

Uncovering the Myths of the Male Sex Worker: A Multi-Jurisdictional Study of Male and Non-Binary Sex Workers in Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

Male and non-binary sex workers are a significantly underrepresented and undervalued population within society and wider academic, political, and legal discourses surrounding the sex industries (Curtis and Boe 2023). These groups are largely invisible within such discourses, and their experiences are either disregarded or misinterpreted through the lens of pervasive and harmful myths. This thesis explores the dominant myths surrounding male and non-binary sex workers within a multi-jurisdictional context (namely, Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand).

Between February and October 2023, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with sex workers residing in Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand. These interviews were situated within a queer ethnographic framework (Rooke 2009), and participant stories were analysed using performative and rhizomatic approaches to narrative analysis (Loots, Coppens, and Sermijn 2013). Through their stories, sex workers taking part in the study resist stereotypical and binary understandings of their experiences and lives.

Throughout this thesis, I argue that invisibility, myth, and harm are intimately linked. I argue that myths have the capacity to cause harm, both material and emotional, and that such harms are further exacerbated in socio-legal landscapes of sex work criminalisation (in the case of Scotland). It is also my contention that limited and mythological understandings of male and non-binary sex workers contribute to the erasure of these groups and further cisheteronormative understandings of the sex industries. This research exists to challenge pre-existing paradigms of male and non-binary sex work, and offers new ways of imagining these groups within social, political, and legal discussions surrounding the sex industries.

Keywords: sex work, queer theory, myth, ethnography, narrative analysis, male sex work, trans sex work, harm

Declaration

I declare that the work presented within this thesis is my own.

Formal Declaration of Ethical Approval



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Glossary

Backpassing – a trans or non-binary sex worker who performs as their birth gender during transactional sex

Cisgender (abbrev., **Cis**) – someone who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth

Myth – a type of narrative or story which contains a degree of falsity

Non-binary – someone who does not identify as male or female. Some non-binary people identify as trans, but not all

Sex worker – someone who exchanges sexual labour for economic gain

Transgender (abbrev., **Trans**) – someone who does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth

Transmasculine (abbrev., **Transmasc**) – a transgender person who identifies with elements of maleness or masculinity and may or may not consider themselves to be a man

Queer – an umbrella term for individuals who identify as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender), and all those who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender

Whorephobia – fear, disgust, or hatred of sex workers

But that river will flow on

Even after we're all long gone

That river will flow on

Take me with you now before I'm one

(Sierra Ferrell, "In Dreams")

Preface

Tūmanako (Māori word for “Hope”)

On the 6th of March 2023, 3 weeks after conducting my first interview in Aotearoa New Zealand¹, Georgina Beyer died. Beyer, a transgender Māori woman, was the world's first openly trans parliamentarian. As the only member of Parliament to have had experience in the sex industry, Beyer supported the Prostitution Reform Bill, which led to Aotearoa New Zealand becoming the first country in the world to fully decriminalise sex work in 2003 (Armstrong 2021a). Georgina's impassioned testimony, which included her lived experience of violence while sex working, tipped the scales in favour of the decriminalisation of sex work, which in the end came down to a single vote (Beyer 2003). When I learned of Georgina's passing, I was on my way to the office of the Aotearoa New Zealand Sex Workers' Collective (NZPC²) in Wellington, where I had been conducting my interviews. The NZPC offices are an important, almost sacred, space for sex workers, both socially and symbolically. As I enter, I am greeted by pictures of previous denizens, both past and present, adorned with crimson-coloured umbrellas, the international symbol for the sex worker rights movement. In this space, Georgina's legacy is honoured daily through the ongoing support for sex workers.

¹ It should be noted that New Zealand is the European name given to Aotearoa (the current Māori-language name) by European colonisers (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). This thesis is aligned with decolonial approaches to theory and knowledge, and, as such, the name Aotearoa New Zealand is used throughout. Where the name New Zealand appears, it will be a direct quotation or referencing other materials in which the European name alone has been used.

² Formerly known as the New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective.

Being in Aotearoa New Zealand when Georgina passed was a surreal and sanguine experience³. With the passing of such an important queer⁴ political figure 20 years after the decriminalisation of sex work, there was a palpable air of contemplation within Wellington, where she had lived and given her historic speech in 2003. The weeks following her death, I was told many stories about Georgina's formidable presence and steadfast dedication to fighting for the rights of marginalised peoples. Although there was a sense of sadness permeating these stories, there was a strong undercurrent of hope. Hope, especially in times of hardship, is a compass. It guides us in the right direction and to keep fighting for what we believe will make the world a better place. It allows us to imagine a new future. Over the last four years, I have faced numerous personal challenges. At times, I did not feel that I could persevere with my research. During these dark times, I anchored myself in hope. I thought of the sex workers and activists whose efforts have brought us to where we are today. They dared to imagine a world in which sex work was decriminalised and, through their tireless advocacy, this idea became reality. From the moment I started working with the NZPC, I felt the immense historical and contemporaneous significance of their organisation. I wondered, how many people have walked these halls? How did I come to be here? Where do I fit in this story?

I was born in rural Scotland in 1993 in the shadow of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. I vividly remember a world in which queerness, specifically male queerness, was socially and politically anathemised. Queer people, like sex workers, were considered vectors of disease, unnatural, deviant, or criminal. Growing up, I did not see positive narratives of what being queer could look like. The systematic erasure of queer identity left queer people born during the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis, like myself, in a troubled ontological and epistemological state. Without representation within cultural

³ This was the first of several “transformative moments” during my fieldwork journey, defined by CohenMiller as, “moments in the research process that made a profound impact on researchers’ lives” (2024, p. 1).

⁴ Throughout this thesis, I implement the term queer both as an umbrella term for LGBTQ+ individuals and as a signifier of my adoption of anti-essentialist and anti-normative sensibilities à la queer theory. It should be noted that all participants taking part in the study identified with queerness in some way (that is, non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender).

institutions, marginalised groups are denied ways of understanding their internal sense of Otherness. Within this framework, myths surrounding queer identity replace the everyday realities. Among these myths was the idea that all queer men had HIV or, more alarmingly, had some predilection for paedophilia (Meek 2015). When I first realised I was queer, the idea of being open about my sexuality was unimaginable. Since the age of 17, I have come out as a queer man many times. Coming out as a sex worker, however, is something I remain reticent about. In Scotland, as with most of the world, sex work is poorly understood, stigmatised, and criminalised. I know, first hand, the debilitating and destructive force of myth. As a queer male sex worker, this research is informed by my own experience of feeling like my identity was imagined only through the lens of harmful myths. On the grand scheme of things, the fight for sex worker rights is just beginning. Decriminalisation of sex work is a starting point rather than an end goal. There is much work to be done by current and future activists, not only to ensure legal protections for sex workers but also to dismantle the social machineries in which myths are propagated and sex worker realities are erased. This research is a contribution to the ongoing struggle for sex worker rights and is a vehicle for inspiring hope for the future.

Introduction

Setting the Scene

“Invisibility is not a natural state for anyone”

(Yamada, 1981, p. 35).

According to an Australian report from 1995 on male sex workers and HIV, McMillan states that, “it may be that the invisibility of the male sex worker is the first and fundamental issue which needs to be addressed” (1995, p. 1). Over 30 years later, this statement has lost almost none of its resonance, with male⁵ and non-binary sex workers being vastly underrepresented in academic research and allied social policy, as well as being generally excluded from wider societal and legal discourses regarding the sex industries (Curtis and Boe 2023; Henriksen, Andersen, and Presser 2020; Raine 2021; Whowell 2010). When cisgender male sex workers appear in the cultural consciousness, they are commonly reduced to stereotypical representations based on entrenched myths⁶ surrounding men in the sex industries (Corvino 2021; Dennis 2008). Ergo, cisgender male sex workers are either invisible within society or exist purely within highly limited mythological understandings of male sex work. Transgender men and non-binary sex workers are a hypermarginalised group, facing intense invisibilisation. As I will discuss later, many of the myths surrounding cisgender male sex workers stem from pre-existing ideas of maleness/masculinity and, in the case of trans men and non-binary individuals, a lack of knowledge surrounding these groups within society more generally. I locate myth within a sociogenic, constructivist paradigm – that is, myths are constructed and maintained by individuals and groups within society by processes of meaning-making and shared knowledge (or lack thereof).

⁵ Within the context of this thesis, male refers to cisgender and transgender men. Broadly speaking, cisgender refers to those who identify with their assigned gender at birth, while transgender refers to those who do not (Appenroth 2021). This research is inclusive of non-binary identities (including genderqueer, genderfluid, and other non-binary expressions of gender). Throughout this thesis, the term non-binary is used to describe those whose identity does not fit within binary categorisations of gender.

⁶ I understand myth as a type of narrative or story, one which contains a degree of falsity (Segal 2015; Jago 2017).

Throughout this thesis, I argue that myth, invisibility, and harm are intimately linked, with myths of male and non-binary sex workers serving to further invisibilise an already obfuscated and at-risk population. As noted by Sawicki et al. (2019) and Strathdee et al. (2015), one of the most pervasive myths concerning male and non-binary sex workers is that all sex workers are women. Although this myth is easy to dispel on an individual level, the rarity of male and non-binary sex workers within social institutions such as media and law greatly hinders their presence within the collective imagination. Thus, myth has the power to invisibilise certain groups within society and render their struggles imperceptible. In this way, myth can produce harm on both an individual and a structural level and is itself a form of harm.

This thesis explores the dominant myths surrounding male and non-binary sex work and the experiences of male and non-binary sex workers within a multi-jurisdictional context (namely, Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand). In relation to uncovering myths related to male and non-binary sex work, the objective is not to replace myth with truth, but rather to deconstruct these myths by creating spaces in which silenced voices can be heard and annihilated experiences can be rendered legible. By doing so, I aim to complicate pre-existing paradigms associated with male and non-binary sex workers, and to dislocate male sex work from the cisnormative and binary frames through which it is commonly understood. In Scotland, sex work is partially criminalised insofar that sex workers can work legally alone and indoors but are not permitted to work outdoors (termed “kerb-crawling” in Scots Law), and are prohibited from working indoors with other sex workers (referred to as “brothel-keeping”), meaning that, to operate legally, sex workers in Scotland must work in isolation (Laycock and Ryan 2025). As Smith and Mac suggest, “criminalisation directly creates conditions where harm can flourish (2020, p. 67). In 2003, all forms of sex work were fully decriminalised in Aotearoa New Zealand in a landmark victory for sex worker rights. The passing of the Prostitution Reform Act (PRA), which decriminalised sex work for permanent residents and citizens, allowed sex workers to operate freely without fear of criminalisation, and studies have shown that full decriminalisation significantly reduces both systemic and interpersonal forms of harm against sex workers (Armstrong 2021a; 2021b).

There are several reasons why a comparative ethnographic analysis between these two jurisdictions was conducted. Both nations are Anglophonic and share a cultural heritage due to the European colonisation of Aotearoa New Zealand dating back several centuries. Both nations also share a similar population size of just over 5 million people and, as a former British colony, much of Aotearoa New Zealand's sex work laws and policies were historically borrowed from Britain, which – to this day – preserves an antiquated system of partial criminalisation pertaining to soliciting and brothel-keeping laws (in Scotland, England, and Wales). This creates a persuasive argument for a contemporary comparison between Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand in relation to sex work, as the two nations share a history which, until 2003, was reflected legislatively (Armstrong 2021a). Transnational studies can offer insights into not only cultural differences, but also structural ones which inform how people experience phenomena within their social, political, and legal context. Scottish sex work is especially topical, with the Scottish Government currently attempting to adopt a neo-abolitionist model of asymmetrical criminalisation – also known as the “Nordic”⁷ model of sex work law (Armstrong, Phillips, and Ryan 2024). It has been well documented that client criminalisation has adverse effects on sex workers regarding their safety, with violence committed against sex workers increasing up to 90%, as seen in Northern Ireland, having adopted the Nordic model in 2017 (Bowen et al. 2021; Murphy 2022). Comparing different nations and their legislative approaches to sex work has several academic antecedents, with studies implementing Aotearoa New Zealand as a site of comparison due to its rare policy of country-wide decriminalisation (Armstrong, Phillips, and Ryan 2024; Ryan 2020; Scoular et al. 2025). No studies, however, have explored male and non-binary sex workers within this multi-jurisdictional context, and it is therefore an area which warrants further academic attention.

⁷ The Nordic Model was first introduced in Sweden in 1999. The model has since been adopted by Norway, Iceland, Israel, Canada, Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland. Within the Swedish context, sex work is considered a social and moral evil, with some As Levy (2015) noting that there are some who consider trauma to be a prerequisite for becoming a sex worker. Levy quotes members of the Stockholm Prostitution Unit, who suggest that, “you are raped, and then something is destroyed inside you, and then you can start selling sex” (p. 70).

The Scottish Government views sex work as an inherently exploitative practice, one predicated on the victimisation of women and girls (Scottish Government 2020). As noted by Butler: “The law is a hermeneutical resource that criminalises sex work due to an essentialist narrative of the sex trades as inherently violent” (2024, p. 735). Within this context, cisgender men are portrayed as clients of sex workers and rarely as sex workers themselves. Transgender men and non-binary sex workers are almost entirely omitted from these narratives, further marginalising and invisibilising male (cis and trans) and non-binary sex workers. Transgender rights are an especially fraught topic in current times, with transgender individuals facing discrimination on a global scale⁸ (NBC 2025). Within the UK/Scottish context, in April 2025, the UK Supreme Court ruled that under the Equality Act (2010), terms such as “woman” and “man” refer strictly to assigned sex at birth, meaning that legal definitions of women and men do not include transgender and non-binary individuals (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2025). Speaking from a socio-legal perspective, Aultman posits that: “Transgender experiences are often translated through an unacknowledged epistemic commitment to a cisgender gender/sex paradigm” (Aultman 2016, p. 12). Both the Scottish Government’s framing of sex work and the UK Supreme Court’s⁹ trans-exclusionary definition of sex are attempts to propel specific socio-political narratives concerning sex workers and transgender people (and erase those who do not fit comfortably within these narratives). This research exists to challenge these dominant, annihilatory narratives by highlighting the stories of male and non-binary sex workers from Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand.

What you are about to read is a story. A collection of stories, to be more precise. The stories presented within this thesis belong to the sex worker community. I am the gatherer and presenter of these stories and my aim is to highlight the experiences and amplify the voices of the people who shared them with me. These stories are deeply personal and include a wide array of experiences involving gender, sexuality, queerness, homophobia, transphobia, sexual harm, and various forms of systemic

⁸ See also: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/ie-sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity/struggle-trans-and-gender-diverse-persons>

⁹ As Aultman notes in their analysis of epistemic injustice relating to transgender legal subjects: “Through their institutional power, as (knowing or unknowing) arbiters of cisgenderism, courts create the conditions for hermeneutical injustice” (2016, p. 2).

discrimination and structural exclusion. The completion of this thesis is not only about obtaining a doctorate. While my status as an academic researcher is hugely important to me, the ability to share the stories of those who might otherwise remain unheard holds a much dearer place in my heart. While I have written my thesis in an undoubtedly academic prose, I sincerely hope that, rather than the floridity of my words, the emotion and humanity of my participants is what remains with the reader long after they step away from this thesis. I consider this thesis to be a work of non-fiction presented within an academic context. This thesis is heavily indebted to the work of Michael Foucault, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Judith Butler. It must also be noted, however, that the bibliographic scope of this thesis extends beyond that of the Academy. This is a conscious decision which reflects my commitment to inclusivity and justice as it pertains to sex work and the resurrection of subjugated knowledges¹⁰.

This thesis draws on non-academic forms of writing for inspiration, most notably the work and ideas of renowned science-fiction-fantasy author Ursula K. Le Guin. I would implore the reader to engage with the stories found within this thesis with empathy and what Nussbaum (1996) terms narrative imagination – that is, the ability to be an emotionally intelligent reader of another person’s story. As Le Guin reminds us, “The imagination is an essential tool of the mind, a fundamental way of thinking, an indispensable means of becoming and remaining human” (2016, p. 19). Within these stories, there is a call to *reimagine* the male sex worker, both in its ontological and epistemological parameters. I understand stories as both deeply personal and socioculturally situated – that is, they are both individual and collective (Goodall 2000). To illustrate this, I turn now to a quote from Le Guin’s 1969 book *The Left Hand of Darkness*. The quote belongs to the novel’s main character, Genly Ai, an interplanetary ethnographer who has been tasked with visiting a genderless planet and reporting his findings:

¹⁰ Drawing on Foucault, Okidegbe writes that: “Subjugated knowledge refers to knowledge that is suppressed and largely unacknowledged outside of the epistemic community that created and validated it” (2022, p. 2049). For Foucault, subjugation of knowledge is not coincidental, but rather a form of oppressive power (Okidegbe 2022).

I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that *Truth is a matter of the imagination*. The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling: like that singular organic jewel of our seas, which grows brighter as one woman wears it and, worn by another, dulls and goes to dust. Facts are no more solid, coherent, round, and real than pearls are. But both are sensitive. The story is not all mine, nor told by me alone. Indeed I am not sure whose story it is; you can judge better. But it is all one, and if at moments the facts seem to alter with an altered voice, why then you can choose the fact you like best; yet none of them are false, and it is all one story... (Le Guin 1969, p. 11).

Chapter One

Key Concepts and Contexts

“Sex work is part of the human story” (Das and Horton 2015, p. 4).

Defining Sex Work

Sex work can be broadly characterised as a transactional relationship between worker and client, predicated on, “the exchange of sexual services, performances, or products for material compensation” (Weitzer 2009, p. 1). In this study, the term sex work is being employed due to its political and progressive implications, with its predecessor, “prostitution”, being considered discursively restrictive (Minichiello, Scott, and Callander 2015). For Dolinsek and Hearne, “the stigmatising potential of the label of ‘prostitute’ stretches across many centuries, as well as across multiple social structures and political regimes” (2022, p. 122). It should be noted, however, that sex work/sex worker are political terms which not all those who sell sex align with (Sawicki et al. 2019). The term “sex work” was coined in the late 1970s by sex worker and activist Carol Leigh, with the intent to emphasise the worker’s agency and labour within transactional sex (Leigh 2010). The rhetorical emphasis on the “work” of sex work has been fiercely contested within both public and political spheres, with anti-sex work critics rejecting the term and its attempt to position sex work within a labour-based and worker rights context (Henham 2021; Smith and Mac 2020).

Sex Work Inequalities

As noted by Murphy, Dunk-West, and Chonody (2015), paradigmatic and sociolinguistic shifts from prostitution to sex work have failed to address the legislative and structural inequalities that negatively affect sex workers. Examples of these

inequalities include, but are not limited to, the criminalisation of sex work; employment discrimination based on experience of sex working; financial and economic discrimination¹¹; mental and sexual health services operating within stigmatising frameworks¹²; and difficulties associated with sex workers accessing justice (Bowen 2021; Butler 2024; Easterbrook-Smith 2022c; Geymonat, Macioti, and Selmi 2024). Such inequalities engender ecologies of shame and stigma towards sex workers and the sex industries more generally (Armstrong 2021b). Fear, disgust, and stigma directed towards sex workers, also known as whorephobia (Simpson 2022), is widespread and operates on both an individual and structural level. Within almost all national contexts, sex workers represent a highly stigmatised and marginalised group who are at disproportionate risk of systemic and interpersonal forms of harm (Armstrong 2021a; O'Neill 2010). The recognition of sex work as legitimate labour (by which I mean, broadly, non-stigmatised) is an issue of grave importance in relation to the safety, equality, and enfranchisement of all sex workers on a global scale, especially as it pertains to access to justice (Bowen et al. 2021; Raine 2021). The perennial debate surrounding sex work as a form of legitimate labour, however, is not related to the direct stimuli of this thesis, although the stigmatisation and near-global criminalisation of sex work does, unquestionably, colour the experiences of all sex workers, including the ones taking part in this study.

Sex Work as Work

Philosophically, I recognise sex work as a form of work which is neither inherently positive or negative. Sex work is an income-generating activity that exists to support the social and economic materialities produced by capitalism (Bowen 2021; Grant 2014; Smith and Smith). As Bowen (2021) suggests, sex workers are responding to an increasingly precarious labour market, one which has been produced (and perpetuated) by capitalistic society and its increasingly unachievable demands. Sex

¹¹ It has been reported that many sex workers face financial and economic discrimination, with banks commonly refusing to cater to sex workers or closing their accounts without warning based on suspicions of sex working (Butler 2024).

¹² Sex workers frequently report being met with stigmatising attitudes when accessing mental or sexual health services – that is, their experience of sex working is presumed to be an inherent detriment to mental and/or sexual health (Armstrong, Phillips, and Ryan 2024).

work cannot be separated from capitalism insofar that if there were no work, there would be no *sex work*. Sex workers cannot be considered non-workers inasmuch that they contribute to local and global economies the same ways in which non-sex workers do. Some pay taxes and most use their wages to pay for essentials such as food, bills, and rent, which all feed into the socio-economic spheres which sex workers are, irrefutably, components of (Bowen 2021). Sex workers, quite literally, cannot be considered non-workers, even if their work is not sanctioned by the state. Sex workers represent an integral part of the network of global capital, despite being marginalised by most governments and labour markets. As noted by Weeks (2011), judgements surrounding work tend to focus on specific jobs or forms of employment, rather than the ways in which work is currently organised. For Jones: “Framing motivations for sex work as driven by pathology is a convenient political strategy that absolves societies from remedying the broken social institutions that play a significant role in shaping motivations for participation in erotic labour” (2020, p. 88).

It is my contention that, under current capitalistic conditions, all labour is fundamentally exploitative, including sex work. I am not alone in this belief, with many sex work scholars and activists sharing this conviction. As noted by Smith and Mac (2020), many sex worker activists are, in fact, sex industry “abolitionists¹³” insofar that they wish to see an end to all forms of work, including sex work. They suggest that “few sex workers would object if you sought to abolish the sex industry by ensuring that they got the resources they need without having to sell sex” (Smith and Mac 2020, p. 53). For Hester and Stardust (2020), the goal of sex worker advocacy is not the reification of work, but rather to make visible underrecognised labour as part of a longer-term plan to resist it.

Situating Solidarity

This research is informed by the scholar-activist paradigm (Routledge and Derickson 2015). Scholar-activists are those who seek to align their academic work and their

¹³ Informed by prison abolitionism, anti-carceral approaches seek to remove state-sanctioned forms of punishment and the cyclical harms reproduced by such punitive measures. As such, anti-carcerality and decriminalisation are not solutions, but rather part of a broader calculus of transformative justice (Butler 2024).

political ideals to foster social change by working directly with marginalised groups. Scholar-activism aims to produce what Nagar and Geiger (2007) call “situated solidarities” and can be an effective strategy in the revival of subjugated knowledges and pays attention to, “the struggles of marginalised communities in ways that reject, but do not ignore, the violent and imperialist histories of the Academy” (Routledge and Derickson 2015, p. 391). This research is situated within the sex worker rights paradigm inasmuch that my ontologic-epistemologic positionality is that sex work is work and I recognise sex worker rights as human rights and acknowledge every sex worker’s right to self-determination. As Das and Horton suggest: “Accepting and embracing sex work – supporting those engaged in sex work to protect their health and bodily integrity and autonomy – should be our humane, as well as our pragmatic, approach to the reality of our human lives” (2015, p. 4).

