling off. It was minimalist but comfortable, and they kept the front screen door open most of the time to let the cool breeze come through, except for when they injected.

Mateo was obviously sweaty, anxious, and sick when we arrived, and Julieta asked if we minded if they cured right away. While he prepared the drugs (often a traditionally male activity), she said they were talking about quitting again. Mateo drew up half of the brown liquid in one syringe and half in another, which he gave to her. She excused herself to the bathroom to inject, while he sat on the bed and injected in the top of his right hand. When he finished, he emitted a long, low sigh that indicated his relief. Right after they injected, we looked through their photos. He was quiet and nodding off at first, and she was very talkative, but a little later into the interview, they reversed roles. When they were both alert, they sat close together and Julieta clutched Mateo's arm.

The overwhelming majority of the couples' photos were drug-themed and revealed that they spent most of their days at home together injecting. Several photos into the batch, a series of photos depicting drug preparation came up, and I asked them about the details of the process because I was preoccupied with understanding injection-related HIV risk. Mateo started to explain but then jokingly asked if they could make the "sacrifice" to inject again and show us. Their first injection was "small" anyway. When he was done heating the mixture, he drew it up into two syringes and said, "ladies first" as he handed Julieta a syringe. She asked if we wanted to see her inject but, without waiting for an answer, promptly pulled down her jeans to inject in her usual spot, her left inner knee. Mateo injected in his inner left elbow.

This process repeated multiple times per day. Every day. This is what their life had become in Tijuana. Heroin injection structured their days, which they described as a "hell," in which "every day is the same." Julieta seemed especially distraught about the monotony. Furthermore, as Mateo's health worsened and their addiction deepened, heroin took the place of their sexual intimacy. Julieta worried about Mateo exerting himself too much during sex. Julieta continued to have sex—just not with Mateo. Recall that when I first met Julieta, she was really worried about her HIV/STI test results from the Parejas project. Why was she worried? How do couples like Julieta and Mateo navigate these physical health threats without sacrificing emotional intimacy?

#### *HIV/STI DISCLOSURE*

Julieta worked part-time in a nail salon and also maintained several regular clients that she never discussed with Mateo. She used condoms with all but one client; she did not have feelings for him, but he paid her more money for unprotected sex, which went toward Mateo's medical expenses. Like Lucia, Julieta preferred regular clients over riskier one-time clients who were not known to her.

Not only were these client preferences typical across the Parejas sample, but women's strategies in client selection represented a form of harm reduction that kept them physically safer. Furthermore, these benefits extended to their primary relationships. As it turns out, in the Parejas study prevalence (existing cases) and incidence (new cases) of HIV/STIs were relatively low—but not without concern. Among the 424 individual partners tested at baseline, HIV prevalence was 2.6 percent and, overall, 9.9 percent tested positive for HIV/STIs. Just like Lucia, Julieta, and other women had told us, client types mattered for their health and safety: women who reported having regular sex work clients were less likely to test positive for HIV/STIs compared to women without regular clients. Moreover, the protective factor of having regular clients extended to their intimate male partners, who were also less likely to have prevalent HIV/STIs (Robertson et al. 2014c). These epidemiologic trends held longitudinally as well: over the two-year data collection period, acquisition of HIV/STIs over time remained lower among women who had regular clients, and this protection also extended to their intimate male partners (Bazzi et al. 2015). In other words, women's harm reduction strategies in the selection of their sex work clients kept themselves *and* their partners physically safer in terms of avoiding disease.

Clearly, avoiding disease transmission is good news in and of itself. Our findings that women's strategies also protected their primary partners is novel and important. But testing negative also carries social benefits: namely, uninfected partners do not have to disclose a positive test result and raise a potentially hurtful or conflict-provoking topic with an unsuspecting partner. Biological evidence of sexual concurrency (a positive HIV/STI test) represents another level of threat to the primary relationships. Partners preferred silence.

The Parejas project, however, disrupted this strategy. In the study context both partners knew they were being interviewed about health topics and tested for HIV/STIs. For many couples discussing test results became incorporated into their conversations about participating in the project. Indeed, a quantitative analysis revealed that 87 percent of Parejas participants disclosed a test result during the follow-up period of the study (Pines et al. 2015). However, within this high disclosure rate, couples who had been together longer were less likely to disclose positive results. As an uncomfortable topic that threatens trust and emotional intimacy, these findings underscore the high stakes of these long-term relationships.

Julieta tried to evade returning to the office for her test results, but Mateo insisted. Mateo said he trusted her to “take care of herself,” a common euphemism we heard for condom use and an example of sexual silence that gestures to but avoids direct communication about HIV/STI risk. He also did not think she had other kinds of sexual partners (or did he not want to talk about it?). Either there was naively no reason for him to worry, or he held his suspicions in silence and pushing to go together for their test results was a way to confront

an uncomfortable topic. Julieta's guilt gnawed at her, and she hoped to avoid an uncomfortable conversation.