Truth, Reality, and Lived Experience

“Sex workers are everywhere” is the opening line of Smith and Mac’s *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers’ Rights* (2020, p. 1), a seminal text within the canon of sex work scholarship. They continue: “Although we are everywhere, most people know very little about the reality of our lives” (Smith and Mac 2020, p. 1). This thesis is committed to poststructuralist methods of inquiry, in which notions of “truth” and “reality” are not static concepts that are able to be captured by the researcher. As Danser reminds us, “we should not think in terms of static ideas and systems. Individuals and social groups are not static. A continual process of self-renewal is necessary” (2005, *preface*). I return now to a quote from Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Left Hand of Darkness* (1969): “Truth is a matter of the imagination” (p. 11). Ricoeur posits that: “We recognise ourselves in the stories we tell about ourselves. It makes little difference whether these stories are true or false, fiction as well as verifiable history provides us with an identity” (1985, p. 214). There is considerable tension concerning the notion of lived experience and whether personal narratives are a direct reflection of lived experience of the social world, or rather a narrative representation of identity situated within specific sociocultural contexts (Heckert 2010; Hulusjö 2013). In their performative narrative study of black South African male sex workers’ negotiation of masculine identity, Peters, Kessi, and Boonzaier suggest that, “the narrative becomes

a process through which people define themselves in relation to others rather than providing objective accounts of reality” (2019, p. 428).

Lived experiences, in this context, are not inherent within individuals but rather a discursive production of culturally situated knowledges. Cultural norms are a symbolic reproduction and are, therefore, culturally constructed and situated within a specific space and time. Lived experience is socioculturally situated and, thus, subject to the sociocultural beliefs and ideological norms of the time. Hulusjö states that: “Instead of seeing personal narratives as direct reflections of lived experience, I ask questions regarding how and why experience is storied” (2013, p. 38). For Heckert: “Rather than representing lives, I am representing stories that have been presented to me. My role is less that of the social scientist; I see myself more as a gatherer and a teller of stories” (2010, p. 53). This research is allied with postmodern perspectives on ethnographic and narrative methodologies and, as such, is dedicated to exploring the epistemological interstice between the, “lived border of reality and representation” (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997, p. 107). My research (or, more appositely, how I have chosen to arrange and present it) straddles the epistemological boundary between lived experience and storied narrative. That is not to say that the stories presented within my research are not lived experiences or reflections of lived realities, but rather is indicative of my commitment to poststructuralist, prismatic, and pluralistic forms of thinking. Sex workers, regardless of gender, are often subjected to epistemic injustice, with sex workers rarely being seen as the experts on their own experiences. This research holds space for sex workers to tell their stories, with an implicit trust being built into the interview process. As Herzog states, “the struggle against invisibilisation and silencing becomes a question of fundamental justice” (2017, p. 13).

Symbolic Annihilation and Epistemic Injustice

As aforementioned, male and non-binary sex workers are largely invisible within social, political, legal, and academic discourse surrounding the sex industries. Borges and Passamani¹⁴ state: “Traditionally, male sex work has been stigmatised and made

¹⁴ In their bibliographic review of Anglophobic literature pertaining to male sex work, Borges and Passamani (2024) locate 3 distinct historic-thematic divisions of male sex

invisible in its nuances, forms and performances” (2024, p. 8). This study adopts a holistic, intersectional, and multi-jurisdictional approach to researching male and non-binary sex work as a way of addressing these ingrained invisibilities. Herzog (2023) suggests that excluded or marginalised¹⁵ groups face challenges of representation and that exclusion can be considered forms of silencing and invisibilisation. Scholars such as Geymonat, Macioti, and Selmi (2024) and Müller (2017) postulate that sex worker invisibility is not accidental, but rather the intentional erasure of subjugated knowledges/identities. Müller (2017) urges us to interrogate the cultural mechanisms of invisibility – that is, they suggest that queer invisibilities may be the result of symbolic annihilation. For Gerbner and Gross, “Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation (1976, p. 182). Huckin notes that, “communication involves more than just the linguistic markers used to encode it – that often what is not said or written can be as important, if not more so, than what is” (2022, p. 348). In relation to the lack of narrative depictions of male sex workers, Corvino states: “The absence of particular characters and narratives in a given genre compounds the problem of persistent stereotypes” (Corvino 2021, p. 178). Although originally implemented within media studies, scholars have also implemented this analytic as a way of examining inequalities within society more generally.

It is my contention that the invisibility of male and non-binary sex workers can be partially ascribed to myth. I recognise myth as a form of power which operates as a form of harm which serves to minimise or invisibilise the experiences and knowledges of male and non-binary sex workers. Symbolic annihilation and myth have a reproductive relationship insofar that the media is a powerful tool for the creation, dissemination, and perpetuation of myths, while the myths people believe are affirmed apropos representation (or lack thereof) of specific groups or cultures. I argue that myth and symbolic annihilation are reproductive of one another insofar that myth relies

work: 1) the male sex worker as a social problem, one inextricably tied to deviant models of sexuality (1940s-1970s); 2) The male sex worker as a vector for the transmission of diseases, including HIV/AIDS (1970s to 1995); and, finally, 3) sex work as a profession (1995-present).

¹⁵ See also: the concept of hermeneutical marginalisation, whereby someone is marginalised because they, “belong to a social group that under-contributes to the common pool of concepts and social meanings” (Fricker and Jenkins 2017, p. 1).

on the propagation of selective and synthetic narratives concerning the social world, while symbolic annihilation is responsive to (and generative of) the social hierarchies sustained by myth. In other words, myth creates the cultural conditionalities for symbolic annihilation to thrive and vice versa. Further, I argue that symbolic annihilation and myth operate as sites of harm, specifically epistemic harm (Fricker 2007).

For Fricker (2007), epistemic injustice is injustice (or harm) related to knowledge, including exclusion and silencing. Fricker delineates between two forms of epistemic harm: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. The former is categorised by not trusting someone's word or experience due to prejudice (for example, homophobia, transphobia, or whorephobia). For example, a trans male sex worker may not be taken seriously by healthcare professionals because of their gender or occupation, with discrimination against trans people in healthcare settings being widely reported (Appenroth 2021). Another example of this is when sex workers report client-perpetrated harm to the police, only to be met with distrust or dismissal. This creates environments of shame in which sex workers frequently do not report instances of harm out of fear of not being trusted (Bowen et al. 2021). Hermeneutical injustice, on the other hand, is injustice or harm relating to the inability to, "render a significant social experience intelligible (to oneself and/or to others)" (Fricker and Jenkins 2017, p. 1). For example, a person who sells sex but does not identify as a sex worker may be at greater risk of isolation due to existing outwith community boundaries. This is especially true for men who sell sex, with most male sex workers working alone indoors. Fricker also states that hermeneutical injustice, "can mean that someone is socially constituted as, and perhaps even caused to be, something they are not, and which it is against their interests to be seen to be" (2007, p. 168). This concept is applicable to both sex workers and trans people inasmuch that sex workers are often located within unidimensional narratives of violence and oppression, while trans people are routinely denied social, political, and legal equality as it relates to their gender and/or sex.

Myth, Reality, and Imagination

Myth has a multiplicity of meanings. Etymologically, myth is derived from the Greek word *mythos* or *mythoi*, meaning, “story”, “fiction”, “saying”, and others (Danser 2005). In today’s parlance, myth commonly refers to something imaginary or untrue (Trubshaw 2003). Within the context of this research, I understand myth as a type of narrative or story that contains a degree of falsity or untruth (Segal 2015). As Danser posits, “myths are rarely retold as complete stories. Rather, we encounter them as mythic fragments which allude to larger narratives” (2005, *preface*). For Trubshaw, “A defining feature of human consciousness is the need to create *distinctions*” (2003, p. 22). Such distinctions or divisions serve as structuring norms within society e.g., day/night, child/adult, man/woman, gay/straight, normal/abnormal, hero/villain. As Trubshaw suggests: “Myths are one of the main ways cultures create the distinctions which are deeply embedded into thinking – often so deeply embedded that they seem natural” (2003, p. 23).

Myth and narrative are closely intertwined concepts. As Danser posits: “Myths are narratives, a sequence of connected events presented as a story” (2005, p. 12). As noted by Barthes, narrative is a family of genres and “is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio’s St Ursula), stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation” (1975, p. 237). For Segal, myth can be used as both a “conviction or credo” (2015, p. 3). That is, myth can be deployed in both positive and negative ways and “accomplishes something significant for adherents” (2015, p. 5). Coupe argues that, “all myths presuppose a previous narrative, and in turn form the model for future narratives” (1997, p. 108). For Warner, myths “can lock us up in stock reactions, bigotry and fear, but they’re not immutable, and by unpicking them, the stories can lead to others” (Warner 1994, p. 14). As Bouchard (2017) notes, when the cultural currency of a myth begins to decline, it is replaced or reworked into another myth. Warner states that: “Myths convey values and expectations which are always evolving, in the process of being formed, but – and this is fortunate – never set so hard they cannot be changed again (1994, p. 14).

Using Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) communities as an exemplar, Jago (2017) explores the relationship between legal and social discourses and the broader relationship between myth and reality. Jago states that: “Coupled with these legal

provisions are the myths that tend to inflame and encourage the social stigma that follows” (p. 181). By exploring the lived experiences of GRT people, Jago measures “myths against relevant realities” (2017, p. 183). As Warner states: “Myths offer a lens which can be used to see human identity in its social and cultural context” (1994, p. 14). Similarly, Fantus (2013) highlights that queer men are equated with HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections, and promiscuity, and that these beliefs continue to be upheld through the “actions of healthcare providers and through political legislation that ban gay men from donating sperm and, under most circumstances, from donating blood. Consequently, their group identity has been informed by one idea and their narratives simplified and distorted” (p. 104). As Butler notes: “When legal system actors decide to privilege or subjugate certain narratives of experience, those actors are essentially declaring some stories more credible or less credible and gatekeeping what knowledge is and which knowledge is valuable” (2024, p. 738). Like GRT people and queer men, myth has been weaponised in both social and legal discourses against sex workers. The trafficking myth¹⁶, for example, was integral in the passing of the Nordic model in Ireland (Murphy 2022; Smith and Mac 2020).

The Nordic Model has been condemned by sex worker activists and sex worker-serving organisations for increasing crime and violence committed against sex workers (Armstrong 2021a; Armstrong, Phillips and Ryan 2024; Bowen et al. 20021; Henham 2021). Violence against sex workers is a contentious issue, with sex work abolitionists often positioning violence against sex workers as the core of anti-sex work rhetoric and abolitionist discourses. However, scholars of sex work and sex work advocates would suggest that violence against sex workers is a structural issue, one that is strongly exacerbated by the Nordic model or “end-demand” approaches to sex work law and policy, and that anti-sex work abolitionism is moralistic and ideological rather than research or evidence-based (Armstrong 2021). This is emblematic of the ways in which myths impact laws surrounding sex work, which, in turn, impacts the material and emotional realities of sex workers. Further, the confluence of myth,

¹⁶ The trafficking myth does not refer to all instances of trafficking being untrue, but rather the gross overestimation and misappropriation of this term which are used to propel invented narratives for specific socio-political purposes. Phantasmagorical narratives of trafficking are commonly implemented as a means of criminalising sex work (by conflating consensual sex work with trafficking) or silencing sex worker voices within law and policy proceedings (Murphy 2022; Snajdr 2013).

reality, and law is illuminated, and how myth can be weaponised as a form of power over marginalised groups.

The socially constructed nature of reality was first theorised by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), a seminal sociological text. Some theorists make distinctions between the concept of social reality and social imaginary while others do not. Social imaginary is an idea first outlined by Sartre in *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination* (1940). Both social reality and imaginaries acknowledge the ways in which individuals within society construct and imagine the social world through collective stories that influence social practices, norms, and institutions. Myth and reality are often seen as antithetical; the latter ostensibly representing the truth or the “real” and the former supposedly signifying untruth or unreality. However, as many social scientists and philosophers suggest, myths – like reality – are constructed by individuals within society. For Bouchard, myths are among the main constituents of social imaginaries, with the social construction of myths informing the social imaginary and our collective consciousness in both tangible and immaterial (that is, imaginary) ways (2017).

In her 2014 book *Playing the Whore*, Grant theorises upon the “prostitute imaginary” - that is, the ways in which sex workers (and narratives of sex work) are situated and imagined within the cultural consciousness. Sex workers are imagined as almost exclusively female; male and non-binary sex workers are not afforded space within the prostitute imaginary. When male sex workers do appear in the popular imagination, they are almost always assumed to be cisgender (Jones 2023). Transmasculine and non-binary people who sell sex are not commonly included within these cultural narratives. One of Jones’ (2023) transmasculine participants refers to himself as a unicorn, signifying the rarity of trans male sex workers within the popular imagination. The analogising of transmasculine sex workers with that of a mythical creature highlights both the social invisibilities and near-mythic status of trans male sex workers. A simplistic, and unconstructive, explanation would be a statistical evaluation. There are significantly fewer male and non-binary people selling sex and they are, therefore, absent from social discourses and cultural imaginaries. I would argue, however, that this lacuna is the result of the complex interplay between

invisibility, myths, and epistemic erasure (including symbolic annihilation), resulting in the absence of male and non-binary sex workers within the popular imagination.

Ethnography, Narrative, and Storytelling

Ethnography is a methodology that aims to produce detailed accounts or narratives of communities or cultural groups (Shelton 2021). Ethnographic approaches typically feature iterative-inductive research designs, meaning that, like other qualitative methods, the overall process is emergent and evolving (Marshall and Rossman 1999). This means that research questions or the researcher's focus may transform during the fieldwork, with the notion of the "field" (a specific setting or context) being central to ethnographic inquiry (O'Reilly 2012). Ybema et al. (2009) examine the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of ethnographic research. Ethnographic research commonly adopts a constructivist perspective where understanding is socially constructed by the researcher and subjects (Burr 2003). Throughout this thesis, I make use of autoethnographic vignettes. For Huber: "Autoethnography is a regime through which we might scrutinise the conditions of our own subjectivity and give substance to our interpretations" (2022, p. 51). Behar describes genres such as autoethnography as an effort, "to map an intermediate space we can't quite define yet, a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life" (1996, p. 174). I also incorporate musical vignettes to examine and articulate my emotional state throughout the research process (Hankins 2014).

Ethnography was chosen as a method of inquiry for several reasons. Firstly, because this thesis is dedicated to highlighting stories of subjugated knowledge and ethnography has been described as a process of telling people's stories within a specific socio-cultural context. Secondly, ethnographic inquiry speaks to my own literary sensibilities as a researcher and storyteller. Lastly, ethnographic accounts are, at their core, about people's experiences and narratives. As this research is dedicated to the oft-overlooked experiences of male and non-binary sex workers, narrative ethnographic inquiry was the preferred methodological approach from this project's inception. As noted by Scott, Grov, and Minichiello (2021), male sex workers are not

a monolith, but instead a highly heterogeneous global community, one which has existed for millennia. This study observes both sex work and gender as complex and multidimensional experiences, and these experiences are influenced by both structural and individualised factors. This study implements narrative ethnographic methods as a means of comparing the experiences of male and non-binary sex workers operating in both Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand, both of which have their own distinctive socio-political climates in relation to sex working, as well as their own socially prescribed myths of masculinity/gender. As Poppi and Sandberg state: “In the humanities and social sciences, narratives have been theorised as one of the primary means of articulating and sharing knowledge, and they are closely related to power” (2020, p. 296).

As Goodall suggests: “We are fundamentally *homo narrans* – humans as storytellers – and a well-told story brings with it a sense of fulfilment and of completion” (2005, p. 497). For van Hulst (2020), stories and storytelling are central to human existence and stories, “construct the identity of people in them” (p. 100). For Ricoeur, human existence, “cannot be separated from the account we can give of ourselves. It is in telling our own stories that we give ourselves an identity” (1985, p. 214). As Baker-Cristales suggests, “the belief that storytelling and imagination are entirely distinct projects from science and truth-telling is a product of a particular, very circumscribed, social-historical system – modernist capitalism” (2015, p. 17). In a similar vein, de Almeida articulates that, “politics requires *imagination*” (2023, p. 4). Further, ethnographers Rice and Maltz (2018) remind us that no two stories are alike. They may share similarities, but stories of experience are deeply personal and are anchored in individual experiences of the social world. For Brown (2016), “myth-making – the practice of producing stories – is dialectically related to social formation – the practice of organising in groups based on modes of production” (p. 15). Here, myth is understood as storytelling that is directly related to sociocultural production. This thesis explores the personal narratives of male and non-binary sex workers and how they construct, navigate, imagine, and perform identity through these narratives. As Hall suggests, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (Hall 1990, p. 225). For Faulkner and Hecht, stories are, “self-representations; we tell others stories that reflect how we want to be seen and how we see ourselves, which makes narrative analysis

a useful method for the study of identities, specifically the negotiation of multiple and stigmatised identities” (2011, pp. 833-834). I implement narrative methodologies as a means of uncovering myths of male and non-binary sex work and to highlight the various forms of harm that myth (re)produces.

Snajdr (2013) implements narrative ethnographic methods as a way of investigating narratives of human trafficking in Bosnia and Kazakhstan. They argue that master narratives of sex work and human trafficking are ideologically driven and reproduced by cultural myths and legends rather than relying on evidence or sex worker experiences. They advocate for researchers to, “consider how beneath the master narrative, ethnography... can reveal subtler and more accurate appraisals of experiences and contexts that depart from the grand discourse” (Snajdr 2013, p. 235). Similarly, Poppi and Sandberg postulate that: “Ethnography or other approaches emphasising the perspective of ‘insiders’ can show how some stories and key experiences are left out of widespread discourses or master narratives” (2020, p. 297). Sex work is often interpreted through master narratives which position women as victims of violence and men as perpetrators (Dennis 2008; Raine 2021; Whowell 2010). Universalising master narratives serve to diminish sex workers’ self-determination, agency, and individualised experiences, and ultimately fails to capture the complexity and nuance within the global sex industries. Master narratives are socioculturally reproduced and ultimately have material and emotional consequences for those the narratives support and, in other cases, marginalise. As Henriksen, Andersen, and Presser suggest: “Cultural storylines and narrative imagination have palpable consequences in the real world” (2020, p. 451). Master narratives are closely linked to mythology and are reproductive of one another insofar that both master narratives and myths are reliant on the production of dominant knowledges within society. I employ narrative ethnographic methods as a way of destabilising the hegemonic master narratives of sex work as paternalistic violence and, instead, highlight sex worker stories as counter-narratives in relation to myths surrounding male sex and non-binary sex work(ers).

Although ethnographic studies of male sex workers are extant (cf. Bloor, McKegany, and Barnard 1990; Luckenbill 1985), ethnographic studies that explore male and non-binary sex worker narratives within a multi-jurisdictional context represents a current

lacuna in the scholarship. This study seeks to bridge the theoretical gap within this nascent subfield by uncovering the dominant myths surrounding male and non-binary sex work in a multi-jurisdictional context (namely, Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand). The stories provided by participants illustrate the ways in which myths are constructed and maintained within society. They also highlight the ways in which these myths produce emotional and material harms for male and non-binary sex workers, both individually and collectively. Throughout this thesis, harm is being explored through a paradigm of epistemic harm – that is, harm related to knowledge (Fricker 2007; Fricker and Jenkins 2017). I locate harm broadly within a zemiological framework – that is, harms which may go unrecognised because they are not acknowledged within normative criminological frameworks (Hillyard and Tombs 2004; Pemberton 2015).

Situating Gender within a Queer and Rhizomatic Perspective

My theoretic understanding of gender requires explanation. This research implements a queer and rhizomatic theoretical framework and considers gender to be sociogenic and performative (Butler 1990; 1993). I recognise queer as, “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick 1993, p. 8). Rhizome is a botanical term for a decentralised, heterachial root system and was later adopted by Deleuze and Guattari for their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987), a seminal text in the canon of postmodern and poststructural scholarship. For Deleuze and Guattari, rhizomatic thinking is an experimental paradigm, one which allows for the reimagining of social phenomena. Queer and rhizomatic approaches are similar insofar that both resist rigid and binary categorisations and share a postmodern ontologic-epistemologic sensibility insofar that both are agnostic in their approach to understanding truth, reality, and knowledge.

Within a postmodernist perspective, truth, reality, and knowledge are not considered static or immutable, but rather multiplicitous, mobile, and multidirectional. As such,

queer and rhizomatic approaches share a theoretical consanguinity and are being applied here as a means of exploring the rich and complex interiority of male and non-binary sex worker lives. Rather than attempting to uncover truths or realities, this research is invested in the promotion of male and non-binary sex worker voices and experiences as they relate to dominant myths within a multi-jurisdictional context. Queer expressions of sex work have gained significant academic attention over the last few decades (Smith, Laing, and Pilcher 2015; Yingwana 2022). Demographically, queer people are overrepresented in the sex industries (Smith and Mac 2020). Structural disadvantages increase their precarity and vulnerability in queerphobic societies, sometimes leaving sex work as one of the few viable options. The high proportion of people in the sex industries who represent multiple marginalities is not a coincidence, but rather a reflection of the systemic failures of mainstream society.

This study is analytically allied with poststructuralist¹⁷ theories of gender and sexuality vis-à-vis queer theory (Butler 1990; 1993), queer ethnography (Rooke 2009; Talburt 1999), as well as performative and rhizomatic approaches to narrative analysis (Loots, Coppens, and Sermijn 2013; Riessman 2008; Sawyer 2021; Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots 2008; Warhol and Lanser 2015). Within these approaches, there is a great deal of ontological-epistemological commonality. These methods share a commitment to epistemological agnosticism insofar that knowledges are not considered static or incontestable, but rather mobile and multiplicitous. These approaches are also connected through difference; that is, through writing differently and *about* difference (Ericsson and Kostera 2020). Ashford (2009) suggests that a unified queer research methodology is a theoretical (and practical) impossibility, suggesting that a fusion of methodologies or approaches is more appropriate. Halberstam states that a queer methodology is, “a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour” (1998, p. 13).

Queer research often attempts to resurrect subjugated knowledges and highlight marginalised experiences; however, because queer identities exist outwith the

¹⁷ For Chang: “Post-structuralism relies on a conception of language and knowledge that is not based on any universalist theoretical ground” (1993, p. 1284).

normative epistemological parameters of social scientific research, Haver (1997) posits that queer research, “is less a knowledge or the production of knowledge than it is a pragmatics, an interruption in the production of knowledge” (p. 284). Halberstam also suggests that a queer methodology, “attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and it refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence” (1998, p. 13). In this sense, queer research is more experiential than conclusive, with Talburt posing the question, “do queer things happen that we might not always be able to know or imagine?” (1999, p. 537). These approaches are non-binary inasmuch that they share a theoretical consanguinity, one which is predicated on experience, knowledge, and identity being porous and multidimensional.