Like Jaime, discussed earlier in the chapter, Julieta was part of relatively small proportion of partners enrolled in Parejas who pursued outside, nonpaid sexual relationships.<sup>5</sup> Julieta's affair with a married man was brief, and their secret arrangement was purely for "partying" and sex. Like Jaime, she was careful to demarcate the emotional boundaries of this outside partner: "There was no love; there was nothing there . . . nothing more than sex," she confessed. "With the other partner, I had sex with him just for the sex, not because I cared. Because since Mateo got sick, we no longer have sex, nothing. Everything is calmer . . . but sometimes sex is necessary! With the other partner, it was pure partying and chaos [*desmadre*]."

Julieta's pursuit of pleasure reflects shifting gender roles among sex worker couples in the Mexico-US border region. For women who venture outside of traditional roles of staying home, caring for children, and being the more private partner in heterosexual relationships, new kinds of sexual geographies offer opportunities for sex that have traditionally been available only to men (Hirsch et al. 2007). In traditional Mexican culture (as in many cultural systems, for that matter), men are socialized to pursue multiple partners for pleasure, and women are socialized for love and marriage. Julieta and Mateo's relationship provides another example of shifting gender norms and challenges to hegemonic notions of masculinity. If men can pursue sex for pleasure without compromising their primary relationship, Julieta shows us that women can too. Women like Julieta have opportunities to interact with people outside the home and family system, enabling them to forge new relations. Why wouldn't women similarly explore new sexual opportunities if the circumstances were right? Women, including sex workers, are sexual beings with needs and desires for pleasure just like men. Julieta acknowledged this and indulged, but only in sex that meant "nothing" so that she didn't jeopardize her relationship with Mateo. Even so, she felt guilty and eventually cut off her affair.

Back in the Parejas project office, before the nurse could even tell her the test results, Julieta burst into tears. The thought of learning she could be HIV positive or have an STI was stressful. She tested negative. Luckily, she was able share her negative results with Mateo, who was likewise negative. But she never told Mateo about her affair. In the context of her relationship with Mateo, in which they live relatively isolated as a couple contending with economic precarity, chronic illness, and relapsing heroin addiction, why would she confess her sexual transgressions to a trusting, unsuspecting, and gravely ill partner? Because she tested negative for HIV/STIs, what would be gained and what would be lost from revealing her sexual secrets?

*A SOCIAL PHENOMENON OR PUBLIC  
HEALTH PROBLEM?*

The couples featured in this chapter share similarities with each other and other couples enrolled in *Parejas*: they are emotionally close and love each other but have sex with other people and lie about it. On the surface these secrets and lies seem counterintuitive to arguing for the importance of emotional intimacy in sex workers' noncommercial relationships. It might even justify bringing concerns of HIV/STIs to the forefront of couples' narratives. However, a deeper dive into the couples' stories reveals that infidelity in this context can be read as accomplishing something rather than merely failing at fidelity.

It is first important to situate sexual concurrency within broader historical and sociopolitical contexts. Infidelity is a global phenomenon (Tsapelas, Fisher, and Aron 2010; Fisher 2016).<sup>6</sup> Although cross-cultural anthropological research illustrates that large-scale political, economic, social, and cultural changes have transformed the role of personal relationships to emphasize love and intimacy rather than obligation across diverse contexts, this has not led to corresponding decreases in infidelity (Hirsch et al. 2009, Rebhun 1999; Smith 2008). Nor have shifts toward companionate relationships necessarily led to increased sexual communication between partners (Hirsch et al. 2007). Thus, the stories in this chapter reflect the complexity of all human sexual relationships within a globalizing world. Sex work adds a layer of complication, but these relationships are really no different than any other the world over.

In Tijuana behaviors categorized as sexual concurrency are varied and shaped by broader sociopolitical contexts of economic exclusion, shifting gender roles, the relentlessness of drug addiction, and precarity of survival itself in the highly sexualized geography of the Zona Norte. In one form of sexual concurrency, women engage in freelance sex work, a pervasive and normalized form of economic survival for many vulnerable women in the region. In this context women enact harm reduction strategies in selecting clients to keep themselves and their partners as physically and socially safe as possible. Couples avoid direct discussions of sex work under a "mutual pretense" to avoid hurt feelings or conflict and to preserve emotional fidelity. But sex work also shifts gender dynamics and invades traditional notions of masculinity, which in turn shapes other forms of concurrency with outside sexual partners for pleasure, who are likewise kept secret.