This research pays close attention to the multidimensionality of gender within male and non-binary sex working. My understanding of non-binary identity requires further elaboration as it required me to engage with the complexities of gender within sex work in ways I had hitherto not confronted. The inclusion of non-binary sex workers presented both a linguistic and paradigmatic challenge for this research. This is largely due to the lack of knowledge surrounding trans and non-binary identities within society, not because trans or non-binary identities are intrinsically more complicated than cisgender identities, but because there has been little effort to understand these non-normative identities both within society and previous academic literature. However, as we will discuss in the later chapters, many transgender and non-binary individuals have a complicated and, at times, contradictory relationship with normative ideas of sex and gender. It should be noted that cisgender individuals taking part in the study also highlighted various gendered complexities, with the culturally constructed and choreographic nature of cisgender identity being largely overlooked within society and scholarship. My journey of understanding male sex work has led me to cognise that the term male sex worker is discursively limited insofar that there are many people who experience “male” sex work in a myriad of non-binary ways. Some individuals fit within this rubric because they are male (cis and trans) and they engage in sex work; others engage in sex work as a man but do not identify as male outside of their working life; and some who do not necessarily identify or perform sex work as a man but exist within queer male socio-sexual circles or communities.

My own understanding of gender has been broadened greatly during this process. As a queer theorist, I was aware of the ontological instability of gender. However, the peripatetic nature of gender is illuminated by sex worker experiences of performing gender *through* sex work. For example, a trans man may choose to present as female for sex working as a way of attracting more clients (femme-presenting sex workers are the most sought-after demographic of sex workers). In this case, his femininity is incongruent with the worker's internal sense of gender, and is therefore a temporal enactment of gendered scripts¹⁸. Here, we can see how gender (and understandings of gender) can be considered rhizomatic. Gender has no clear start or end; it is an interior feeling that we categorise via language and external signifiers such as clothes, hair, and speech. My participants know more about their gender than anyone else. Much the same way they know about their own experience of sex work than anyone else. The knowledge produced between myself and my participants is inherently rhizomatic insofar that knowledge is not static. Knowledge is constantly being interpreted and reinterpreted upon the acquisition of "new" knowledge (new in inverted commas because most knowledge is not new, it is merely subjugated¹⁹). In many parts of the world, we consider non-binary or gender diverse identities to be a modern invention. However, we know that non-binary identities have existed within BIPOC cultures for millennia. This thesis aims to highlight these subjugated knowledges, specifically as it relates to trans and non-binary sex work.

I am keenly aware that my inclusion criteria may seem bemusingly broad to some. This is a deliberate attempt to reveal the mercurial nature of gender as it relates to "male" sex work, with male sex work itself being mythological in many ways. There is an implicit cis-centric assumption when it comes to male sex working. Not only do trans men disrupt this cisnormative positioning of male sex work, but non-binary sex workers further dislocate male sex work from its cisheteronormative framework. Through queer and rhizomatic understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality, I aim to provide critical understandings of gendered erotic labour, ones which are not so heavily anchored to biological essentialism. Such essentialism not only negates postmodern understandings of gender and sexual identity, it rejects the

¹⁸ This practice is called "backpassing" (attempting to "pass" as your assigned gender at birth during transactional sex) by Easterbrook-Smith (2022c).

¹⁹ See: Okidegbe (2022) and their analysis of "discredited data".

poststructuralist production of knowledge that is profoundly required for rethinking the categories of “male” and “female” sex worker. This is not to say that we live in a postgender society – we do not. Such an implication would be a serious misconstruction of the material realities for people of all genders. What is needed, however, is a broadening of these categories as a means of imagining a more inclusive social world. For many, their maleness (or femaleness) is an important part of who they are. No one is attempting to delegitimise or erase these experiences, but rather, to allow others to experience their gender as legitimate forms of identity or expression.

Transgender and non-binary persons often feel outcast or unseen within society. This is reflected in the sex industry, a heavily gendered space. It has been noted by scholars that sex work is deeply performative, rooted in gendered and sexualised social scripts which reinscribe repressive social institutions such as patriarchy (Jones 2020; Stardust 2015). In relation to male sex work, Bacio and Rinaldi state that scholars of male sex work have, “alternately and in contradictory terms expressed evaluations and analyses of a phenomenon that both reinforces and, at the same time, challenges hegemonic masculinities” (2022, p. 10). As Jones (2021; 2023) notes, the commercial porn industries often reinforce gendered norms in terms of the desirability of performers – that is, performers are often cast based on society’s current perception of attractiveness. Jones says that this is reflected in pornography featuring trans men, with many prominent trans male performers being white and cis-passing²⁰. Sex work is seen by many as transgressive, as an act of sexual defiance. However, the sex industry itself upholds and reinforces socially prescribed notions of gender and sex. Rather than thinking of gender and sexuality as fixed, normative categories or identities, I instead consider gender and sexuality to be experiences, ones which are, like the label of sex worker, multidimensional and multidirectional.

Hall suggests that, “instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact... we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process” (1990, p. 222). As an identity, sex worker is a mobile marker of marginalised experience. Sex worker identities are fluid, dependent on a multiplicity of

²⁰ Cis-passing refers to the idea of a non-cisgender individual being able to “pass” as cisgender – that is, be assumed to be cisgender based on their external presentation (Appenroth 2015).

factors, including the specific sex industry sector (for instance, an OnlyFans model and an independent escort will most likely have different experiences of sex working, meaning that the construction of sex work identity is subject to specific sociocultural experiences and is further impacted by personal privileges and biographies). As Bowen (2021) notes, sex worker identities are marked by both multidimensionality and multidirectionality. Multidimensional and multidirectional identities are not fixed, but rather open to the reconstruction of personal biographies. To wit, Identities are rhizomatic insofar that they are open-ended, multiplicitous, and open to continual negotiation and renegotiation. Deleuze and Guattari also suggest that the rhizome “never allows itself to be overcoded” (1987, p. 9), suggesting that rhizomes, like identities, are open to continuous reinterpretation, renegotiation, and recalibration of meaning. As Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots (2008) suggest: “The narrations someone tells about herself or himself are never complete; they form an ongoing process of co-construction and co-reconstruction” (p. 644). For Hall: Cultural identity... is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture” (1990, p. 225).

History of (Cisgender) Male Sex Work

Sex work has been observed within almost all modern and ancient societies and cultures, dating back millennia (Strathdee et al. 2015). Attempts to historicise male sex work, however, is challenging, due to male sex work being largely undocumented throughout history because of oppressive attitudes towards both sex work and homosexuality. It has been well-documented, however, that cisgender male sex work and homosexuality were prevalent practices during ancient Greco-Roman times. During antiquity, Jordan (2010) notes that sex work was commonplace and it was both socially and legally accepted for men to purchase sex. Jordan (2010) states that one of the earliest examples of widespread transactional sex was in Athens in approximately 600 BC, when government-run sex work companies were established as a means of financing the expansion of the Greek military. Greek male sex workers were offered legal protection from the state if they registered as a sex worker and paid their taxes. Similarly, male sex work was so entrenched within ancient Roman society

that male sex workers had their own holiday and paid tax to the state (Friedman 2014). By today's standards, we often revisionise male queerness/sex working in Ancient Greco-Roman times as liberal practices. As Foucault (1985) reminds us, however, while sexual practices were not as intensely regulated as they are in many contemporary societies, unrestrained sexuality was not commonly endorsed. As Friedman (2014) writes, sex between males was delineated by an intricate set of sociosexual codes. Relationships between older men and younger boys, what we would now call pederasty ("paederastia") were permitted insofar that the older man must not exploit his younger companion purely for physical gratification or neglect his education. When used solely for sexual satisfaction, this was considered prostitution ("porneia"). Important here are the roles played within transactional sex during this period: "Those who commonly played the passive role in intercourse were boys, women, and slaves – all persons excluded from the power structure" (Friedman 2014, p. 11). To borrow a quote from a foremost queer academic text, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" by Leo Bersani: "To be penetrated is to abdicate power" (1987, p. 212). The ancient Greeks and Romans did not perceive gender or sexuality as we do in modern times, with identitarian models of gender and sexuality emerging only within the last few hundred years or so (Malatino 2019). Instead, sexual relationships between men during this time were seemingly formed on an axis of socio-economic power, one which favoured the older, dominant partner.

Friedman (2014) also explores male sex work in early Modern Japan, suggesting that homosexuality and, in some instances, male sex work, was an established social convention. Kabuki theatres offered spaces for transactional sex during this period, with kabuki wakashu occupying the role of male escort. Some scholars note that, like the Greek and Roman men soldiers before them, samurai warriors had sexual relationships with their male protégés, a relationship which existed outside the contemporary worker-client binary. Friedman (2014, p. 4) states: "Male sex work almost always has been viewed as a consequence and reflection of economic disparity between older and younger partners, and has existed across a wide continuum of cultural acceptance". They continue: "Conditions for male sex workers are contingent... not only on the degree of cultural acceptance afforded them but on the degree of cultural acceptance afforded any sexual activity between men" (Friedman 2014, p. 4). Due to sex working and queerness representing social taboos, much of

sex working history (and queer history) has been preserved by a longstanding tradition of oral history, and is often difficult to historicise.

Muñoz's discussion of historiographic bias demonstrates its expunging influence on queer history: "Queerness has an especially vexed relationship to evidence... when the historian of queer experience attempts to document a queer past, there is often a gatekeeper, representing a straight present" (2009, p. 65). Muñoz suggests that these historical gatekeepers, "will labour to invalidate the historical fact of queer lives – past, present, and future" (2009, p. 65). As Ings suggests: "In accepting that not all histories are equally privileged, we need to ensure that obscurity does not become cultural absence and that essentially oral languages describing marginalised cultures are not denied a position in the national landscape" (2012, p. 788). Here, we begin to trace the genealogical pattern of a seemingly perennial problem pervading both sex worker and queer experiences: visibility. What does it mean to be "visible" within society? Visibility is usually deployed as a rhetorical apparatus through which to expose social inequalities faced by marginalised groups i.e., the queer and sex working communities. Visibility intends to highlight social disparities and disenfranchisement, but, as Chapkis (2017) reminds us, visibility alone is not enough to legitimise the experiences of marginalised groups. Morris (2012) refers to the consistent tension between the "radical" and "respectable" elements of the movement for queer rights and recognition, which implemented strategies of the antecedent civil rights and women's rights movements. Chapkis (2017) claims that the focus on respectability politics is one which favours normalisation over liberation, which ultimately reinforces stigma rather than resolving it. In their study of "gayfriendliness", Tissot (2023) postulates that queer acceptance is usually afforded to those who occupy similar socio-economic status, those who wish to mimic nuclear forms of family life, and do not seek to disrupt the cisheteronormative hegemony. They also state that queer stereotypes continue to pervade perceptions and narratives of queerness more generally. This is especially true for queer sex workers who inhabit multiple marginalised identities and, in turn, are subject to a multiplicity of stereotypical and mythological understandings of their identities.

Friedman (2014) refers to emperors Caesar and Nero enjoying what we would now consider homosexual proclivities, although, as aforementioned, these activities were

not labelled as such and, therefore, more difficult to stigmatise. In Classical Greece, although male sex workers were offered legal protections if they were registered as a sex worker and paid their taxes, Friedman (2014, p. 9) states that they were, “simultaneously caricatured and called sluts”. Legalisation efforts alone do little to combat stigmatic beliefs and phobic attitudes concerning non-heterosexual identities. Sex work may be legal in many parts of the world, but this does not mean sex work is culturally accepted or considered legitimate labour. Further, legalisation offers little in the way of highlighting the heterogeneity within given communities and the diversity of experiences therein. Morris (2021) reminds us of the paradoxical nature of identitarian models of sexuality – that is, visibility creates opportunity for community and access to social justice, but also presents opportunity for stigma and oppression. As Moscovici suggests: “By classifying what is unclassifiable, naming what is unnameable, we are able to imagine it, to represent it” (1984, p. 30). For marginalised groups, visibility is the proverbial double-edged sword, being required for social, legal, and political justice, but also potentialities for discrimination and stigmatisation on both a structural and individual level.

Male Sex Work in the 19th and 20th Century Britain and Aotearoa New Zealand

Very little is known about the history of homosexuality and male sex work within Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand, with Meek (2015) suggesting that this is largely due to male sex workers representing an intersection of two historically oppressed communities. Although sodomy laws were in place since the 16th century – specifically, the Buggery Act of 1533 – there was very little concept of homosexuality or male sex work, and no specific laws relating to male homosexuality until the late 19th century (Weeks 1981). In 1885, the Criminal Law Amendment Act was passed in the UK. Originally designed for the “protection of women and girls”, there was a last-stage amendment to include indecency between males, officially criminalising homosexuality in the UK (Crofts 2020). In practice, this allowed for prosecuting gay men (and male sex workers) without having to prove they had broken sodomy laws. This law was later replicated in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1893 (Ings 2012). As noted by Weeks, “all major enactments concerning male homosexuality were drawn from

Acts designed to control female prostitution” (1981, p. 50), and, “all homosexual males as a class were equated with female prostitutes” (1981, p. 52). Both male and female sex workers are marked by social and moral deviance; however, unlike female sex workers, male sex workers’ deviance is causal with homosexuality, with homosexuality and female sex work both being viewed as acts of gender transgression. As Vanwesenbeeck (2012) notes, while male sex work has been largely understood within traditional perspectives of male sexuality, female sex work is largely constructed as a contradiction of normative ideals of femininity.

As Crofts (2020) notes, male sex work and homosexuality have, historically, not been regulated as distinct socio-legal issues when compared to female sex workers. Unlike female sex workers, male sex workers and their clients were both considered deviant and criminal. As Borges and Passamani state: “Ideas such as marginality, deviance and risk have often been associated with both the figure of the man who does sex work and his client” (2024, p. 1). The criminality of two men having sex was considered turpitudinous irrespective of money being exchanged, with Crofts (2020) suggesting that little-to-no distinction was made between male sex work and homosexuality during this time. Croft and Orchiston suggest that: “This application of the law suggests that no legal-conceptual distinction was made between male sex work and male homosexuality and, indeed, that the goal was to address male homosexuality itself” (2021, p. 247). Referring to Greco-Roman times, Friedman (2014) highlights the selling of sex within specific socio-spatial parameters, such as socially sanctioned brothels, under arches of amphitheatres, and inside deserted buildings. A contemporary corollary to this ancient practice would be “cruising” i.e. the tradition of gay men having sex in public spaces. For Crofts and Orchiston: “This public homosexual subculture meant a fluidity between male sex work and male homosexuals, with both seeking sexual encounters in the same public cruising spaces” (2021, p. 248). The rhetorical slippages between transactional and non-transactional homosexual behaviour are illuminated by the account of Detective Constable Hamilton with the Glasgow Police published in 1949. According to Crofts: “Hamilton moves between detailing elements of cases of soliciting and cases of gross indecency without noting any difference in their application” (2020, p. 381). Crofts (2020) suggests that this type of policing was not just to address male sex work, or men engaging in homosexual sexual acts, but to combat ideas of male homosexuality

more broadly, ones which had only been recently developed within the cultural consciousness.

As noted by Crofts (2020) and Ings (2012), attitudes in the UK and Aotearoa New Zealand towards both homosexuality and male sex work became increasingly punitive towards the middle of the 20th century. Ings states that, “prosecutions under vagrancy laws fluctuated markedly, reaching a peak between 1965 and 1969 when there were 4549 vagrancy prosecutions in New Zealand” (2012, p. 782). Crofts (2020) notes that the rise in prosecutions of homosexual men following the Second World War, as well as the publication of details of prosecutions of several high-profile homosexual men, led the UK government to establish a committee chaired by Sir John Wolfenden to investigate the law relating to homosexuality and female sex work. Published in 1957, The Wolfenden Report is now seen as a landmark document in relation to homosexual law reform, both in the UK and Aotearoa New Zealand. The report suggested that, “homosexuals cannot reasonably be regarded as quite separate from the rest of mankind” (Crofts 2020, p. 385). This report paved the way for the later decriminalisation of homosexuality in both nations. In relation to female sex work, the committee did not recommend measures directed at the abolition of the sex trade, but rather towards the “offensive and injurious” nature of street-based sex work. Homosexuality was decriminalised in Scotland in 1980 (for men over the age of 21, later amended to 16 in 2001, in accordance with heterosexuality), while Aotearoa New Zealand would later decriminalise homosexuality in 1986 for men aged 16 and over (Ings 2012; Meek 2015). The decriminalisation of homosexuality, however, did little to combat the invisibility of the male sex worker within social or legal discourses. The decriminalisation of homosexuality resulted in a steady decline of queer male cruising practices, with most male sex workers now finding their clients online and arranging to meet in private, indoor spaces (Minnichiello and Scott 2014). The advent of the internet has also changed the ways queer men meet for sex (either transactional or non-transactional), with apps such as Grindr and sex worker advertisement sites facilitating queer male sex in largely private ways. Thus, as noted by Whowell and Gaffney (2009), male sex workers are less likely to have sex work laws applied to them due to the largely private and isolated nature of male sex work.

The Erased (Transmasculine and Non-Binary) Histories of Sex Work

Anthropological-historical data on non-cisgender sex workers is scarce, with scholastic attention focusing overwhelmingly on cisgender female sex workers and, to a much lesser extent, cisgender male sex workers. The limited historical data concerning transgender sex workers is predominantly concerned with transgender female sex workers, with trans men and non-binary sex workers being largely absent from historical accounts. Jespersen suggests that: “Trans history is sex work history” (2024, p. 49). Jespersen (2024) highlights the “curious case” of Eleanor Rykener, a 14th century transfeminine sex worker from London, as well as several prominent transfeminine sex workers from Colonial North America. Absent, however, is any mention of transmasculine or non-binary sex workers²¹. In a Reddit thread from 2025²², an archive worker from Texas asks, “why are trans men MINIMISED in the historical record?”. The archive worker says that almost every piece of information (stories, mentions, biographies, etc.) is related almost exclusively to trans women. They state that: “I am glad to have found any trans history AT ALL – but my heart hurts all the same that I cannot find any mention of people who are like me”. They conclude their post with, “I hate feeling invisible”. This underscores a longstanding symbolic and hermeneutical gap – where histories of trans men, especially those in sex work, are rendered invisible by archival neglect and cultural erasure. In 2023, Jack Parker, a transmasculine sex worker from the UK, posted their “Transmasculine Guide to Sex Work”²³, highlighting the lack of resources for transmasculine and non-binary sex workers and offering advice relating to backpassing, interpersonal relationships with clients, and accessing sources of community. Jack states that: “We aren’t hypervisible the way that trans women are... we’re lumped in with gay men... or dismissed” (2023, n.p). This speaks to the dual invisibility faced by transmasculine and non-binary sex workers within sex work and broader social narratives.

²¹ It should be noted that labels such as transgender and non-binary were not common parlance during this time, and that it is possible that sex workers thought to be transfeminine may have been considered non-binary from today’s standards.

²² https://www.reddit.com/r/trans/comments/1ihq1m1/why_are_transgender_men_absent_from_the/

²³ <https://jackviolet.com/2023/04/01/transmasculine-guide-to-sex-work/>

Myths of Male and Non-Binary Sex Workers

Myths associated with male and non-binary sex workers transcend, to some extent, geography inasmuch that participants from both nations often commented on similar phenomena. As Poppi and Sandberg postulate: “Master narratives of sex work can therefore share important similarities across geographical, cultural and societal contexts” (2020, p. 299). This can also be partially ascribed to myths stemming from broader socio-cultural issues, cisheteronormative understandings of the sex industries, and a lack of awareness surrounding transmasculine and non-binary identities. What is significant, however, are the ways in which these stories differ in presentation – that is, the ways in which they are *narrated*. Participants operating within the decriminalised context of Aotearoa New Zealand were forthcoming about their experiences and narrated them in a highly casual manner. Participants working within the criminalised context of Scotland, however, were more guarded in the sharing of their stories, presumably due to the criminalised and taboo nature of sex work within Scotland. Participants from both nations, however, appreciated the chance to have their voices heard within an academic context, speaking to the almost non-existent presence of male and non-binary sex workers within academia and other important societal institutions. It should be noted that, in line with rhizomatic thinking, these myths are not presented in order of importance. Further, these myths share a significant amount of overlap, existing in a complex, rhizomatic web of harm.

The following five interrelated myths were highlighted by the participants:

- 1) **The myth of the “male” sex worker** – that is, the male sex worker is presumed to be cisgender (or not to exist at all). This myth was emphasised and explored by trans and non-binary narratives of sex work, destabilising and queering pre-existing ideas of men who sell sex. Assumptions of cisgender identities within male sex work serves to further invisibilise transmasculine and non-binary sex workers.
- 2) **The myth of invulnerability** – numerous participants remarked on the notion of male sex workers being largely insusceptible to harm, at least when compared to their female or femme sex worker counterparts. This renders male

and non-binary sex workers invisible within victimhood narratives and broader socio-legal discussions surrounding the sex industries.

- 3) **The myth of hypersexuality** – many participants suggested that, due to their gender, there is often an implicit presumption of hypersexual tendencies.
- 4) **The myth of recreationality** – operating in tandem with the myth of hypersexuality, the myth of recreationality supposes that, for male and non-binary sex workers, sex work is inherently recreational or exploratory. Not only does this trivialise or invalidate the rich multiplicity of male and non-binary sex worker experiences, it serves to invisibilise male and non-binary sex workers from labour and legal-based discussions surrounding the sex industries.
- 5) **The myth of the monolithic “male” body** – numerous participants remarked upon the perception of a prerequisite for male sex workers to be youthful and adhere to normative societal conventions of attractiveness by possessing a specific body type (slim or muscular). In other words, sex workers must conform to monolithic ideas of masculinity. Such a perception is largely reserved for cisgender male workers, with transgender male and non-binary sex workers commenting on the limited knowledge surrounding non-cisgender bodies within society. The misconception that all male sex workers are young, muscular, and conventionally attractive serves to erase male and non-binary sex workers who do not fit within this normative paragon of youthful, masculine ideals. Several of these myths stem from broader social understandings of men/masculinity and a general lack of knowledge surrounding transgender and non-binary individuals, which will be explored later in greater detail.

Research Aims and Questions

The primary aims of this research project are threefold:

- 1) To uncover the dominant myths surrounding male and non-binary sex work within a multi-jurisdictional context (Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand).
- 2) To examine the diversity of gender within male and non-binary sex working in Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand.

3) To highlight the stories of male and non-binary sex workers and amplify their voices and experiences.

The research questions are as follows:

- 1) What are the dominant myths surrounding male and non-binary sex workers?
- 2) To what extent are these myths attendant to socio-legal contexts?
- 3) To what extent do myths have the capacity to cause harm to male and non-binary sex workers?

Structure of Thesis

Chapter One has introduced key concepts and contexts that are integral to the overall thesis. Chapter Two of this thesis will explore the pre-existing relevant literature and offers a brief overview of the debates surrounding the sex worker rights movement (and the myths that have permeated these discourses). Chapter Three is dedicated to my chosen methodological process, ethical considerations, and reflection on my fieldwork journey. After this, data analysis will be presented by using the previously outlined myths as theoretical points of entry. Chapter Four is the first of three data analysis chapters. The data analysis chapters presented within this thesis are, similar to the myths presented in this thesis, interrelated. Chapter Four demythologises and queers pre-existing paradigms associated with male sex working by highlighting the diversity of gender within male and non-binary sex working. Chapter Five presents several myths associated with male and non-binary sex working and examines participant narratives in relation to sex work law and policy. Chapter Six explores the limited media representation of male and non-binary sex workers and the harms associated with symbolic annihilation in the media and beyond. This chapter also highlights the importance of sex-worker told stories and asks participants to imagine a better world for sex workers. As Meek suggests: “The creation of narratives within communities can help shape identities within that community, and within future communities” (2015, p. 8). The concluding chapter summarises the key theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions to knowledge, presents possible avenues

for further research in this area, and calls for a reimagining of male and non-binary sex workers within society.

What Do Stories Matter?

During the final stages of my PhD, I experienced significant physical and emotional burnout. This was not only due to the many challenges associated with completing doctoral-level research, but also the broader socio-political context in which I exist. I often found myself wondering: “What is the point?” – that is, how can anything truly matter within the wider context of ongoing tectonic shifts such as the rapid development and accessibility of artificial intelligence, impending climate catastrophe, and socio-political unrest on a seemingly global scale. Over the past few years, anti-migration, anti-queer (specifically anti-transgender), and anti-sex work ideologies have been gaining a concerning amount of traction. How do we remain hopeful for the future? This is a question of infinite existential complexity and, at present, I do not have a comprehensive answer. What I am sure of, however, is that stories *do* matter. We must resist oppressive ideologies by telling stories and imagining a better future. Storytelling is a form of resistance; a radical act of defiance against the repressive regimes and hegemonic hierarchies that enable the oppression of marginalised groups within society. As Ursula K Le Guin (Le Guin 2016, p. 203) reminds us:

Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We'll need writers who can remember freedom.

Chapter Two

Theoretical Perspectives

“Exclusion has many faces. Its harms are insidious and its methods multifarious. One reason that exclusion is so readily able to work its harms is that exclusion, at a certain point, becomes so pervasive that it becomes invisible”

(Chang 1993, p. 1287).

Introduction

This chapter explores the pre-existing literature relating to mythologies of sex work and their attendant ideological underpinnings. This chapter also outlines the socio-legal models of sex work law and policy and wider socio-political discourses surrounding the sex industry. This chapter also explores theories relating to gender, sex, and sexuality, both in relation to sex work and in a broader academic and societal context. Lastly, this chapter highlights the theoretical models of harm being implemented throughout this thesis.

Myth(ologies) and Sex Work

River Redwood, a male sex worker, writer, and activist states: “Over my working years, I’ve found that my biggest challenges have not come from sex work but from people’s misperceptions, stereotypes, and prejudices” (Redwood 2018, p. 167). In other words, mythological understandings of the sex industry may present the most pervasive obstruction to male and non-binary sex worker visibility. Myth can be understood, in the anthropological sense, as a falsity or untruth, or – in the Barthesian, linguistic sense – an ideological meaning which is reliant on systems of semiosis (Barthes

1957). Barthes, following on from Saussurean structuralism, suggests that “myth is a system of communication... a message...” (1957, p. 107). For Barthes, “myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system” (1957, p. 113). It should be noted that throughout this thesis, myth is understood primarily in the anthropological sense – that is, misconceptions relating to male and non-binary sex workers. However, semiological understandings of myth are being highlighted here to illustrate both the complexity of myth and its power within society.

Kelsey expounds upon Barthesian notions of myth, suggesting that myths, “are culturally constructed through semiotic systems (signs) that hold denotative and connotative meanings” (2015, p. 6). Kelsey uses the example of the rose, explaining that a rose is, denotatively, a rose; however, on a connotative level, the rose would be associated with other meanings, such as passion or romance. On a denotative level, sex work is the exchange of sexualised labour for monetary or material compensation (Weitzer 2012). Connotatively, however, sex work carries an array of heavily gendered semantic charges and, for many, is commonly associated with criminality, disease, and inherent femaleness (Koken et al. 2004). Mythological meanings of sex work are shaped by social and political understandings of the sex industries (Weitzer 2010; 2012). Abel and Fitzgerald (2010) highlight the dichotomous discourses concerning sex work – namely, the “public nuisance” and “moral order” discourses. The former constructs sex workers as immoral, disease-ridden criminals who represent a threat to public morality. In contrast, the moral order rhetoric portrays sex workers as innocent victims, often targets of sex trafficking, who require protection and relocation within society (which we will address later in more detail). Here, we can begin to interrogate the social and political parameters of sex work and how these cultural constructions can influence mythological understandings of the sex industries. In other words, different ideological perspectives impact the ways in which sex work and sex workers are constructed, imagined, and understood within society.

Sex work is mired in myth, with its sociological and historical dimensions being eclipsed by abolitionist narratives of universal female suffering and oppression (Weitzer 2009; 2010). For Bell: “Myth serves to flatten the complexity, the nuance, the performative of human history; it presents instead a simplistic and often univocal story”

(2003, p. 75), with Kelsey proposing that: “The very principle of myth is to transform history into nature” (2015, p. 6). A prime example of this is the commonly held belief that sex work is the world’s “oldest profession”; however, despite its axiomatic status, scholars of sex work have widely discredited this idea (Dolinsek and Hearne 2022; Jordan 2010; Strathdee et al. 2015). The myth that sex work is the world’s oldest vocation is not only ahistorical, it fails to recognise the complexity and nuance within the sex industries and the global sex working community. Moreover, the erroneous positioning of sex work as the primordial form of paid employment not only homogenises the global sex working community, it disregards the intersectional interests of gender, class, sexuality, religion, and race. In other words, it denies the “complex personhood” (Gordon 1997) of sex workers – that is, sex workers’ multiple, intersecting identities. The oldest profession myth is just one example of how sex work is obfuscated by mythological meanings, and how the experiences of sex workers are, in turn, mythologised. Another apposite example is the ways in which gender and myth coalesce, specifically in relation to male and non-binary sex workers and their invisibility within discussions of the sex industries in both academic and socio-political spheres (Curtis and Boe 2023; Dennis 2008; Raine 2021; Whowell 2010).

Dennis’ (2008) paper explores scholastic discussions of the sex industries by sampling 166 articles, most of which omit even a singular mention of male sex workers, reducing male sex workers to what Minichiello and Scott deem a “linguistic impossibility” (2014, p. vii). In fact, in many cases, the term sex worker was entirely synonymised with female sex worker, with 67% of these studies presenting the term “prostitute” as identical to “female prostitute” and “sex worker” as identical to “female sex worker” (Dennis 2008, p. 13). Myth, in the semiotic sense, is transformative insofar that it annihilates the socio-political materialities surrounding social phenomena and presents itself as an indisputable truth. As Barthes suggests, myth, “is a semiological system which has the pretension of transcending itself into a factual system” (1957, p. 133). It is within these sociolinguistic discourses that male sex work is illuminated as mythological. The naturalised assumption that all sex workers are cisgender women is apparent in both academic literature and wider socio-political discussions surrounding the sex industries, with male and non-binary sex workers being invisibilised to the point of near non-existence (Dennis 2008; Jamel 2011; Matthen et al. 2018). This is especially true of transmasculine sex workers, with studies devoted

to the study of trans men in sex work being particularly scarce (Appenroth 2021; Easterbrook-Smith 2022c; Jones 2020; 2021; 2023; Raine 2021). Weitzer attempts to unpack abolitionist assumptions of sex work, stating that a, “notable feature of oppression writings is the neglect of male and transgender sex work, which is jettisoned by the almost exclusive theorising of prostitution as an institution that victimises women and girls” (2012, p. 11). As Smith and Mac remind us, sex work is a “richly symbolic terrain” (2020, p. 141). They suggest that for many feminist women, “the figure of the prostitute comes to represent the trauma that is inflicted on all women within patriarchy...”, and that the client, “becomes the symbol of all violent men; he is the avatar of unadulterated violence against women...” (2020, p. 141). Cisgender and transgender male sex workers (as well as transgender female and non-binary sex workers) serve no purpose in the mythology of abolitionism, in which sex work is narrativised solely as violence against cisgender women and girls.

For many, male and non-binary sex workers exist purely within mythological parameters, both in the anthropological and semiological sense (Dennis 2008; Sawicki et al. 2019). Male and non-binary sex workers have been historically underrepresented in discussions surrounding the sex industries and it is therefore difficult to produce accurate depictions of the lived realities of male sex workers (Borges and Passamani 2024; Curtis and Boe 2023; Sawicki et al. 2019; Whowell 2010). This dearth of knowledge relating to male sex work is compounded by myths surrounding the prevalence of men and non-binary people selling sex, with many believing that this amount is too insignificant to warrant discussion (Jamel 2011). As Sawicki et al. (2019) state, there are an estimated 40-42 million sex workers in the global economy, with over 8 million being cisgender men, meaning that roughly 1 in 5 sex workers are cisgender men. Scholars have predicted the actual global population of male sex workers to be much higher; for instance, police often mistake male sex workers for queer cisgender men seeking non-commercial sex experiences, invisibilising their labour and identities (Curtis and Boe 2023). This is hardly a negligible statistic, yet male sex workers are routinely ignored in discussions of sex work, specifically in relation to law and policy (Crofts and Orchiston 2021; Raine 2021; Whowell 2010). Transmasculine and non-binary sex workers are even more difficult to quantify, with their gendered invisibility within society largely precluding them from statistical data. If all sex workers are women, then male and non-binary sex workers

are not afforded space to exist within the cultural imagination – or prostitute imaginary, as Grant (2014) describes. If male and non-binary sex workers do not “exist”, due to ideological or epistemological extinction, then harms affecting these groups cannot be meaningfully addressed within social discourse, practice, or policy. Myth-as-untruth is only tenable in tandem with myth-as-truth; in this case, male and non-binary sex workers do not exist (untruth) because all sex workers are women (naturalised truth). The notion that all sex workers are women is a pervasive social myth, one which is produced alongside the myth of there being no male or non-binary sex workers. If all sex workers are cisgender women, then no sex workers can be cisgender men (to say nothing of transmasculine and non-binary sex workers, who represent an intensely invisible population). Although some scholars have explored myth in relation to sex work, myth is rarely implemented as an analytic paradigm through which to explore the personal narratives of sex workers.

As noted by Weitzer, the sex industries are highly contoured by myths concerning sex work/sex workers and suggests that such mythologies, “shape both the popular imagination and public policies throughout the world” (2012, p. 3). Weitzer (2012) comments that many popular assumptions about sex workers, their clients, and third parties are either entirely fictional or valid for only specific segments of the sex industries. Sex work is often described as a singular entity, and little attention has been paid to the heterogeneity of erotic labours within the sex industries (Poppi and Sandberg 2020). Much of the research which frames academic and public narratives surrounding sex work is derived from street-based studies, failing to capture the complexity and nuance within the global sex industries. For example, it has been noted that street-based sex workers are at disproportionate risk of harm compared to other workers (Henham 2021; Smith and Mac 2020). Abolitionist discourses universalise this claim, however, and apply it to all forms of sex work. As Bennett et al. suggest, people tend to, “make generalisations and judgments about a wider group of people based on their experience with a specific group”, and, “form conclusions based on their subjective perception rather than the evidence” (2018, p. 4).

Among the vocal proponents of anti-sex work myths is Julie Bindel, who goes as far to suggest that sex work, and the sex worker rights movement itself, is a myth, one which is endorsed by, “misguided neoliberalism” (2019, p. xxx). Although Bindel claims

that the sex worker rights paradigm is mythologic, others have postulated that anti-sex work abolitionism is, in fact, reliant on demagogic disinformation and mythologic storytelling (Armstrong 2021b; Smith and Mac 2020; Weitzer 2010). Further, the sex worker rights paradigm has, for many, been recognised as evidence-based and human rights-focused (Raine 2021; Smith and Mac 2020; Weitzer 2012). For Horrocks, “myths flow from the social unconscious: they are an important part of the socially constructed reality in every culture” (1995, p. 17). As Kelsey notes: “Myth provides a particular way of representing and understanding the world. Whilst it promotes one way of seeing or discussing something, it restricts and denies other interpretations or understandings” (Kelsey 2015, p. 5) Anti-sex work logics are, to some degree, constructed through the axiomatic language of sex trafficking and paternalistic violence. Butler suggests that anti-sex work feminists, in their attempts to prevent co-optation, “commit an epistemic oppression when they essentialise the narrative of people with sex trade experiences. The essentialised narrative is then used to control what is perceived as knowledge and who are seen as knowers” (2024, p. 736). This unidimensional view of sex work ignores the complex socio-historic conditionalities of the sex industries and naturalises the belief system that sex work is synonymous with violence and oppression. As Butler notes: Any narrative that refuses to recognize the complexity of victimisation, exploitation, agency, and state violence is incomplete and runs the risk of committing forms of epistemic injuries” (2024, p. 780).

Myth itself is immaterial but is produced by (and reproduces) historical and social materialities. For Bennett et al., “Myths often develop and are used by society to explain less tangible aspects of the world around them” (2018, p. 1). As Smith and Mac (2020) suggest, very few are privy to the lived realities of sex workers, meaning that they must construct their own fictitious narratives of sex work. Bennett et al. also suggest that, “reducing the negative impacts of myths involves uncovering the tensions and voices of the people whom the myth silences, as well as the tensions and voices of the people whom the myth supports (2018, p. 12). As myths are tied to social reality, they can have very real consequences for those who the myth either supports or suppresses. Bennett et al. (2018) state that myths can cause direct physical and emotional harm as well as indirect damage. To wit, myths surrounding the sex industries can cause both direct and indirect harm to sex workers. Exploring

the personal narratives of sex workers is an exercise in demystification, a way of dispelling the entrenched myths surrounding sex work, and allows sex workers to tell their own stories and have their (often silenced) voices heard. In other words, highlighting the stories of sex workers is a necessary first step towards epistemic justice.

Socio-Legal Models of Sex Work

In terms of legislative approaches, there are five typologies of sex work law which represent differing social, political, and moral positions on sex work (Henham 2021; Scoular et al. 2025; Smith and Mac 2020). They are as follows: 1) Full criminalisation of sex work. Under this model, all participants in the transaction are criminalised. Examples of countries which have fully criminalised sex work include: USA, South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and China; 2. Partial criminalisation, where the purchasing and selling of sex are legal but associated activities are criminalised: kerb crawling (street-based sex work), working together (also known as “brothel keeping”), and “facilitating” sex work. This model is found in Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales); 3. Regulation, legalisation, or licensing. This model is most commonly associated with Germany, the Netherlands, and the US state of Nevada. This describes a system of heavily regulated sex work with criminal penalties for failure to comply with these regulations. These regulatory features often include: registration as a sex worker, mandatory health checks and STI testing, and employment in specific venues or premises; 4. Asymmetrical criminalisation (also known as the “Nordic model”, the “Swedish model”, or “end demand” approaches) describes the criminalisation of purchasing sex and for third parties while sex selling itself remains legal. This model originated from Sweden and has since been adopted in Iceland, France, Israel, and Northern and Southern Ireland; 5. The full decriminalisation of sex work describes a legal framework found only in New Zealand, the Australian jurisdictions of the Northern Territory, Queensland, Victoria and, more recently, Belgium (Mgbako et al. 2025), where all parties are decriminalised and sex work is regulated through labour law. It is important to note that, within the Aotearoa New Zealand context, these labour protections are not extended to migrant sex

workers, however, a limitation often derided by sex work activists and scholars (Armstrong 2021b; Abel and Fitzgerald 2010).

It should be noted that the impartiality of the language found within sex work law and policy does not always adequately reflect the lived realities of the sex workers operating within these frameworks (Smith and Mac 2020). As Morris (2021) reminds us, legalisation or decriminalisation alone is not enough to legitimise the experiences of marginalised groups. The legal and political dimensions of sex work are seldom synonymous with social and cultural attitudes, with sex work rarely being accepted within society, irrespective of its legality or illegality. Moreover, Crofts and Orchiston state that: “Legal, academic, and policy discussion and legal regulation reveal a fractured, gendered and heterocentric approach to sex work”, and that, “Laws criminalising or regulating sex work have traditionally been drafted, interpreted, and applied only with female workers in mind, largely ignoring male sex workers” (2021, p. 245). Furthermore, Matthen et al. write that, “existing research has largely been carried out exclusively by non-sex worker academics, giving sex workers no input into how research is done and how data is interpreted” (2018, p. 3).

Östergren (2017) suggests that it is more useful to scrutinise sex work-related policy as either repressive, restrictive, or integrative. According to Östergren, repressive regimes (such as full criminalisation and the Nordic Model) are based on a moral, religious, or radical feminist ideology, with the total eradication of sex work being the primary aim. Under such regimes, sex workers operate illegally and therefore have no access to labour rights and find it difficult to access healthcare, state benefits, and report crimes committed against them (Östergren 2017). For Weitzer, repressive paradigms are grounded, “in the argument that exploitation, subjugation, and violence are intrinsic to and ineradicable from sex work – transcending historical time period, national context, and type of sexual commerce” (2012, p. 11). Repressive paradigms view sex work as a universally destructive force which is detrimental to society and deem those who either purchase or sell sex to be immoral. Repressive regimes are, therefore, abolitionist in nature. In restrictive regimes, sex work is heavily managed to protect society and those selling sex from harm. Commercial sex is viewed as negative, but operates with a more pragmatic approach than full criminalisation (Henham 2021; Östergren; 2017). Sex workers can operate legally, but under

conditions that are far more restrictive when compared with other sectors of work e.g. in the German context of legalisation, anyone who has registered as a sex worker is prohibited from working as a teacher or within social work settings, regardless of how long a person has engaged with the sex industry or how long ago this was (Appenroth 2021). Restrictive regimes are more prohibitionist rather than abolitionist, with the intent to regulate sex work rather than eradicate it. Appenroth (2021) suggests that in countries like Germany, which operate under a system of regulationism, trans sex workers often work illegally due to the transphobic nature of the health and social care systems. Regulationism usually requires individuals to register as a sex worker and attend regular sexual health screenings, a process that is not amenable to many trans sex workers due to the cis-centric and trans-exclusionary nature of health and social care provision (Smith and Mac 2020). Finally, an integrative approach is based on collaboration and a dedication to human rights, with the aim of protecting sex workers from systemic and interpersonal harm. Under an integrative model, commercial sex is viewed as a multifaceted phenomenon containing both positive and negative elements (like all forms of work). Sex workers are viewed as a category of service providers who have been integrated into pre-existing socio-legal structures, and are theoretically offered the same labour rights and protections as non-sex workers (Armstrong 2021b). Weitzer refers to this approach as the “empowerment paradigm” (2012, p. 7).

Murphy (2022) further elaborates upon the differing socio-legal approaches to sex work law by delineating between carceral and social justice approaches. Murphy states that the Nordic model is a carceral approach to sex work, one which is in direct contrast with decriminalisation or social justice approaches. Carceral logics are predicated on punitive measures such as imprisonment and fines, whereas social justice approaches centralise sex worker rights, safety, and access to legal justice (Murphy 2022). Murphy, citing FitzGerald, O'Neill, and Wylie, asserts that this, “carceral approach is essentialist, and reduces sex workers to having a one-dimensional identity, rather than full and complex roles and relationships, where their profession constitutes only one strand” (2022, p. 2). Contrasting this, “a social justice approach to sex work would instead recognise the complexity of sex workers’ lives and relationships, and support their safety and autonomy” (Murphy 2022, p. 2). For Smith and Mac: “Abuses such as racist policing, corruption, and sexual assault are fundamentally bound up with the vulnerability of the sex worker who, when defined as

criminal, has little recourse to justice or protection” (2020, p. 129). Henham suggests that social justice approaches are imperative because, “it places the lived experiences of current sex workers as the key informants of their experiences and needs and clearly demands that all policy, practice and research should be developed in consultation with current sex workers” (2021, p. 912).

Henham then uses the phrase “nothing about us, without us”, a common saying among sex workers and sex worker activist groups, referring to the impossibility of sex worker experiences being captured or conveyed within socio-legal discourses without the input of those with lived experience of selling sex. For Henham, carceral approaches propagate, “considerable concerns about the impacts on the lived realities of all sex workers of all gender identities” (2021, p. 911). Carceral approaches to sex work are often tied to other systems of brutality and penalty. For instance, in South Africa, sex workers are subjected to increased levels of violence, with Smith and Mac (2020) suggesting that the country’s legacy of institutional brutality under apartheid, combined with the full criminalisation of sex work, fosters a particularly hostile and punitive environment for sex workers. They cite a case of a male sex worker who was arrested by the police, after which the police reportedly encouraged the men sharing his cell to sexually abuse him (Smith and Mac 2020). Speaking from the Canadian perspective, Redwood suggests that, upon the adoption of the Nordic Model in Canada in 2014, sex workers, “faced barriers to organising and teaching each other techniques or running workshops about how to screen clients” 2018, p. 174). Highlighting the importance of not only lived experience but peer-led initiatives, Redwood states that: “Those of us with first-hand experience could and should be allowed to share our experiences with other people working in the profession” (2018, p. 174).

It is generally agreed among sex workers, sex worker-led activist collectives, sex worker-serving groups, and human rights organisations that full decriminalisation²⁴ of sex work is the only way to ensure the human rights of all sex workers globally, which

²⁴ Butler notes that: “Of course, no group is a monolith, so there are disagreements over whether all potentially harmful activities should be decriminalised and whether there are some activities that should remain punishable by incarceration” (2024, p754).

includes complete social, political, and legal equality (Abel and Fitzgerald 2010; Armstrong 2021a; 2021b; O'Neill 2010; Raine 2021). For Raine: "In terms of policy, both decriminalisation and stigma reduction are essential requirements for tackling violence and harassment of sex workers globally (2021, p. 351). As Armstrong notes, "decriminalisation is the approach commonly favoured by sex worker rights advocates because it affords power to sex workers through the provision of rights, creating conditions which are most conducive to their safety and well-being" (2021b, p. 370). Armstrong (2021b) also highlights that many sex worker-led organisations have been actively campaigning for decriminalisation for decades, including the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP); Scarlet Alliance (Australia); Empower Foundation (Thailand); and Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT; South Africa). This position is championed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Human Rights Watch, the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the World Health Organisation (WHO), the European Sex Worker Rights' Alliance (ESWA), and Amnesty International. Amnesty International stated that the full decriminalisation of sex work can reduce violence, HIV transmission, and other health-related risks for sex workers, and can address discrimination and stigma by offering sex workers the same protections and human rights guaranteed to all other individuals (Henham 2021).

Some radical feminists and sex work abolitionists claim that sex work is inherently violent, coercive, and exploitative (Easterbrook-Smith 2022b; Easterbrook-Smith 2022c; Murphy 2022). Abolitionist narratives of sex work commonly propose that selling sex is a fundamentally non-consensual act insofar that sex workers are perpetual victims of paternalistic violence, and that sex working women are given the illusion of choice rather than one that is predicated on the worker's agency and ability to decide what is best for herself (Abel and Fitzgerald 2010). According to Weitzer, "this wholesale denial of women's agency in sexual commerce and emphasis on passive victimhood violates a central tenet of feminism, which centres on women's intentionality and empowerment" (2012, p. 12). Sawicki et al. (2019) suggest that the notion that sex work is inherently anti-feminist is a myth, one which has emotional and material consequences for all sex workers (most prominently, stigma). Abolitionist discourse also commonly takes the form of the infantilising "saviour" narrative – that

is, sex workers requiring rescue and relocation from the deviant sex industry to a more socially accepted form of employment (Smith and Mac 2020; Murphy 2022).