While couples' lived experience of exclusion and vulnerability do not absolve partners of their acts of indiscretion, lies, and secrets, it does help explain how the deep emotional imprints of the world around us shape our behavior. For example, Jaime's infidelity does not reflect discontent within his relationship with Lucia, but it does represent a form of lashing out against the economic exclusion and social marginalization that he—and other men like him—feel regarding their inability

to provide and subsequent economic reliance on their partner's sex work. Jaime framed his sexual risk taking as a pursuit of pleasure, but these encounters also counteract some of his feelings of anger, stress, jealousy, and inadequacy. Sex for pleasure allows him to at least temporarily feel "like a man" to restore a sense of masculinity. A similar argument applies to Julieta's stressful situation in the context of relapsing into heroin use and caring for a partner with chronic illness; she also justified her affair, but it never changed her love for Mateo.

While Jaime's and Julieta's encounters were driven by sexual satisfaction, they also reflect what anthropologist Héctor Carrillo (2002) writes about as "rational" forms of sex in his ethnography of sexuality and HIV in Mexico. One of Carrillo's male participants described "rational" sex as that without love and total surrender; it is only about physical pleasure. Only when individuals love their partner can sex be "irrational" in the sense of a full emotional surrender to that person. While having an affair might not seem like a "rational" decision, the calculation of Jaime's and Julieta's pursuits with partners with whom they have no emotional commitment signals an intentionality about their actions and desire not to hurt their partners or break up their relationships.

In other words, we need to reframe our understandings of the ir/rationality of sexual risk and how this changes depending on the social context. Sex has "feeling" in it and a different meaning in sex workers' primary relationships. There is no space for condom use in this context, and virtually no couples in Parejas, including the couples in this chapter, reported consistent condom use. Despite knowing the physical risks for HIV/STIs, condom use in intimate relationships cannot be rationalized because these relationships are about love, emotional intimacy, support, and commitment. On the other hand, concurrent sexual relationships are rational on other levels: women rationalize their sex work and client choice (and calculate condom use with clients in economic terms), drug addiction might rationalize trading sex with same-sex partners, and outside affairs are rationalized as pleasure but not love. None of these concurrent partnerships (client or nonpaying) are intended to break or replace the primary intimate relationship; they function for various other reasons outside of, but not totally apart from, the primary intimate relationship. Rational outside sexual relationships may be for money, drugs, restoration of masculinity, experimentation, escape, or pleasure but *not* for love.

Thus, sexual concurrency is a social phenomenon, yet we primarily treat it as a public health problem. For couples like Lucia and Jaime and Julieta and Mateo, concurrency is not understood, negotiated, and lived in epidemiological terms of disease risk. Concurrency emerges amid a challenging set of life circumstances and is practiced in ways that ultimately prioritize and reinforce the importance of primary intimate relationships. While concerns about HIV/STIs are of course real, disease is not the primary factor driving partners' sexual behaviors. Sexual concurrency is about more than the physical act of sex and risk of HIV/STIs.

What does this mean? A key contribution of this chapter is to highlight the social and emotional contexts of sexual concurrency and assert that failing at fidelity doesn't mean failing in love. As we learn from the couples in this chapter and the broader Parejas study, sex can *end* with outside partners and clients, but *emotions begin* within intimate relationships in which a shared connection makes life meaningful. We need to push beyond an ethnocentric reading of sex workers' relationships that dismisses the possibilities for love in contexts of multiple sexual partnerships. While the tactics couples employ to have sex with other people and hide it might seem counterintuitive to this pursuit, the lengths partners go through to maintain their bonds actually tells us something important about the meaning of these intimate relationships. They matter. They are qualitatively different. Amid challenging life circumstances, partners do whatever they can to hold on to each other.

To be certain, concurrent sexual relationships can endanger primary intimate relationships in terms of HIV/STI transmission. Public health prioritizes disclosure, and it is not necessarily a bad thing to share a result and encourage a partner to get tested. However, given that couples go to such lengths to prioritize the emotional safe haven of their relationship over physical health threats, we need to shift public health disease-prevention strategies to better account for the social meanings of concurrency. These topics are taken back up in the final chapter of this book, but for now I want to reiterate the importance of sex workers' relationships as socioemotional spaces of refuge that are highly valued and need to be protected—even if it means an occasional secret or lie.

We see this in returning to Jaime's story: while he may indulge in secret sex with others "like this, or this, and this, or that"—his heart belongs to Lucia. The photographs he took of her, but not his outside partner, evoked a deep and very different kind of emotional response. I could see it in his eyes, as he clenched his fist to his heart, as he thought deeply about her, belly laughed, and talked about how he loved her. It could have been a performance to keep up with his careful appearance. But I don't think so. The moments were too unscripted.

This chapter urges us to look beyond glosses of sexual concurrency to appreciate the emotional complexity and endurance of sex workers' relationships. Dangerous safe havens may not conform to stereotypical standards of monogamous love, but they are critically important safe spaces in their own right. The strategies that couples deploy around concurrency are a constant negotiation of competing risks that ultimately aim to uphold and keep intact couples' dangerous safe havens. The stories of Celia's and Mildred's relationships in the next chapter extends the analysis of couples' dangerous safe havens in relation to their social networks beyond sexual risk.