As Bowen (2021) notes, many sex workers hold multiple forms of employment, terming this “duality” e.g., having employment both within and outwith the sex industry. Bowen’s (2021) analysis illustrates the defective logic of saviour or rescue discourses, with many sex workers already working in the industries that they would be supplanted into via saviourhood. Sex work abolitionism is predicated on the notion of helping or saving women from the uniformly negative experience of sex working. By doing so, however, anti-sex work proponents further marginalise the very people they are purportedly attempting to rescue. Abolitionist discourses of sex work are overwhelmingly centred around cishetero hegemonies, and, as such, the experiences of queer sex workers are overlooked and erased entirely (Smith, Laing, and Pilcher 2015). Scholars suggest that end-demand approaches to sex work law are ideologically-driven, compared to decriminalisation, which is based on research and an emphasis on human rights. As Weitzer posits, “in no area of the social sciences has ideology contaminated knowledge more pervasively than in the writings of the sex industry” (2005, p. 934). As Cruz (2018) suggests, however, the sex worker rights movement is not free from ideology, suggesting that some sex work scholars and activists oversimplify the labour-related issues concerning transactional sex, specifically as it relates to anti-trafficking efforts and migrant sex workers. Sawicki et al. (2019) state that, due to the conflation of sex workers and sex trafficking, it has become increasingly difficult to estimate the prevalence of either group. Scholars suggest, however, that the issue of trafficking has been grossly exaggerated (Abel and Fitzgerald 2010; Harcourt and Donovan 2005; Sawicki et al. 2019; Snajdr 2013).

Despite carceral approaches being the most widely implemented, Henham (2021) states that the Nordic/end-demand approach, “has not reduced the number of sex workers, and it has not protected sex workers from violence, exploitation, or trafficking. It has driven sex work underground and increased the marginalisation and stigmatisation of sex workers by individuals and state” (Henham 2021, p. 912). Henham (2021) also states that, importantly, this approach is overwhelmingly rejected by the sex working community at large due to its associated health risks and exacerbating effects on social harms. Armstrong (2021b) reminds us, however, that

while all end-demand approaches are often collectively referred to as the “Nordic model”, it has been noted that there is considerable variation in how this framework is implemented and interpreted, meaning that it would be inaccurate to propose the existence of a unified Nordic model approach. What these approaches do share, however, is, “a commitment to criminalising the clients of sex workers... while advocates of such models argue that this focus on clients means that sex workers are not criminalised, recent reports indicate that this is inaccurate” (Armstrong 2021b, p. 371). Moreover, Henham (2021) discusses the systematic eradication of visible sex worker spaces in Europe, for instance the legal Red-Light District in Leeds and “tipplezones” in countries such as the Netherlands. These designated areas are commonly populated with sex workers with multiple marginalised identities e.g., sex working drug users or transgender sex workers. The reduction of these spaces creates geographies of exclusion whereby the risks of violence and exploitation are amplified. Henham (2021) argues that this systematic eradication creates spaces of displacement for marginalised sex workers, with workers being forced to move to different, unknown spaces where the risks of victimisation and violence are often intensified. Penal responses to sex work have been derided by some activists and scholars due to their proven lack of efficacy, criminogenic nature, and opposition to human rights (Brooks-Gordon and Ebbitt 2021; Bowen et al. 2021).

Armstrong (2021b) explores the concept of “strategic storytelling” in relation to public and political narratives of sex work, and how such narratives can influence sex work law and policy. For example, Julie Bindel, a known anti-sex work commentator, was invited to speak to the Scottish Parliament in June 2019. After this visit, Joan McAlpine, an MSP, tweeted that, since decriminalisation in Aotearoa New Zealand, the street-based sex worker population had quadrupled, a widely-debunked claim which has no evidentiary support (Armstrong 2021b). Anti-sex work critics such as Bindel suggest that decriminalisation of sex work is inherently harmful to sex workers, despite having no real evidence to support this claim. Armstrong (2021b) suggests that Bindel aligns herself as an expert on the topic by using emotive, persuasive language to discredit the work of decriminalisation advocates. Dismissing and discrediting research findings that do not align with anti-sex work rhetoric is a common technique among proponents of abolitionism and, as noted by Weitzer (2010), abolitionists have long been critiqued for their generalising and universalising claims apropos the sex industries. Weitzer

(2010) states that abolitionist rhetoric is sensationalist, alarmist, and dogmatic in nature, relying on anecdotal “horror stories” from women who have had negative experiences with sex working. Weitzer claims that when abolitionists do comment on findings from studies which contradict their own, “these findings are discounted, reinterpreted, or inverted. Most of the time, however, these writers simply ignore findings that challenge their claims” (2012, p. 15). Weitzer claims that abolitionist discourse is rooted in what Popper termed “prescientific ideology” i.e., “conclusions formed in the absence of evidence or lacking in the critical ingredient of falsifiability” (2012, p. 15). Bennett et al. highlight the intractable nature of mythology, suggesting that: “Once they become enmeshed in the belief system of a group of individuals, challenging these myths becomes even more difficult, even when scientific research proves the myth has no basis in fact” (2018, p. 3).

Sex worker abolitionists implement strategic storytelling as a means of perpetuating the myth that sex work is inherently violent and exploitative. Such a position denies the complex social and political conditionalities of sex work across millennia and is therefore ahistorical in nature. As Barthes (1957, p. 142) claims, myth is, “depoliticised speech” insofar that it naturalises (or annihilates) phenomena. For Barthes, myth abolishes the, “complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organises a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth...” (1957, p. 143). Barthes suggests that, through the linguistic process of myth-making, “things appear to mean something by themselves” (1957, p. 143) and that myth’s, “clarity is euphoric” (1957 p. 163). Myth provides euphoria, a sense of apolitical and ahistoricised bliss to those who purport it. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the clarity provided by myth is a “false clarity”, one which is simultaneously, “obscure” and, “luminous” (2002, p. xvii). Speaking of the Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that its impetus was to “dispel myths” and “to overthrow fantasy with knowledge” (2002, p. 1). They also suggest that Enlightenment is an exercise in “demythologisation” (2022, p. 12). In their writings on disinformation and Euroscepticism, Henkel (2021) explores the concept of “destructive storytelling” and how myth was weaponised by proponents of Brexit as a means of confirming Eurosceptic logic and the UK’s eventual withdrawal from the EU. Henkel cites Wardle and Derakshan’s definition of disinformation, which is information, “that is false and

deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country” (Henkel 2021, p. 153). Kelsey suggests that: “Whilst mythological storytelling might not construct lies or untruths, it can be highly distorting due to the preferences, exaggerations, suppressions or simplifications that function through it” (2015, p. 6). Kelsey cites Lule, who explains: “Myth legitimises and justifies positions. Myth celebrates dominant beliefs and values. Myth degrades and demeans other beliefs that do not align with those of the storyteller” (2015, p. 6).

Murphy (2022) also explores the concept of storytelling in their article concerning sex work in Ireland since the introduction of the Nordic model. Murphy states that the “Turn off the Red Light” (ToRL) campaign, which lobbied successfully for the introduction of the Nordic model in Ireland, was ideology-driven. They suggest that migrant sex workers were conflated with trafficking victims, thus distorting the facts and figures used in the campaign and later being reverberated throughout Parliamentary debates on the subject. Murphy (2022, p. 2) suggests that these falsities concerning sex workers in Ireland were reiterated until they gained “truth status”, ultimately allowing for the Nordic model to be introduced in Ireland. Interestingly, the campaign was paid for by the Religious Sisters of Charity, a religious order who were one of the four religious organisations that ran Magdalene laundries in Ireland. Magdalene laundries (or asylums) were workhouses for “fallen women” e.g., unmarried women, queer women, and sex workers. The women were made to carry out unpaid labour under extreme working conditions, often said to be more severe than a prison setting. Smith and Mac (2020, p. 26) state that the conditions of these laundries were “primitive” and “brutal”, with many women and children dying through abuse, overworking, or neglect, and then buried in unmarked graves. In Tuam, Ireland, 796 dead children were secretly buried in a septic tank between 1925 and 1961. The last Magdalene laundry in Ireland closed in 1996, not even 30 years ago. For Smith and Mac (2020) sex workers, and all those who stand to oppose religious and cultural oppression, are collateral damage in an ideological war. The Nordic model’s introduction in Ireland is rooted firmly in the country’s rich history of whorephobia. For Simpson, whorephobia, “is a term used to describe the hatred, disgust and fear of sex workers – that intersects with racism, xenophobia, classism and transphobia – leading to structural and interpersonal discrimination, violence, abuse and murder” (2021, p. 4).

The Nordic Model creates an ecosystem of crime, fear, and punishment in relation to sex work, and serves to foster ecologies and geographies of violence and shame, much like its antecedent, the Magdalene laundries. All those who seek to oppose (or expose) the Religious Sisters of Charity are stonewalled into silence, often marked as iconoclastic (Murphy 2022; Smith and Mac 2020). For Bennett et al., “At the foundation of many myths is fear... Creating a myth that provides an explanation for the phenomenon can enable people to decrease their fear of the phenomenon” (2018, p. 3). Fearing what they do not understand, people construct myths as a means of interpreting phenomena; however, as aforementioned, mythological interpretations can be injurious to marginalised groups such as sex workers, whose lives are often reduced to single-narrative stories. In this case, *a priori* assumptions surrounding migrant sex workers and sex trafficking – viz., that all migrant sex workers are trafficked into sex work. Cruz posits that sex worker rights paradigm, “overestimates the amount of freedom that migrant sex workers enjoy” (2018, p. 66). However, as evidenced by the ToRL campaign in Ireland, anti-sex work commentators highly overestimate the number of sex workers who are trafficked, implementing mythological, destructive, or strategic storytelling and narratives founded on fear and disinformation to successfully legislate the criminalisation of purchasing sex in Ireland. Fear-based narratives and disinformation are not novel by any means; this is illustrated by the historic treatment of queer people more generally, with male homosexuality being viewed as coincident with paedophilia for many years (Meek 2015). A more recent example of this is the debate surrounding trans women being viewed as sexually predacious, propelled into mainstream media by J.K. Rowling (McRobbie 2025). These are cultural myths driven by disinformation, fear, and strategic/mythological storytelling. According to Bennett et al., “acceptance of myths may impede the ability of individuals to exercise critical thinking and judgement” (2018, p. 11). This is especially important in relation to sex workers, as many people openly champion misconceptions of sex work without critically challenging them, or engaging in conversations about sex work with sex workers themselves.

The ideological bifurcation between anti-sex work feminism and pro-sex work feminism serves to obfuscate the lived experiences of sex workers (positive or negative). O’Neill (2010) asserts that moving beyond this binary is a necessary starting point for imagining inclusive, holistic strategies for sex work policy reform in the UK.

They employ a cultural criminological analysis, one which explores cultural, structural, and emotional experiences of sex workers and centralises politics of inclusion as a way of imagining social justice. They also advocate for the usage of participatory research methods as a way of centralising sex worker voices and experiences, and as a response to the, “paralysis that constrains feminist thinking in this area” (O’Neill 2010, pp. 219-220). Murphy (2022) also discusses the potential dangers associated with binaristic thinking in relation to sex work, suggesting a paradigmatic shift towards more nuanced, complex representations of sex workers. They cite Smith and Mac’s (2020) notion of the “happy hooker/exploited victim” dichotomy, the former being empowered, voluntary sex workers with full autonomy and agency, with the latter being someone who is coerced into sex work and has no control over their engagement with the industry. Murphy (2022) states that many sex workers exist in the grey area between these two extremes, and that a counter-hegemonic argument narrative should be developed, one which recognises the full humanity of sex workers. As one activist notes, “if we are too afraid of perpetuating that line between happy hooker and sex slave... people will get away with passing these dangerous laws” (Murphy 2022, p. 10). Murphy also states that: “These intimidation tactics have resulted in the silencing of sex workers, and the perpetuation of hegemonic discourse and unconsidered binaries, which do not acknowledge the nuances and spectrum of experiences in sex work” (Murphy 2022, p. 10). Murphy also notes that sex workers have been abused for speaking up for their rights, and even labelled as “trafficking apologists” (2022, p. 10).

Sawicki et al. state that trafficking, “is a human rights violation involving threat or the use of force, abduction, deception, or other forms of coercion to exploit individuals. This may include forced labour, sexual exploitation, slavery, and more” (2019, p. 2). In stark contrast, sex work is a transactional relationship between consenting adults and is, in no way, a violation of human rights (Amnesty International 2022). As noted by Abel and Fitzgerald (2010), in the early 2000s, the sex trafficking narrative had picked up considerable momentum in the UK. The Home Office made unsubstantiated claims of between 140 and 1400 women and children per year being trafficked into the UK to work in the sex industry. In 2003, although 295 women were proven to be migrants working in the sex industry, only five were found to be victims of trafficking

by the immigration service (Abel and Fitzgerald 2010). The trafficking debate, as Weitzer asserts, bears, “all the hallmarks of a moral crusade” (2007, p. 467).

For Snajdr (2013), anti-trafficking narratives, “almost always include simple binaristic themes and easily interpretable symbols of morality and immorality, murky, malevolent characters, and unsuspecting and ultimately helpless protagonists” (p. 238). Snajdr suggests that these “limited stories” are comparable to what Brunvand observes in urban legends or modern-day myths (2013, p. 240). Snajdr states that, while sex trafficking is not entirely fictional, the “official narrative” proposed by anti-trafficking efforts is, arguably, legend-like in nature. Citing Brunvand, Snajdr asserts that urban legends, “play on societal and cultural fears and anxieties”, and that, “like myths, these legends circulate as moral lessons, told from person to person using themes and images of plausible, but personally unimaginable situations” (2013, p. 252). In relation to male sex workers, Eichert states that, “narratives about sex trafficking are used to overemphasize certain harms, effectively silencing individuals (such as male sex workers) who are constructed as less worthy or less needing of protection” (2020, p. 209). As Snajdr posits: “There is in fact very little that is ‘human’ in official narratives of human trafficking...” (2013, p. 240). These limited narratives of sex trafficking remain a pervasive tactic of abolitionism, as evidenced by the ToRL campaign. Not only is this a duplicitous attempt to delegitimise all forms of sex work, but it forcefully extinguishes the experiences of sex workers who operate in the sex industry by choice. As Cruz (2018) reminds us, however, under capitalism, we can never fully be in control of our labour. They, instead, implement the terms labour freedom and unfreedom, with the latter signifying the inability to control one’s labour in relation to favourable working and living conditions. “Choice” may be replaced here with “consent”, with Sawicki et al. (2019) suggesting that sex work is inherently consensual labour. Sex work without consent is an impossibility, as this would constitute assault. Sawicki et al. (2019) note, however, that many sex workers themselves consider these two points of consensual and non-consensual sex to be a continuum of free choice rather than a dichotomy.

Gender, Sex, and Sex Work

Despite much of the scholarship surrounding sex work being heavily concentrated on cisgender women and their experiences, sex workers are not now, nor have they ever been, a homogeneous group (Sawicki et al. 2019; Scott, Grov, and Minichiello 2021; Whowell 2010). That being said, when the discourses surrounding sex work are reserved exclusively for cis female sex workers, this renders the experiences of male and non-binary sex workers inconsequential and invisible (Appenroth 2021; Curtis and Boe 2023). Some scholars suggest that, while cisgender male sex workers represent a smaller demographic within the global sex working community, the needs of female and male sex workers are equally complex (Raine 2021; Whowell 2010). Raine states that: “Sex workers of all genders constitute a marginalised and stigmatised group... it is imperative that the voices of all genders are heard, respected and represented in practice and services for sex workers” (2021, p. 352). Sawicki et al. state that: “More research is also required to explore the marginalisation of sex workers from all branches of the sex work force and to include representation of male, non-binary, trans, and LGBTQA sex workers and not just cisgender women” (2019, p. 12). Male sex workers (both cis and trans) are rarely afforded space within these narratives, as well as sex workers who do not identify with the rigid binaries of man/woman. Pereira states that: “The invisibility of male sex work is associated with mechanisms of oppression that are reinforced by sexual stigma, homophobia, and a lack of systematic research” (2021, p. 1). These omissions raise significant sociological questions that scholars of sex work tend to eschew entirely. For Dennis, the dearth of studies focusing on male sex workers is not a surface level issue, but one which is interconnected to structural homophobia and heterosexism: “What is needed is more subtle and more difficult, a re-evaluation of scholarly preconceptions about male and female bodies, about objectification, about the inevitability of heterosexual identity and about the impossibility of same-sex desire” (2008, p. 23).

Taking the importance of gender into account, I find the scholarly equation of cisgender male sex workers and transgender female sex workers particularly concerning. Conflating cisgender male sex workers and transgender female sex workers based on sex assigned at birth is a misguided and potentially harmful practice, as noted by Appenroth (2021) and Easterbrook-Smith (2022c). More recently, epidemiological studies have criticised the conflation of cisgender male and transgender female sex workers in relation to global health and HIV prevention

strategies. There has been a call to rethink or reappraise paradigms surrounding these strategies and the cisnormative language embedded within these approaches, and to emphasise the importance of the multiplicity of genders and sexualities across a range of social and cultural settings that are being obfuscated by static categorisations within health research (Parker, Aggleton, and Perez-Brumer 2016). Moreover, Kaplan Sevelius, and Ribeiro (2016) critique the Euro-Atlantic constructs of HIV prevention categories, suggesting that the conflation of MSM (men who have sex with men) and transgender women is both sociologically and epidemiologically problematic. Biologically deterministic narratives are unable to accurately depict the full scope and complexity of sex workers and their lived experiences and fail to capture the nuance within the current cultural landscape of sex work and the wider sex working community. When we conflate the experiences of sex workers based on sex assigned at birth, we ignore the lived realities and subjectivities of the sex workers we are purporting to assist via our research. The experiences of a cisgender female sex worker and a transgender male or non-binary sex worker may be similar in some cases (especially if the trans or non-binary sex worker is backpassing) but suggesting that these similarities are purely because of assigned sex at birth is an injudicious and potentially harmful practice. Unless transgender or non-binary sex workers specifically compare their own experiences to cisgender male or female sex workers, we have no reason to do so as scholars of sex work. Transgender experiences have been overly medicalised and pathologised for centuries, being viewed as a scientific problem rather than a social reality (Malatino 2019). Smith and Mac remind us that: “People of all genders sell sex: transgender and cisgender men, non-binary people, and those with indigenous or non-western genders such as hijra, fa’afafine and two spirit people” (2020, p. 4). Numerous scholars highlight the academic dearth of studies that explore gender rather than sex, specifically in relation to transgender male sex workers (Appenroth 2021; Dewey and Zheng 2013; Jones 2021; 2023; Matthen et al. 2018; Raine 2021).

For Jones (2020; 2021; 2023), cissexism, transmisogyny, and racism are embedded within the sex industries, which they conceptualise as an inherently cisgendered space. Cissexism refers to the ingrained social and structural dominance of cisgender experiences. For Sumerau and Mathers: “Processes of cisgendering reality may be seen in any social setting, structural arrangement, or interaction wherein people –

intentionally or otherwise – breathe into life an imagined world wherein only cisgender people exist...” (Sumerau and Mathers 2019, p. 4). For Jones (2021), most scholars do not imagine a social world in which trans men exist, meaning that they are largely overlooked or erased within academic research. The invisibility of trans male sex workers is bolstered by cissexist and cisnormative hegemonies wherein every male sex worker is assumed to be cisgender (Appenroth 2021). The process of cisgendering reality is a form of epistemic harm, with trans male sex worker experiences (and lives) being erased from important cultural narratives. Butler suggests that heterosexuality is – erroneously – regarded as the “original” form of sexuality and homosexuality as the “copy”. Butler surmises that there is no real original, only the idea of an original, and therefore, “gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy... the original [is] nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original” (1990, p. 43). As Butler reminds us, however, all forms of gender and sexual identity are constructed and none are truly original, but some are privileged as authentic while others are not. In this case, cisgender identity is privileged over transgender identity, with transgender realities being perceived as mimetic of cisgender reality. The notion of gender mimicry is implausible as all genders are constructed and performative. Rubin (1984), another seminal queer theorist, argues that some forms of sex are privileged over others, hierarchising different types of sexual relations as existing within or outwidth the “charmed circle” – that is, normative and non-normative. Rubin argues that the charmed circle is represented by heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, and non-commercial forms of sex. Conversely, queer, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, and commercial sex occupy the so-called outer limits e.g., occupying the margins of culturally acceptable socio-sexual relations.

I implement a similar rhetorical positioning in relation to sex work and gender as Matthen et al. (2018), whose work explores gender identity in relation to sex work among cis and trans men and two-spirit persons in Vancouver. Matthen et al. (2018) denounce the scholarly preoccupation with “biological sex” (assigned sex at birth) and advocate for academic refocusing on more fluid and polymorphous notions of gender identity. For Matthen et al. (2018), gender, like sex work, is a construct that can defy hegemonic normalities, and reducing sex workers to either male or female is an oversimplification of the heterogeneous global sex worker community. They suggest

that greater attention is to be paid towards gender rather than sex, and that further academic research is to be directed towards transgender and non-binary sex work, as this is an area that is decisively lacking. Their paper is one of the very few that parallels the experiences of cisgender and transgender men by putting them in the same category. The authors are not suggesting that cis and trans men have identical experiences of sex work; this would be an impossibility for many reasons, but largely due to the heterogeneous nature of sex workers themselves and their individual subjectivities. By aligning cis and trans men in such a way, the authors are inferring that cis men and trans men are both equally men, but their individual experiences of sex are shaped by more than gender alone. Appenroth (2021) notes that trans sex workers are exposed to higher levels of structural disadvantage than cis sex workers, being more likely to experience intersecting forms of oppression, such as poverty or homelessness, with many trans sex workers trading sex for hormones or money for gender affirming surgeries. Trans people are often excluded from formal economies, especially trans migrants whose identification documents do not reflect their gender identity and/or gender expression.

Many scholars of sex work view gender or sex categories as binary. In fact, many view trans or transgender as its own separate category altogether. Trans/transgender are not genders but rather descriptors of gender inasmuch that trans people are usually male/female/non-binary, so grouping trans experiences under this umbrella ignores the complexity of the lived experiences of trans people within academic research (Easterbrook-Smith 2022c). For Smith and Mac, “peoples’ gender shapes their route into sex work, their experiences while selling sex, and their lives beyond” (2020, p. 4). Abel and Fitzgerald (2010) also highlight the lacuna of academic research that focuses on gender and ethnicity. They state that indigenous populations in colonised countries are typically overrepresented in sex work, with two-thirds of street-based sex workers in Aotearoa New Zealand identifying as Māori. They also claim that Māori and Pacifica persons are more likely than other ethnic groups to identify as transgender, illustrating the constructedness of imperially-imposed gender roles on colonised nations. Kulick’s (1998) ground-breaking ethnography explores Brazilian “travesti” – cisgender men who present as female and commonly engage in sex work. Travesti persons differ from cross-dressers or drag queens, however, as they live socially as female, even having medical procedures to enhance their femininity. Travesti sex workers evade

ontological and epistemological conceptions of sex and gender, with some suggesting they represent a third gender or non-binary gender. What is clear, however, is that the cultural and ethnic dimensions of sex work are both specific and subjective.

Matten et al. (2018) express that: “The diversity of participants’ gender and sexual identities constituted a major finding in itself, as this diversity is rarely acknowledged in research and policy discussions surrounding sex work” (p. 6). Relating this to a Scottish context, gender diversity goes unacknowledged within research and policy. The Scottish Government views sex work as, uniformly, a form of violence against cisgender women, erasing the experiences of cisgender men, transgender men and women, and non-binary sex workers (ScotPep 2020). Socio-political stances framed in such a way ignore the diversity of the wider sex working community and the impact of the international sex worker rights movement (Abel and Fitzgerald 2010). According to Raine: “Sex work is commonly constructed through a gendered heteronormative framework with men viewed largely as buyers of sexual services and females, as sellers, the victims of exploitation” (2021, p. 336). In 2021, the Scottish Parliament submitted the cross-party report: “Online Pimping: An Inquiry into Sexual Exploitation Advertising Websites”, a report which suggests that websites such as OnlyFans, an online sex working platform, are exploitative and serve to intensify violence against women (Scottish Parliament 2021). If we define all sex work as violence, we invisibilise the actual, specific forms of violence being committed against sex workers every day on a global scale (Bowen 2021; Bowen et al. 2021). Raine emphasises, “the need to integrate fully the experiences of male sex workers in service provision and sex work policy” (2021, p. 351). The Scottish Government expunges male and non-binary sex workers from parliamentary discourses surrounding sex work. By constructing the narrative of sex work as a form of violence against women, and that all those who sell sex are women, male and non-binary sex workers are not only ignored, they are erased entirely, along with their lived experiences of harm (Jamel 2011; Legg and Raghavan 2020; Raine 2021). Theories of symbolic annihilation – that is, absence of representation of a particular group within the media (Gerbner and Gross 1976) – is a useful analytic paradigm through which to examine male and non-binary sex worker erasure within political and legal discourses. Müller (2017) implements symbolic annihilation as a way of exploring queer erasure in healthcare settings, suggesting that symbolic annihilation extends beyond the scope of media representation (or lack

thereof). Male and non-binary sex workers are symbolically annihilated from socio-legal discussions of the sex industries, with cisgender men being perceived solely as buyers of sex (and, by and large, the oppressors of cisgender female sex workers). Symbolic annihilation within political and legal discourse invisibilises male and non-binary sex workers and, in turn, allows myths to thrive within narrow, cisheteronormative understandings of the sex industries.

The Scottish Online Pimping report is not dissimilar to the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) bill, signed into law by the US Congress in 2018, combining elements from the House FOSTA bill and the Senate's Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) bill (Eichert 2020). This law is, ostensibly, an effort to take down websites promoting sex trafficking, but instead poses an immense threat to sex workers operating on their own volition. Websites such as Backpage, an online space through which sex workers could meet and screen clients, were taken down. The policy also forced sex workers to shut down online community pages, where they shared information and reviews of clients (Jones 2023). These practices are not consequences of trafficking – they are harm reductionist strategies employed by sex workers to keep one another safe in an increasingly violent, whorephobic world. In the UK, National Ugly Mugs, a sex worker-serving violence prevention charity, provides alert-based warnings to sex workers in relation to unsafe, dangerous clients. This enables sex workers to make informed decisions about the clients they choose to see and who they choose to avoid in terms of their safety. Since its inception in 2012, NUM has sent over 1.5 million alerts to sex workers to prevent violence and other harms (Bowen et al. 2021). Intracommunity resources, also known as hermeneutical resources (Butler 2024), and services such as these are invaluable to sex workers as part of a broader harm reduction strategy. Thus, legislative attempts to prohibit access to such resources have been perceived as imprudent and dangerous.

Parliamentary attempts to criminalise or outlaw sex work practices of any kind not only reinforce the socially prescribed stigma and shame surrounding sex work, but also force sex workers to engage in unsafe practices out of desperation caused by criminalisation e.g., engaging in street-based sex work, having condomless sex, or participating in chemsex (Brooks-Gordon and Ebbitt 2021; Henham 2021). Further, Eichert (2020) examines the impact of FOSTA-SESTA on male sex workers,

suggesting that, despite being excluded from legal and policy discussions surrounding the sex industries, male sex workers are harmed by protectionist policies such as FOSTA-SESTA. Eichert states that: “Victims, as well as the political and legal narratives about them, do not exist in a vacuum,” and that, “victims are placed in a hierarchy of harm which silences the harms of those who are not recognised by authorities as important or vulnerable enough” (pp. 216-217). To wit, male and non-binary sex workers are symbolically annihilated from legal and policy discussions surrounding the sex industries, rendering their identities and experiences invisible and removing them from victimhood narratives.

Matthen et al.’s (2018) research also highlights geographical nuances in relation to the sex worker/client relationship. Relationships between sex workers and clients are largely seen as dichotomous. However, as Matthen et al. (2018) illustrate, this is not the case in other parts of the world (in this case, Canada). They write: “Our findings showed a great deal of movement between the categories of selling and buying sex, which disrupts the narrative of workers as universally oppressed and clients as universally oppressive” (Matthen et al. 2018, p. 10). Just as Matthen et al. (2018) seek to dislocate the rigid binarisms of male/female within their research (and instead focus on more polymorphous and fluid notions of gender identity/expression), they also emphasise the potentiality for rhetorical slippages and shifting within the categories of worker/client. Many scholars position sex workers/clients as ontologically fixed categories. However, as Matthen et al. (2018) demonstrate, these fixed groupings are not always representative of the complex lived experiences of those who sell and/or purchase sex. Sex workers (and clients) are not monolithic, just as sex/gender are not rigid binaries. For many, the label of sex worker is an identity, one which represents a sense of community and belonging. For others, it holds no such power. These identity markers, sex worker and client, are loaded with socio-political charges, which lead to some rejecting these labels altogether.

Morris (2021) explores the concept of “incidental” male sex workers i.e., men who sell sex sporadically or casually on dating apps such as Grindr. Many of Morris’ participants rhetorically distance themselves from the term/identity of sex worker. One participant suggests that he is a “substitute prostitute”, with another claiming what he does is “payment for pleasure” rather than sex work, despite existing within the same

framework of erotic labour (Morris 2021, p. 862). Such strategies may represent a postmodern, anti-identitarian view of sexual identity discourses, but they are also emblematic of stigmatic philosophies concerning sex workers more generally. Morris' participants discuss the pejorative connotations associated with the terms "rent boy" and "prostitute", and they make a conscious decision to distance themselves from these labels. However, by doing so, the stigmas surrounding male sex work are illuminated and reinforced by sex workers themselves (or, in this case, incidental sex workers). The participants attempt to dislocate and destabilise the category of male sex worker by distorting their own situationality within sex work, whereby semantically (and symbolically) situating themselves outside of the sex worker/client binary. Some sex workers reject the identity/label of sex worker, and some clients resist their categorisation as someone who purchases sex, instead viewing their relations with sex workers as mutually beneficial, whereby disavowing the implicit power imbalance between worker and client.

Power, in the Foucauldian sense, is exercised through the transactional relationship between worker and client (Read 2013). However, without the identitarian labels of worker and client, the power dynamics are obscured and dislodged. While the structural dynamic of worker/client is impossible to extricate entirely, the interpersonal experiences (played out within the heterotopic space of transactional sex) are subject to personal interpretation. Moreover, as noted by Curtis and Boe (2023), men are less likely to be identified as sex workers, "thus increasing their ability to manage their identity as sex workers and decreasing their chances of being arrested" (p. 247). However, due to such invisibilities, male sex workers are often excluded from the development of intervention programs and policies and laws governing the regulation of sex work, "thus increasing their vocational risk and decreasing their ability to access resources that would sustain a successful transition outside of the sex industry" (Curtis and Boe 2023, p. 247). As noted by Henriksen, Andersen, and Presser (2020), men who sell sex but do not identify as sex workers, "may short-sightedly benefit from this boundary work in terms of shunning stigma, it may also harm them as it excludes them from care" (2020, p 443). Exclusion and invisibility are intrinsically tied to notions of imagination – in this context, who is socially permitted to be imagined as a sex worker within dominant cultural narratives.

Nussbaum uses the term “narrative imagination” – that is, the capacity to become an intelligent reader of another person’s story (1996). For Nussbaum, narrative imagination is an ethical process insofar that it allows us to see the world from a different perspective, albeit temporarily. Yiu et al. suggest that, from an American perspective, non-sex workers, “popularly imagine sex workers in terms of their physical appearance and their practice of accumulating capital through erotic and intimate services”, and that they, “describe and understand people who perform sexual labour only as sex workers, which neglects and makes invisible the multiple forms of care, knowledge, and critique that sex workers offer as community members” (2023, p1). In other words, by viewing sex workers through the unidimensional lens of their profession, complex realities and intersubjectivities are obfuscated. Such a simplistic construction of sex worker lives not only lacks narrative imagination, but the basic human empathy required to appreciate and understand experiences divergent to one’s own. Henriksen, Andersen, and Presser (2020) implement Nussbaum’s concept of narrative imagination in relation to social policy and care interventions aimed at male sex workers in Denmark. Henriksen, Andersen, and Presser (2020) suggest that policymakers and care providers must understand (or imagine) the needs of male sex workers to develop programmes that adequately address these needs, and that male sex workers must also imagine themselves as participating in and benefiting from such programmes. Apropos the latter, Henriksen, Andersen, and Presser state that narrative imagination, “is a conjuring of one’s personhood along or beyond cultural storylines...” (2020, p. 442). In other words, if men who sell sex do not imagine themselves as sex workers, policy and care interventions specifically catering to male sex workers do not apply to them. As one participant suggests, such policies and interventions are aimed at “real prostitutes” (2020, p. 443).

Jones (2020) explores the relationship between pleasure and empowerment apropos sex work, specifically in relation to the camming industry. As Jones (2020) notes, some engage in sex work as a way of exploring sexual subjectivity and, while most trade sex for purely economic reasons, some workers may also experience pleasure and empowerment as parallel practices. Jones suggests that this is particularly true of cis men, with the participants in their research noting sexual exhibitionism as a primary reason for engaging with sex work. Some find sex work empowering (or even pleasurable) inasmuch that they are in control of how much they are charged for their

services and which clients they choose to see and when. Sex workers who occupy specific subsections of the sex working community, for instance a professional dominatrix, often experience empowerment as power play is intrinsic to BDSM roleplay. Smith and Mac note that the dominatrix is an “Erotic Professional” e.g., “types of sex work in which the act of penetration is until it’s practically incidental” (2020, p. 32). For Easterbrook-Smith (2022a), the growth of empowerment discourse frames sex work as being sexually motivated rather than a legitimate choice of labour. Moreover, as noted by Smith and Mac (2020), discussions surrounding sex-positivity in the sex industry can be counterproductive insofar that, “labour rights and safety are not the same as pleasure, and those who do experience sexual gratification at work are likely to be those who already have the most control over their working conditions” (2020, p. 13). For Smith and Mac (2020), pro-sex and pro-pleasure discourses ultimately detract from important discussions surrounding Marxist feminist, labour-centric analyses. They state that, “sex positive politics create the illusion that client and worker are unified in their interests” (2020, p. 32). This is totemic of Cruz’s (2018) aforementioned concept of labour freedom versus labour unfreedom. Sex workers who can work independently and exercise control over their prices and working schedules undoubtedly have access to a more privileged experience of sex work are more readily afforded power. Sex workers who do not wield as much power, such as street-based workers who are engaging in survival sex work, are possibly unable to harness any power through transactional sex and are therefore typified, to some extent, by labour unfreedom. This is emblematic of the concept of the “whorearchy” – that is, a stratified social hierarchy of sex work (Fuentes 2022).

For Sawicki et al., the whorearchy, “is arranged according to intimacy of contact with clients as well as intersections of other marginalised identities. The more marginalised and closer in contact one is to a client, the closer they are to the bottom of the whorearchy” (2019, p. 9). This means that street-based sex workers are at the bottom of the whorearchy, while non-contact sex workers such as cammers or phone sex operators occupy the upper echelons. A sex worker’s marginality and position within the whorearchy is consistent with the amount of discrimination and stigma they are subjected to, both from the internal sex working community and wider society (Fuentes 2022). For instance, a queer, trans, black street worker would be operating within the lowest levels of the whorearchy and therefore face much higher levels of whorephobia

than a cisheterosexual, white cammer. Whorearchal structures also inform levels of harm and violence that sex workers are exposed to, with street workers who represent more than one marginalised group being at risk of higher levels of interpersonal and structural harm (Bowen 2021; Bowen et al. 2021). As Bowen (2021) states, patriarchy operates in tandem with other power structures, and therefore benefits some women (and men) while disadvantaging others. Similarly, the whorearchy is a complex, interlocking system of class, gender, and race, one which benefits some sex workers and discounts others. As noted by Bacio and Rinaldi (2022), cisgender male sex workers possess greater social latitude due to their hegemonic gender; however, because of this increased social latitude, male sex workers occupy not only a privileged position within the whorearchy, but also within hierarchies of harm in a broader sense (Eichert 2020). While it is important to recognise cis men's privilege within the sex working community, the presumption of invulnerability to harm is engenders the invisibility of male sex worker experiences of harm and limits their access to victimhood and justice.

Nuance is not entirely absent from scholarship concerning sex working men. More recent scholastic attention has been dedicated to exploring male sex work from hitherto unexplored angles. For example, Law's (2021) analysis of management of male sex workers, an area which, historically, has been female-centric. Law challenges the normative assumption that male sex workers are young, muscular, and able to defend themselves against physical violence from clients, suggesting that these claims are not based upon empirical evidence but, instead, stem from potentially outdated social scripts concerning gender itself. Valente et al. (2022) explore instances of violence and victimisation in Mombasa, Kenya, suggesting that various forms of violence (structural, sexual, and economic) are common for both male sex workers and their clients. Male sex workers in Kenya face discrimination due to several compounded issues i.e. homophobia, whorephobia, deviation from prescribed gender roles, and religious beliefs. Valente et al. (2022) suggest that sexual violence (such as rape and forced condomless sex) is common among this population but is often under-reported. They also state that, "violence enacted by the police and those in positions of power may undermine sex workers' ability to exercise their basic human rights and respond to acts of violence, leading to disempowerment and social isolation" (p. 1787). Male sex workers in Kenya may also be at increased risk of intimate partner violence.

Interestingly, Valente et al. (2022) note that clients of male sex workers are subject to stigma related to their sexuality, their purchasing of sex, and victimisation from intimate partners. The confluence of stigma and violence for both male sex workers and their clients illustrates the structural nature of homophobia, whorephobia, and the determinants of violence. Both homosexuality and sex work are criminalised in Kenya, which has been shown to increase violence against all involved parties.

Queer(ing) Theory

Recent decades have seen sociolinguistic and paradigmatic shifts towards more pluralistic forms of queer identity. Queer is an umbrella term for individuals who identify as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender), and all those who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender (Jagose 1996). Queer identities represent anti-normative categories of gender and sexuality, but are not necessarily monolithic or monosexual i.e., homosexual or gay. In fact, as many of the theorists invested in the study of anti-identitarian queer politics suggest, queer is less of an identity in and of itself and more of a *critique* of identity (Jagose 1996). Generally speaking, “queer” is defined through and measured against what it is not – that is, culturally constructed notions of heteronormativity. For Chambers, heteronormativity defines a world in which, “everyone and everything is judged from the perspective of straight” (2003, p. 26). As Sawyer reminds us: “It is not easy, however, for queer people to tell their queer stories. An initial problem is surfacing queer experience, given the power of heteronormativity to erase or invalidate queer experience and/or promote its sublimation” (2021, p. 21). Queerness is strictly oppositional to heteronormative and heterosexist belief systems which support homophobic and xenophobic fears of the “Other” – viz., those who challenge the hegemonic and hierarchical systems of cisheterosexuality. Turner (2000) suggests that the exploration of foundational, apparently unquestionable, socio-cultural concepts is a principal tenet of queer theory. These socially and culturally constructed concepts are commonly understood by oppositional binaries, namely, man/woman and heterosexual/homosexual.

Queer theorists deconstruct these paradigms to dislocate them from their heteronormative positionalities. In other words, they “queer” them. Halperin (1995, p.

62) claims that queer is a “positionality” that is, “At odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant”, whereas de Lauretis intimates that queerness is, “Another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual” (1991, p. iv). For Hankins, “lived queer experience is itself a hermeneutic, literally an art of interpretation, an ongoing negotiation of selfhood vis-à-vis an omnipresent social text” (2014, p. 87). French philosopher Michel Foucault’s pioneering poststructuralist works have been instrumental in the development of queer theory, with many adapting his theories of power, discourse, and the body into their analyses of queer identities. For Foucault, sexuality is a discursive production rather than a human attribute (1985). Queer theorists such as Judith Butler (1990; 1993) have drawn on the work of Foucault to deconstruct and dislocate culturally prescribed binarisms (such as man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual) from their hegemonic, heteronormative positioning, exploring how non-normative gender and sexuality are socially engineered (commonly in ways which uphold heterosexist and heterocentrist attitudes).

Within queer theory and queer activism, visibility and invisibility are contentious issues. In Sedgwick’s (1990) seminal text *Epistemology of the Closet*, they argue that invisibility and the notion of the queer closet are inherently oppressive modes of existence. However, as noted by several scholars, visibility as a queer political strategy has been widely critiqued for its liberatory limitations (Stella 2012; Wiedlack 2023). For Foucault: “Visibility is a trap” (1995, p. 200) – that is, visibility is a tool for surveillance and control. Rather than being understood as a vehicle for liberation, Foucault suggests that visibility is an instrument of Panoptical power. That is, the more visible a person or group is within society, the more vulnerable they are to institutional and interpersonal forms of harm. Further, Wiedlack states that the queer political preoccupation with visibility is, “deeply rooted in a neo-liberal individualistic understanding of identity and self-expression”, traced back to Global Northwestern movements of LGBTQ+ equality (2023, p. 922). For example, some argue that the politics of visibility are epitomised by Pride marches and events, a “collective coming out” of sorts (Stella 2012). As Crusan writes: “After we have fought and bled for visibility, our bodies and minds are continually confronted with violence and now our struggles are commodified and summed up in a rainbow flag” (Crusan 2018). Stella (2012) uses the example of the Pride parades held in Moscow, Russia from the mid-to-late 2000s as a way of highlighting the limitations and potential harms of queer

visibility. These Pride marches, which were organised by a small group of activists with the support of international human rights and LGBTQ+ organisations, were criticised by the broader LGBTQ+ community in Moscow and resulted in anti-queer protests and instances of homophobic violence. As Skeggs (1999) suggests, visibility can have the unintended effect of attracting public scrutiny and, within public spaces that are imagined inherently as cisheterosexual, queerphobic violence. Thus, some scholars and activists reject visibility as a universal strategy for gaining recognition and equality, citing violence against (hyper)visible populations such as trans women of colour as a major issue with visibility politics (Wiedlack 2023). As Foucault states: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault 1978, p. 95). In other words, resistance of (or compliance with) social norms cannot be fully disentangled from the normative power structures in which we all exist.

Poststructuralism and Performance Theory

Over the last few decades, there has been significant scholastic attention paid to the discursive construction of gender and sex (Butler 1990; 1993; Derrida 1990). For poststructuralist and queer theorists such as Butler, gender and sex are socially constructed and performative. This does not mean that gender and sex are unreal; they are real inasmuch that they are culturally constructed, prescribed, and preserved through intricate social systems and institutions. Performance theory is closely associated with the work of Schechner (1985) and Turner (1988), who drew attention to the performative nature of societies around the world and how events, rituals, and everyday life were governed by a code of social performance. Using ethnographic methods to survey different societies, these authors highlighted how performances are central to the human experience. Poststructuralist theorists such as Butler (1990; 1993; 1997) and Derrida (1990) have drawn attention to the way performances seek to communicate and reinforce our identities (gender, sexual, personal, and collective) in society. Butler writes, “that gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character” (1990, pp.192-193).

Butler uses the example of drag to expose the constructive, mythologic nature of gender. They write, “in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency” (1990, p.187). Read (2013) also compares the artifice of drag to sex workers, suggesting that sex workers will dress differently (that is, more “sexual”) for certain clients (or “audiences”), akin to how drag performers embody and produce idealised versions of masculine and feminine performance dependent on their audience. In their analysis of drag performance, in which they analogue drag as a form of sex work, Hankins suggests that, “gender performance as a whole is both a performative hermeneutic of queerness and is queerness itself” (2012, p. 446). Butler stresses the difference between performance and performativity. For Butler, “performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularised and constrained repetition of norms... This iterability implies that ‘performance’ is not a singular ‘act’ or event, but a ritualised production...” (1993, p. 95). To wit, gender identities are simulated through sustained social performances, meaning that the notions of essential sex and “real” masculinity or femininity are also constructed as part of a web of gendered performance.

Masculinity, Transmasculinity, and Beyond the Binary

Connell coins the term hegemonic masculinity to irradiate the socio-structural privilege of cisheterosexual men, with hegemonic masculinity being the structuring norm in relation to how other non-hegemonic genders and sexualities are measured within society (1995). Connell (1995) suggests that the social construct of masculinity can only exist in contrast to that of femininity. Similarly, Halberstam (1998) notes that hegemonic masculinity depends on the subordination of alternative masculinities to reinforce its dominant cultural positioning. Eguchi (2009) posits that queer men must express themselves cisheterosexually to be considered masculine, and that disrupting cishetero-masculinity is perceived as non-normative or non-masculine. Kumar, Scott, and Minichiello posit that: “Male sex work has a double stigma as it is at once associated with homosexual desire and prostitution, both of which can be aligned with subordinated expressions of the masculine” (2017, p, 2). Minichiello, Scott, and Callander (2015) comment on the changing nature of the commercial sex industry in

relation to the increasing visibility of male sex workers. They suggest that the very notion of male sex work, whereby the cisgender male body is commodified, challenges previous heterosexualised expressions of masculinity that relies on aggression-based agency (Minichiello, Scott, and Callander 2015). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) reflect upon Connell's original conception of hegemonic masculinity, agreeing – to some extent – with criticisms directed at the model being grounded in rigid gender typologies. This has led some to theorise masculinities which integrate elements of subordinated masculinities or femininities e.g., hybrid masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Pre-existing models of masculinity within sex work are further troubled by the inclusion of transmasculine and non-binary identities, as noted by Jones (2020; 2021; 2023).

Masculinity studies are primarily concerned with cisgender men, with transgender men (and the study of transmasculinity) rarely being afforded academic or non-academic discussion. Minichiello, Scott, and Callander (2015) comment that, within recent times, cultural discourses surrounding masculinity and male bodies have undergone paradigmatic shifts – the male body is now, more than ever, more polymorphous and fluid. They also remark upon the declining cultural currency of the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy (Minichiello, Scott, and Callander 2015). Sedgwick (1990), a seminal queer theorist, explores the heterosexual/homosexual binary and speaks of two opposing views when it comes to sexual identity: the minoritising view and the universalising view. The minority view holds that people are born gay and that the gay population truly is a minority. The universal view, on the other hand, supposes that queer people exist on a spectrum of different sexualities, and that most people, to some extent, are not confined by strict sexual categorisations. Trans men, and non-cisgender persons in general, are illustrative of this polymorphous positioning of gender (and sexual) identity. Through the process of gender transition, a trans or non-binary person may revise not only their gender identity, but also their sexuality in some cases. Trans experiences not only expose the constructed and performative nature of gender and sexuality, but also the importance of poststructuralist thinking in relation to gender and sexual identities. Trans men and non-binary individuals not only complicate the pre-existing paradigms of masculinity, they expand and revise them. This is not to say that trans men or non-binary people

cannot exhibit traits associated with toxic masculinity, but their very existence contradicts biologic assumptions concerning gendered and sex-based hierarchies.

Horrocks suggests that: “Masculinity has to be maintained, or like the male erection itself, it threatens to topple...” (1995, p. 18). This comparison is indicative of the overwhelming preoccupation with gender and physiology, and alludes to the myth that all men have penises. Kessler and McKenna (1978) controversially argued that a person’s genitals, specifically the presence or absence of a penis, is the most salient feature within the process of attributing gender. Phallocentrism is a pervasive structuring norm within society, and is one which is clearly at odds with trans identity, specifically transmasculinity. When most people speak of “men”, they are operating within a framework of cisgendering reality. According to Corwin, trans men “disrupt the semantic link between characteristics of the body and gender by reworking genital terminology”, with some trans men and non-binary people using the term “bonus hole” instead of “vagina” (2016, p. 257). Some trans men and non-binary people refer to their genitals simply as a vagina, which also serves as a reworking of anatomical terminology as it disrupts the notion that only cisgender women have vaginas. There are also trans men who refer to their clitoris as a “dick”, further problematising the cis-centric notions of gendered anatomy (Corwin 2016).

Jones (2021) notes how trans sex workers have utilised subcultural semiotics in the production of queer sex work within the ever-expanding porn industries. Jones refers to websites such as Bonus Hole Boys (BHB), a porn website featuring predominantly trans male performers, a space which Jones claims can challenge the cishetero-capitalist hegemony which dominates pornographic labour (Jones 2021). Not only do transmasculine and non-binary individuals disrupt pre-existing paradigms of masculinity, they represent a radical reordering of masculinity itself. This further illustrates the constructed and performative nature of masculinity and gender more generally. For some, trans men (who were assigned female at birth) represent an assimilationist form of masculinity, one which is predicted purely on transition. This harkens back to the Butlerian notion of authentic gender and sexuality (or lack thereof). For Butler: “Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real or apparent, neither original nor derived” (1990, p. 193). If there is no true original, trans men do not typify assimilationist forms of masculinity, but rather a dismantling and rebuilding of

masculine myths altogether. In relation to myth, Morris writes: “The fundamental question is not about fact versus illusion. Rather, the question is whether the myths we live by serve us well” (1997, p. 353). Myths of masculinity, in which maleness is construed as unidimensional, stoic, and often violent, no longer encompass the true scope of the male experience. As Danser states: “Male characterisation is confined to roles that likewise restrict rather than reflect the complexities of reality” (2005, p. 40).

Harm, Violence, and Sex Work

This research exists at the intersection of several interdisciplinary interests – namely, criminology, sociology, and socio-legal studies. I implement a queer approach which is also informed by more recent discourses surrounding queer criminology (Ball 2016; Buist and Lenning 2016); sex-positive criminology (Wodda and Panfil 2021); and zemiology (Boukli and Kotzé 2018; Canning and Tombs 2021). Broadly speaking, zemiology is the study of harm (Canning and Tombs 2021). Zemiology has seen rapid development since the 1990s as a critique of criminology and its conceptually constrictive notion of harm, whereby harm has commonly been defined as criminal acts (Armstrong 2021a). Armstrong (2021a) and Stuart (2022) suggest that harm-based approaches are particularly useful when researching marginalised communities who have been mistreated by mainstream criminological thinking – viz., sex workers. Stuart (following on from Canning and Tombs 2021), suggests that considering, “societal issues through a framework of harm rather than crime facilitates a multidimensional understanding that reveals otherwise unseen or underrecognised damages” (Stuart 2022, p. 171). Pemberton (2007) delineates between the study of harm (zemiology) and the study of social harm. While they are often conflated (and are, undoubtedly, interrelated) they are not the same *per se*. Zemiology is the study of harm, while social harm denotes socially mediated harms. Pemberton writes: “Politically this distinction is important; it distinguishes between harms which may result from the physical world and those that result from modes of social organisation” (2007, p. 36).

As noted by Pemberton (2007), social harm approaches have been criticised for being too broad and poorly defined. In terms of its political potential, Hillyard and Tombs

state that “a social harm approach might entail a more progressive form of power-knowledge than that which criminology has come to represent in its 100-year plus history” (2007, p. 21). As Armstrong suggests, “harms experienced by individual people are not typically a direct result of their behaviours or choices, but rather a consequence of how societies are organised” (2021a, p. 942). As Canning and Tombs (2021) note, the “social” in social harm is indicative of the aetiology of harm insofar that social harm and zemiological approaches attempt to produce meaning beyond that of the individual. That is, they attempt to locate harm on an institutional level rather than an individual one. Hillyard and Tombs (2004) argue that a social harm approach should be inclusive of the following categories: physical, financial/economic, emotional/psychological and cultural safety. Hillyard and Tombs suggest that a social harm approach may be particularly efficacious in terms of its “intellectual reflexivity” and, “in its commitment to the resurrection of subjugated knowledges” (2007, p. 21). As Foucault expressed through his extensive writings: “Power and knowledge are not independent but intimately linked” (Canning and Tombs 2021, p. 45). Supporting marginalised communities to share their experiences and knowledges affords them power which was, hitherto, inaccessible. For Pemberton: “The role of the social harm perspective is to help create the discursive spaces where the marginalised can articulate their lived experience of harm without persistent reference to the notion of ‘crime’” (2007, p. 33).

Some have argued that very concept of crime is mythological insofar that crime has no fixed ontological reality (Hillyard and Tombs 2007). For Hillyard and Tombs, crime (and criminals), “are fictive events and characters in the sense that they have to be constructed before they can exist” (2007, p. 10). For Roberts: “The process of criminal justice mystifies rather than clarifies what is harmful in society and what might be done about it” (2011, p. 13). Likewise, Garside suggests that, “contemporary debates about crime, whether in politics or popular culture, the academy or policy making, are also a species of mythmaking and mystification. It is the underlying act, its causes and harms, not the social definition, that ultimately matters” (2011, p. 18). Crime is a cultural construct and is both historically and spatially contingent (Garside 2011). Garside (2011) uses the example of homosexuality as something which was once considered criminal in the UK but is now, by and large, both socially and legally permitted. Some have argued that the contemporary criminal justice system, and the very notion of

crime, (re)produces harm insofar that they have failed to reduce rates of reoffending (Copson 2016), with the penal system having long been characterised as a dehumanising system of “pain delivery” (Christie 1981). Foucault characterises criminology as a disciplinary knowledge which serves to legitimise forms of penalogical power (Garland 1992). Even the most critical approaches to criminology cannot be separated from its penalogical origins and, as Smart notes, “the thing that criminology cannot do is deconstruct crime” (1990, p. 77). As Muncie suggests, contemporary approaches have increasingly sought to “decriminalise criminology” (1998). Zemiological perspectives seek to draw academic gaze away from crime-driven approaches and redirect it towards harm-based discourses.

Canning and Tombs (2021) expound upon the dialogic relationship between harm and violence. In many ways, the two are inextricable. Canning and Tombs write: “The focus on the social also reveals that those who experience harm do so not in a sporadic or random way – but systematically, so that harm tends to be experienced as a member of a social group, be this of minority status or relatively powerless or marginalised” (Canning and Tombs 2021, p. 56). These harms are partially illuminated by the concept of structural violence (Galtung 1969). For Galtung (1969), structural violence describes social structures (political, legal, economic) that impede individuals from reaching their full potential. For Farmer et al. (2006), structural violence refers to the social structures that put people in harm’s way. Pemberton (2015) also locates social harm within a human needs framework, suggesting that social harm occurs when human needs are not met within society. As Farmer et al. posit: “The idea of structural violence is linked very closely to social injustice and the social machinery of oppression” (2006, p. 1686). Canning and Tombs also position “institutional violence” as a useful conceptual adjunct to structural violence, suggesting that institutional forms of violence describe the, “ordinary and mundane violence that make up lived experience of those subject to it – the lived experience of feeling humiliated, anxious and vilified” (2021, p. 57). I would argue that, in relation to the sex industries, individual acts of physical or emotional harm cannot be disentangled from harms produced by social organisation. In a recent report published by Amnesty International (2022), they claim that the Nordic model is a form of structural violence against sex workers (in this case, those operating in an Irish context) insofar that such a framework is oppositional to the human needs of sex workers.

Normative models of violence and harm are further illuminated by Herzog (2023) through the analytic lens of social suffering (that is, socially produced suffering and/or suffering that can be eliminated or alleviated socially). Herzog states that: “Lived experiences of domination and repression – of disrespect... lead to emotional reactions such as humiliation and despair, underlining the damage that social forces cause to individuals in both structured and/or systematic ways” (2023, p. 16). Herzog differentiates between physical and material silencing and invisibilisation and social silencing and invisibilisation. The former, for example, is evident in countries such as Japan and the USA, both of which ban sex workers from entering, even if they enter with no intent to sell sex (Easterbrook-Smith 2022c). Social invisibilisation and silencing, however, refer to the socially created capacity “to look through” the individual even when physically present (Honneth 2001, p. 112). For Honneth, invisibility requires an active behaviour (the “looking through”), which, “demands gestures or ways of behaving that make clear that the other is not seen not merely accidentally, but rather intentionally” (2001, p. 112). Similar to social invisibility, we also find social silencing – that is, suppressing the voices of non-hegemonic groups (in this case, sex workers), which can also be considered a form of epistemic injustice.

Epistemic harm is related to the notion of cultural intelligibility. Yep et al., drawing on Butler (1990), state that cultural intelligibility, “refers to the production of a normative framework that establishes and authenticates who can be recognised and regarded as a legitimate subject in a particular society” (2023, p. 4). Carline suggests: “Performances which contravene the ideal scripts, for example engaging in sex work, are considered to be legally unrecognisable and so rendered as unintelligible” (2009, p. 29). Sex worker lives, along with the lives of other minoritarian subjects (sexual and gender non-normative persons), are not considered “liveable” within heteropatriarchal society (Butler 1990; Carline 2009). Butler writes: “Sex workers are routinely dismissed either as nonknowers or as noncredible knowers (2024, p. 745). For Yep et al., “Cultural unintelligibility creates and perpetuates epistemic injustice, a wrong perpetrated against minoritarian subjects in their capacity as knower and legitimate author of their own experiences” (2023, p. 2).

Raine's (2021) research indicates that studies that explore violence against cis and trans male sex workers are scarce, with most the scholarship being devoted to the experiences of cisgender women and, to a lesser extent, transgender women. Although studies of violence as it pertains to male sex workers are extant, violence against male sex workers is significantly underreported and under-researched (Curtis and Boe 2023; Dennis 2008; Jamel 2011). For Dennis: "The lack of attention to violence as a threat to the male sex worker may be partially explained by the belief that his world is indeed violence-free" (2008, p. 18). Raine states that: "Men are commonly seen as perpetrators of violence rather than sex workers who are also vulnerable to crime and abuse" (2021, pp. 336-337). Connell posits that, "current research in this area tends to focus heavily on female prostitutes and does not address, in detail, the experiences and impact of violence on men involved in prostitution" (2009, pp. 79-80). Raine's (2021) quantitative systematic review suggests that the rates of violence experienced by sex workers is highly informed by gender and geography, with female sex workers having a significantly higher risk of rape than male sex workers in locations such as San Francisco, USA, whereas male sex workers in Pakistan (known as "Bantha") faced higher levels of sexual police violence when compared to their female counterparts. Moreover, the proportion of female sex workers who had been subjected to police violence (5%) was three times lower than either Bantha (16%) or "Khotki" (cisgender males who have "feminised" traits) workers (18%). Conversely, Connell's (2009) study of Scotland-based male sex workers in Edinburgh and Glasgow shows that most male sex workers involved in the study had been victims of verbal, physical, and sexual attacks. The ones who had not experienced client-perpetrated violence attributed this solely to luck. Thus, the notion that male sex workers do not experience violence or harm is a reductive misconception or stereotype which seems to apply to all male sex workers irrespective of geography (Curtis and Boe 2023).

Misconceptions and stereotypes are closely interconnected, with misconceptions informing stereotypes and vice versa. As is the case with myths, misconceptions and stereotypes have the potential to cause harm. This is particularly pronounced in the case of marginalised persons, whose identities are already subject to scrutiny within normative cultural frameworks. In their lecture, "The Danger of the Single Story," Chimamanda Adichie suggests that, "The problem with stereotypes is not that they

are untrue, but that they are incomplete. It is that they make one story become the only story” (Adichie, 2009). For Fantus: “Creating a one-story narrative rejects multiple contingency theories, which demonstrate that people have multiple stories, and individual identities are oftentimes conflicting, multi-layered, and non-linear” (2013, p. 104). Corvino states that: “While stereotypes of many types of marginalised people persist, the problem is particularly acute with prevailing representations of male sex workers” (2021, p. 177). Curtis and Boe highlight the stereotypes associated with men’s relationship to sex, suggesting that there is, “an implicit global assumption that women view their sexuality as a precious commodity, while men view their sexuality as a form of recreation and exploration” (2023, p. 245). Peters, Kessi, and Boonzaier’s (2019) narrative study of black South African sex workers challenges this notion, with the men taking part in the study constructing sex work as work and rejecting the idea that men sell sex mainly for sexual recreation or exploration. Moreover, most of the participants suggested that they used the money earned from sex work to support their families, a concept commonly reserved for female sex workers. Further, the participants taking part disapproved of the idea that sex workers would have condomless sex with their clients, stating that their sexual safety was paramount (Peters, Kessi, and Boonzaier 2019). Stereotypes and misconceptions have emotional and material effects for male sex workers; for instance, the notion that all male sex workers are young, muscular, and invulnerable to harm. Dennis comments that: “When male sex workers appear in the popular imagination at all, they are muscular athletes, even bodybuilders, in control of their bodies and their destinies” (2008, p. 18). Law states that: “Assumptions that men can defend themselves or are more dangerous than clients may inform minimal safety measures that leave male sex workers unnecessarily vulnerable to client violence” (2021, p. 952). Therefore, from a zemiological perspective, misconceptions and stereotypes offer scaffolding for structural violence and harm to flourish.

Other potential sources of harm can be, at least in part, attributed to the cisnormative structuring of the sex industries and society as a whole. Jones (2020a) comments on the structural exclusivity of camming websites, with many of these sites catering solely to cis female workers. Other sites are inclusive of cis men and have a transgender category, but this largely applies to transfeminine workers and does not include transmasculine or non-binary sex workers. The transmasculine and non-binary

workers taking part in Jones' research noted how cissexist and transphobic the sex industries are, with many performing as their assigned gender at birth instead of the gender they identify with, what Easterbrook-Smith terms "back passing" (2022c, p. 176). In other words, some trans male and non-binary workers will present as female out of economic necessity. As Appenroth (2021) notes, in Greece and Turkey, laws have been introduced that allow only cisgender women to engage legally with the sex industry. Laws such as these force transmasculine people to perform sex work as their birth gender – that is, as "women". This may lead to clients misgendering trans sex workers, either intentionally or unintentionally. The act of misgendering is considered harmful or injurious, with Butler postulating that we, as "linguistic beings", ascribe, "an agency to language, a power to injure, and position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory" (1997, p. 1).

Butler suggests that linguistic vulnerability is akin to physical vulnerability insofar that there appears to be somatic dimensions to linguistic pain. They write: "Certain words or certain forms of address not only operate as threats to one's physical well-being, but there is a strong sense in which the body is alternately sustained and threatened through modes of language" (Butler 1997, p. 5). Citing Morrison, Butler writes that oppressive language, "does more than represent violence; it *is* violence" (1997, p. 6). One of Jones' (2021) participants suggest that trans women, "face more violence because they're so well known as being the face of transness... people don't know trans men exist (p. 246). Appenroth (2021) suggests that society's normative expectations of masculine gender expression put transmasculine sex workers at risk for violence. Due to the limitations of gender affirming surgeries for trans men who wish to pursue bottom (genital) surgery, trans men are far less likely to be able to "pass" as cisgender during sex work when compared to trans women. This can result in uncomfortable or potentially dangerous situations for trans male sex workers. One of Appenroth's (2021) participants states that, although he clearly stated on his advertisement that he was, "a masculine person with a vagina", he receives many emails asking if he will wear lingerie or other traditionally feminine clothing. The participant also states that: "I've had clients telling me, it was their first time having sex with a woman. Feels pretty weird, regarding my appearance, which is clearly masculine" (Appenroth 2021, p. 356).

Violence committed against sex workers, irrespective of gender, is widespread in many parts of the world. However, scholars of sex work suggest that sex work itself is not intrinsically violent, but rather a consequence of institutionalised oppression (Raine 2021). Violence experienced by sex workers is a research area of crucial importance. Ignoring such experiences perpetuates physical and symbolic environments in which violence against sex workers is unchallenged and normalised. Despite abolitionist movements citing women's safety as their *raison d'être*, studies have shown that carceral or end-demand approaches contribute to an approximated 92% rise in violence committed against sex workers (Bowen et al. 2021), indicating a clear correlation between criminalisation and the levels of violence directly faced by sex workers. Bowen et al. (2021) are firm in their assertion that violence against sex workers is both an endemic and systemic issue, one which is preserved through anti-sex work laws, policies, and policing. As Raine suggests, "strategies to tackle stigmatisation and violence need to adopt an intersectional perspective to address multiple structural inequalities and forms of oppression" (2021, p. 351). Moreover, Raine posits that: "It is important to recognise that sex workers experience other intersecting forms of oppression, such as racism, class, and immigration status that are also important in fostering stigma and the enacting of violence" (2021, p. 351).

Many of the male sex workers who took part in Connell's (2009) study reported threats of physical violence, including explicit death threats from clients. Despite this, no one taking part in the study had contacted the police, with participants expressing a deep distrust and disdain for the police. They propose that police harassment, homophobia, and whorephobia were the main reasons for non-reporting. One participant suggests: "There is a very negative attitude from the police about gay people especially in the sex industry, they never seem to take a liking for it so I have always avoided going to the police..." (Connell 2009, p. 86). Another participant states: "There's no point (in reporting), there's just no point, they (police) wouldn't care about what happened to me..." (Connell 2009, p. 86). This could be indicative of what Pinel terms stigma consciousness i.e., awareness of socially stigmatised attributes (Law 2021). For sex workers, this is cognisance of whorephobia and the stigma surrounding the sex industries more generally. Sex workers actively avoid engaging with penal procedures out of fear of censure or further stigmatisation. In a similar vein, Bowen et al. posit that: "Gay sex workers [are] afraid to speak to the police in case a sex worker being on or

supplying substances (or assumed to do) becomes the focus of the conversation” (2021, p. 892). When sex workers do take drugs, either for personal recreation or with clients during a session, they suggested that accessing criminal justice could pose further harm as they could be prosecuted for drug-related offences (Brooks-Gordon and Ebbitt 2021).

Brooks-Gordon and Ebbitt discuss the phenomenon of chemsex and suggest that it is, “syndemic of violence and infection in gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men”. (2021, p. 1). They suggest that a high proportion of male sex workers offer chemsex and other potentially risky services (such as having unprotected anal sex) due to the increasingly high levels of competition for clients in metropolitan areas like London or Manchester. Similarly, Ruiz-Burga (2021) suggests that engaging in condomless chemsex is commonplace for migrant male sex workers operating in London, one of the many social inequalities that disproportionately affect migrant sex workers. They suggest that male migrant sex workers in London are at greater risk of HIV infection and other STIs, as well as being exposed to higher levels of discrimination and social exclusion within health care services. Male sex workers who engage in chemsex are stigmatised threefold, facing condemnation for their sexuality, their sex working, and their drug usage. This stigma is compounded by a general lack of understanding or awareness of chemsex drugs within socio-political discourses and policy-making. Brooks-Gordon and Ebbitt (2021) remind us of the case of Stephen Port, also known as the Grindr Killer, who was eventually convicted of purposefully overdosing, raping, and killing 4 young gay men. The police were not able to connect the murders due to a lack of education surrounding chemsex drugs (in this case, GHB), illustrating the need for both public and political understanding of chemsex and how it adversely affects specific marginalised populations. One participant taking part in the study likens chemsex to self-harm, calling it aggressive or violent. Other participants noted the unfortunate outcome of sex workers engaging in chemsex to pay for more drugs, but then being too inebriated to properly negotiate the economic exchange. Moreover, negotiations surrounding safer sex become difficult to navigate in the liminal space of sexualised drug use, with PrEP²⁵ and condom use being rare.

²⁵ PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis) is a medication used to significantly reduce the transmission of HIV (NHS 2023).

Transactional sex is inherently liminal insofar that it exists within its own temporal-spatial limbo. Its transactionality is demarcated by its temporal and spatial parameters, both of which are blurred by the introduction of drugs. During their study, Brooks-Gordon and Ebbitt (2021) found that some sex workers would engage in chemsex as a means of earning more money, with the allure of certain chemsex drugs being prolonged sexual gratification, which ultimately means being paid more. One participant recalls an example from attending regular chemsex parties, with one attendee being addicted to various drugs and selling sex to pay for drugs. The participant claims the person in question would end up unconscious, was unable to consent to sex acts, and ended up in intensive care. This example highlights the possible rhetorical slippages between sex work, drug use, and consent. Participants noted that the decriminalising of drugs would help combat stigma and empower those engaging in chemsex to seek out legal justice without fear of prosecution or further stigmatisation (Brooks-Gordon and Ebbitt 2021).

The social machinery of stigma and the myths surrounding the sex industries are unmistakably interconnected. Sex workers, regardless of gender identity, have been demonised and pathologised for millenia. Hammond and Kingston posit that: "Commercial sex can be seen as a stigmatised activity, and those who take part are constructed as different, challenging societal, sexual and moral norms" (2014, p. 330). According to Koken et al. (2004), sex workers have been constructed as thieves, murderers, and vectors of disease. The idea that sex workers are marked by contagion has been largely discredited, although it remains a pervasive social opinion. Baral et al. (2015) comment that HIV rates among male sex workers are generally higher than those of non-sex workers; however, these figures are not easily substantiated due to the multiplicity of factors which can impact the research of male sex workers e.g., criminalisation of sex work and homophobia. Moreover, Panfil (2018) comments that the scholarship often depicts sex workers as runaways, homeless youth, or victims of abuse. While this is undoubtedly a certain degree of truth to these statements, Panfil also comments that scholars have tended to elide discussions surrounding the potential benefits of sex work e.g., increased self-esteem, agency, and monetary gain. Moreover, the discussion of entering sex work as a means of escaping harmful or violent circumstances is rarely explored within sex work scholarship. This is

highlighted by Weitzer (2012), using the example of Mexican women who work in Mexico's legal sex work zones to escape abusive relationships. For many, sex work is a corrective solution to dire circumstances such as abusive relationships or extreme economic hardship. Weitzer (2012) states that queer sex work can be an affirming experience for gender and sexual minorities. Matthen et al. (2018) also explore this idea in their research, suggesting that queer youth in rural Canada engage in sex work not only as a means of achieving financial independence (which allows them to relocate to more queer-friendly, urban areas), but also as a way of affirming their gender and/or sexual identity.

Summary

This chapter has outlined a broader engagement with literature relating to myth; socio-legal approaches to sex work law and policy and their ideological underpinnings; an exploration of queer theoretical perspectives on gender and sexuality; and examined issues of violence and harm within the context of sex work.

Chapter Three

Methodological Approaches

*"I wish, instead of looking for a message when we read a story, we could think,
'Here's a door opening on a new world: what will I find there?'"*

(Le Guin cited in Heckert 2010, p. 44).

Introduction

Within the previous chapters, I outline the ideological debates surrounding the sex industries, the socio-legal approaches to sex work law and policy, and the limited presence of male and non-binary sex workers within these narratives. This chapter is dedicated to the methodological approaches adopted for this study. Data collection and analysis are also outlined, as are my considerations of objectivity and positionality within my research. The research aims and questions are reiterated, with the remainder of the chapter spent outlining the various methodological approaches and their attendant ethical considerations. Ethical approval was formally granted by the University's ethics panel on the 6th of December 2023. However, the ethical considerations of conducting research with marginalised groups, especially within an ethnographic context, require an iterative and reflexive approach. As such, issues pertaining to ethics, and how these were negotiated on both a practical and emotional level, are discussed throughout this chapter. This chapter concludes with a personal reflection of the fieldwork journey and its physical and emotional challenges.

Research Aims and Questions

Research aims:

1) To uncover the dominant myths surrounding male and non-binary sex work within a multi-jurisdictional context (Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand).

2) To examine the diversity of gender within male and non-binary sex working in Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand.

3) To highlight the stories of male and non-binary sex workers and amplify their voices and experiences.

Research questions:

4) What are the dominant myths surrounding male and non-binary sex workers?

5) To what extent are these myths attendant to socio-legal contexts?

6) To what extent do myths have the capacity to cause harm to male and non-binary sex workers?

Qualitative Approach

This research can be characterised as queer qualitative social research. Qualitative research can be broadly defined as an approach that seeks to offer thick descriptions of social reality, including cultural practices, patterns of meaning, structural features, and understandings of the natural world (Flick, Kardorff, and Steinke 2004). For Marshall and Rossman, qualitative research is fundamentally, “pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experience of people” (1999, p. 2). In contrast to quantitative approaches, which are commonly marked by statistical generalisability, qualitative research is largely typified by empirical exploration and does not share the statistical preoccupation of quantitative methods (Maxwell 2005). The qualitative nature of this thesis will surely garner scrutiny from those who favour statistical or positivist approaches, to which I would kindly, but confidently, disregard. It is my firm belief that the human experience cannot, in any meaningful way, be quantified. As noted by Grant (2014) and Matten et al. (2018), much of the data generated about the sex industry is done without the consent or counsel of sex workers. Yiu et al. state that: “Often when sex workers describe their experiences, especially in research settings, they are acutely aware of the pressures of having their experience essentialised and meshed into a singular sex worker narrative” (2023, p. 14).

Even a cursory glimpse towards sex work scholarship undertaken by those with lived experience of sex work will expose the deep distrust of statistics and numerical-based approaches in relation to researching sex workers and their lived experiences (Smith and Mac 2020; George 2021). Rice and Maltz (2018) suggest that ethnographic research represents a welcome and much-needed departure from statistical analysis, suggesting that ethnographic inquiry deals with individual and group behaviour that does not always conform to statistical analyses. Mac and Smith posit that: “The dependence on statistics in the prostitution debate is often a result of our invisibility and our illegitimacy as commentators” (2020, p. 5). George argues: “What do statistics do for sex workers, especially sex workers of colour, if not remove their humanity and autonomy? Statistics are used in parliamentary debates and conversations when the people behind the statistics are not in the room” (2021, n.p). I would suggest that George’s comments concerning sex workers of colour are analogous to all sex workers who experience multiple forms of marginalisation (in the context of this thesis, queer male and non-binary sex workers). As Smith and Mac suggest: “Sex workers perhaps seem alien and mysterious, and the questions we raise too political, but numbers are reassuring, seemingly apolitical, and knowable” (2020, p. 5). Statistics, while useful in certain contexts, are impersonal, disembodied, and dispassionate displays of data that further serve to discount (or erase) marginalised groups and their experiences. For Gubrium and Holstein: “Qualitative inquiry is especially sensitive to representational matters because of its unique position at the lived border of reality and representation” (1997, p. 107).

Ethnography: Fact or Fiction?

According to Madden, the term ethnography is derived from the Greek “ethnos”, meaning “people”, and “graphein”, which refers to the act of writing – the combination of which loosely translates to “writing about people” (Madden 2010, p. 16). Baker-Cristales states that ethnography, “has always been a literary endeavour” and that ethnographic writing is, “neither fiction nor science, but something-in-between” (2015, p. 15). Baker-Cristales, citing Geertz, suggests that ethnographies are ultimately “fictions” – that is, “invented and inventive texts that can never perfectly capture the worlds they are supposed to describe” (2015, p. 15). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s,

the description of anthropologic and ethnographic work as fictitious (also known as the “crisis of representation”) led to scholastic anxieties pertaining to whether the human sciences could adequately depict social reality (Marcus and Fischer 1986). Baker-Cristales refers to science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin’s ethnographic sensibilities, including the use of, “field notes, data, and the rich descriptions of people and places so important to ethnographic writing” (2015, p. 16). Le Guin implements ethnography as a narrative form; by doing so, she is able to construct peoples, cultures, and worlds which extend *beyond* the written form. Through anthropological and ethnographic approaches, Le Guin imagines her literary characters as real, thereby blurring the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction.

For Craith and Kockel, ethnographic work is unique in its aptitude for, “blurring of the lines between fact and fiction, between reality and imagination. But this is not an opposition between truth and falsehood. Instead, it is recognition of the human reality of ethnographic work” (2014, p. 695). Baker-Cristales states that: “Ethnographers often face the dilemma of excess; reality will always surpass the ability to capture it. Our attempts to develop a coherent narrative out of multifarious and often indeterminate experiences, aligns the ethnographic endeavour with real fiction or storytelling” (2015, p. 15). Moreover, Baker-Cristales states that: “Science fiction and social science writing have much in common despite the fact that the former is fiction while the latter is framed as realist and objective reporting” (2015, p. 16). As Thompson writes: “When a person sinks into an imaginative reverie to write a book, or to synthesize the factual results of research, then he or she is likely to move into a more mythopoeic form of narrative, for even science can be a form of storytelling” (1996, p. 62). Ethnographic and narrative approaches are closely intertwined, with stories and storytelling often at the ontologic-epistemic core of both ethnographic and narrative methodologies (van Hulst 2020; Snajdr 2013).

Delineating the Field

Traditional ethnographic research places researchers within their field of choice for extended periods of time and seeks to produce “fieldnotes” i.e., detailed narrative accounts of how people in specific social and cultural settings experience and navigate

phenomena within their everyday lives (Shelton 2021). My ethnographic field sites were multiple, with the most prominent being the NZPC office in Wellington. Wellington was chosen as the primary ethnographic site largely due to its status as the political hub of Aotearoa New Zealand. Wellington is home to the New Zealand Parliament (Māori: Pāremata Aotearoa). It is here that Georgina Beyer gave her powerful testimonial, which would allow decriminalisation to be passed into law. Wellington is home to the NZPC's National branch, with Regional offices located in Auckland, Tauranga, Manawatu, Hawkes Bay, Christchurch, and Dunedin. Wellington is a small city of around 555000 people, similar to Edinburgh, where I live in Scotland. Wellington is a vibrant, colourful city known for its street art, speciality coffee scene, undulating hills, and scenic surrounding nature.

Photo 1:



View of Wellington and its iconic cable car, first opened in 1902 (picture credit: Haka Tours New Zealand)

For several days a week, I operated from the office, sharing the space with the NZPC practitioners, a dedicated team who offer practical and emotional support to sex workers. The services the NZPC offer include: counselling; sexual health testing; community drop-ins; and legal assistance. The NZPC offices are largely sex worker-only spaces and I was permitted access because I disclosed my lived experience of sex work in my early correspondence with the NZPC.

Photo 2:



Inside the Wellington NZPC office (photo credit: The Famous Feminist)

The NZPC were highly enthusiastic about my research and supported me both practically and emotionally during my three-month stay. They consoled me when I was homesick, introduced me to important figures within the Aotearoa New Zealand sex worker rights movement, and promoted my research with their tacit “seal of approval”. Many significant ethnographic insights were ascertained during informal conversations with NZPC staff members, sex workers who were engaging with their services (both participants and non-participants), and non-sex workers (including friends whom I met

during my stay and members of the public). Through these conversations, I learned about the history and public perception of sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand and, after some time, I felt immersed within the cultural context of sex work decriminalisation. Through informal conversations and participant interviews, the social, legal, and cultural context of sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand was illuminated, one which I felt resoundingly alien compared to the European context to which I was accustomed. Ethnographic fieldnotes were audio-recorded as a means of documenting the research process à la ethnographic inquiry. Audio fieldnotes were typically recorded immediately after interviews, either within a private space within the NZPC or as I walked back to my flat. I would often take long walks or runs around the city, not only as a means of ethnographic exploration, but as a form of self-care. Fieldwork can be a highly demanding process, especially fieldwork that takes place in a location so different from the researcher's home environment. When I first arrived in Wellington, there was a 13-hour time difference with Scotland. I found this especially challenging as it meant when I was awake, most of my family and friends in Scotland were asleep and vice versa. I was only able to talk to people back home for a few hours in the morning and evening and, at first, this was very isolating. I felt marked by liminality, emotionally straddled between two opposite ends of the Earth, not quite feeling like I was truly present in either. I invoke the words of the R.E.M. song "Daysleeper" to describe these complicated feelings:

*I cried the other night
I can't even say why
Fluorescent flat, caffeine lights
It's furious balancing
I am the screen, the blinding light
I'm the screen, I work at night*

Orientating Myself in the Field

I arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand with my partner the day before my 30th birthday. We spent two weeks travelling around both the North and South islands, marvelling in the country's rich history and breath-taking natural landscapes.

Photo 3:



Mount Ruapehu, Tongariro National Park, North Island (own photo)

After these two weeks of orientating myself with my partner by my side, we parted ways, and I remained there on my own. The first few weeks were, in all honesty, rather painful. I was unhappy with my living situation as I was staying on the outskirts of Wellington in a suburb called Ngaio, away from the city's energetic centre. Although beautiful, I longed for the buzz of the city, to be closer to what was going on in the heart of Wellington's urban centre.

Photo 4:



A twilight view of Ngaio, an inner suburb of Wellington situated on the slopes of Mount Kaukau (own picture)

I missed my partner to an unbearable degree; I missed Scotland and its familiarity; and I missed my friends and family. I began to wonder: can I stay here? Should I stay here? Am I strong enough to be here on my own? Am I a good enough academic to conduct this research? And if I am, why *me*? Why should I be the one to do this research and not others? I interrogated these questions throughout my stay, with some having more defined epistemological parameters than others. The question of why me proved to have the simplest answer: simply put, no one else was doing this research. The question soon developed into, if not me... then who? As a participant in Scotland would later ask me: “How do you feel being the only person that’s in any capacity, any way, telling stories about sex workers in Scotland?”. I will return to this question later in this chapter.

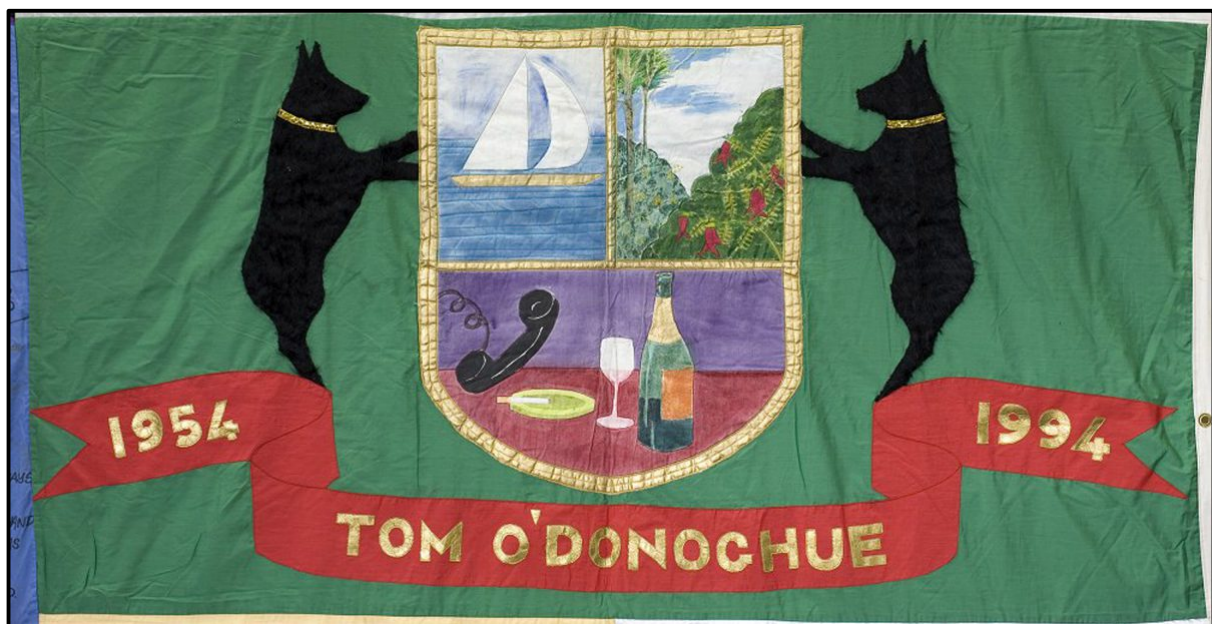
Within my first week of living in Wellington, I started attending a weekly queer badminton evening; it was within this space that I found some of the friends I would

hold dear during my trip, including my soon-to-be flatmate, Andy. Andy was a kind, effervescent man from Vietnam whom I had taken an instant liking to. Someone had told me that Andy had a spare room in his flat but that he was cautious about renting it out after an issue with a previous tenant. I had already been alerted to Wellington's housing crisis, with some people going months without securing a place to stay due to overwhelming demand. The couple I was staying with were about to leave for a trip to Europe, and we agreed that it would be best if I found somewhere to live before they left, giving me three days. I sat next to Andy on the bench as we waited our turn to play badminton – I was intensely anxious; this whole situation was incredibly stressful and was beginning to take a toll on my mental health. As I began to speak, I felt very small. I did not know these people – they did not owe me anything. I asked him about his spare room and implored, "I need your help". Immediately, Andy could see how distressed I was and he agreed to show me his flat after practice. It was a stunning new-build flat in the lively New Town area of Wellington. I immediately fell in love with the flat and its location. I moved in the next day and remained here until I left the country on the 28th of April. Andy later told me that he allowed me to live with him because he could see how much it meant to me and how I phrased "I need your help". Andy understood that the true meaning behind this statement was not, "you must help me", but rather, "can you help me?". This honesty and vulnerability, according to Andy, were enough for him to consider letting me stay. This sense of honesty and vulnerability would also permeate my interviews with participants. I did not desire to create detached, one-way relationships with my participants, but rather a reciprocal relationship built on a politics of care, trust, and mutual respect.

After a few difficult weeks of settling in, I began to find my pace. I spent my time in Wellington mostly at the NZPC; I was welcomed warmly and they went out of their way many times to make me feel included and, often, as a vital member of the team. Instead of a visiting researcher, I felt like part of a family. This sense of familiarity and community also extended to the interviews, which often did not feel like interviews at all. They were conversational and sincere. I shared my story with the sex workers taking part; I disclosed my own lived experience of sex working, which (for many) was visibly disarming. While working alongside the NZPC, I also casually volunteered for the Burnett Foundation (previously the AIDS Foundation), who were kind enough to promote my research within their centre. I joined the team in their condom packing

sessions and attended queer community events with the Burnett team and the NZPC. I also attended Pride events, a queer Vogue Ball, queer and sex worker-related protests, and sex work-themed theatre shows (which were written and performed by sex workers), and events dedicated to the history of AIDS quilts and the intersection of sex work, drug use, and HIV/AIDS.

Photo 5:



Quilt dedicated to Tom O'Donoghue, HIV positive “crusader for the rights of people living with HIV and AIDS, injecting drug users and sex workers” (photo credit: New Zealand AIDS Memorial Quilt)

A few weeks into my fieldwork, I attended an event with the NZPC at the University of Wellington, an event where charities and organisations could promote their services to incoming students. I, alongside NZPC staff members and other volunteers, was asking students the extent to which they understood sex work laws in Aotearoa New Zealand. While not every person knew the exact details of how decriminalisation functioned in context, many were familiar with the broader idea of decriminalisation and what it meant for people selling sex in Aotearoa New Zealand. One individual, a young male-presenting person, told us, without the slightest hesitation, that he had an OnlyFans account. They did this in the presence of their friends, in earshot of strangers, in a very casual manner. I had never seen such a spontaneous but

confident declaration of sex working experience, especially in a crowded and public space. I had only my experiences in Scotland to compare this to, where sex work is, for many, highly secretive due to its partially criminalised status. It was here that I met one of my future participants, a young cisgender man who, after seeing my study's flyer on the table, told me he had experience of situational sex work. Like the previous individual, he had no reservations in telling me this, and we later arranged a time to meet and have an interview.

Numbrella Lane, a sex worker wellbeing space overseen by National Ugly Mugs, was intended to be the primary Scottish ethnographic site. Although two interviews were conducted here, most Scotland-based participants chose to meet either on Zoom or at a pre-agreed private location. The Numbrella Lane address is not made available to the public, only sex workers and close allies. This is understandable with the legal status of sex work in Scotland, but several participants noted that the clandestine nature of the Numbrella Lane space fosters an environment of apprehension, one in which they did not always feel comfortable. Returning now to the previous question that I was asked during an interview in Scotland within the Numbrella Lane space: "How do you feel being the only person that's in any capacity, any way, telling stories about sex workers in Scotland?". This question took me off guard, mostly because, in Aotearoa New Zealand, I did not feel alone in telling these stories. Male and non-binary sex workers still represent a largely invisible population in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, but the way the research was welcomed, promoted, and afforded credibility by the NZPC was, in itself, a research finding. Decriminalisation is the scaffolding for a socio-legal landscape in which sex worker stigma is mitigated and, thus, is the first step towards imagining a more inclusive world for all sex workers, regardless of gender. I never felt out of place in the NZPC. Even on the days when I was the only man in the space, I always felt like I belonged. In Scotland, several male and non-binary sex workers told me that they often felt out of place or unwelcome in the Numbrella Lane sex worker space, citing that it, first and foremost, felt like a space designed for cisgender women sex workers.

As noted by several participants, no one in Scotland seems to want to discuss sex, let alone sex work. In Aotearoa New Zealand, I was happy to discuss my research with anyone who asked, and I do not recall a singular instance of feeling uncomfortable

from someone's reaction to my research. Quite the contrary, people seemed either enthusiastic or neutral to this information, with many sharing stories about their own knowledge of or interactions with the NZPC. Compare this with Scotland, in which speaking openly about sex work is virtually unheard of. When sex work is discussed, it is done so with an implicit discomfort. In Aotearoa New Zealand, I had candid conversations about sex work practically everywhere I went: on the bus, on planes, in museums, in cafes. The criminalised status of sex work in Scotland not only serves to invisibilise sex workers, but sex work as a practice more generally. The law creates an ecosystem of shame that inhibits open, honest discussions about sex work. Not only does the law symbolically annihilate male and non-binary sex workers from policy discussions surrounding the sex industries, but it also prohibits broader discussions of sex work within society. Furthermore, as I have outlined, it is more challenging to engage with the topic of sex work using certain academic methods – in this case, ethnography.

Problematising Ethnography

Rooke notes the numerous ethical issues within traditional ethnographic research: power imbalances within research; the textual construction of the classed, racialised, and gendered Other; assumed lack of scientific rigour; and the limits and possibilities of knowing (2009). Ethnography has been heavily critiqued for its colonial and oppressive past, leading to the development of critical ethnographic approaches, which suggest that academic research is inherently implicated in the oppression of marginalised communities (Smith 1999; Dawthorne 2018). As Māori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith suggests, research is, “probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary”, and that, “the ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonised peoples” (1999, p. 1). In contrast to traditional ethnography's entrenched connections to cisheteropatriarchal and colonial hegemonies, a queer(ed) ethnography attempts to curve the, “established orientation of ethnography in its method, ethics, and reflexive philosophical principles” (Rooke 2009, p. 149).

Queer(ing) Ethnography

Over the last few decades, scholars have examined the epistemic relationship between the ethnographic method and queer theory. For Valocchi, the ethnographic method is especially well suited to handle the methodological challenges associated with, “distinguishing practices, identities, and hegemonic structures of gender and sexuality”, and is, “an important component of a queer perspective” (2005, p. 751). Much like queer theory, queer ethnography, “is indeterminate and cannot always promise rich, reliable readings based on ‘the facts’” (Talbot 1999, p. 537). For Valocchi, the affinity between queer theory and ethnography derives from common epistemological assumptions that are not shared by quantitative approaches. They posit that: “Both queer theory and ethnography are agnostic about their capacity for discerning ‘objective’ truth. Both emphasise social reality as representation: queer theory in its reliance on discourse and ethnography in its culturally mediated relationship between observer and observed” (2005, p. 767). Rooke (2009) suggests that queer theory has tended to veer toward philosophical abstractions and textual criticisms, thereby sacrificing an engagement with the material relations of inequality. In a similar vein, Castell and Bryson suggest that mainstream ethnographic research has long been “denying queers’ presence as speaking subjects” through exclusionary disciplinary practices (1998, p. 98). For Talbot, queer ethnography, “may not have as a central goal the accretion of knowledge as do critical inquiries into race, class, and gender; rather, it may refigure what is considered ethnographic knowledge” (p. 537). Rooke postulates that sexuality is a taboo within the, “epistemological closet of research ethics” (2009, p. 14). They suggest that by reinforcing the traditional ontological and epistemological binaries of the “knower” and the “known,” researchers fail to comprehend the complexities of queer subjectivities within the field.

Rooke emphasises the importance of subjectivity, suggesting that queer ethnographers are required to pay attention to, “the performativity of a Self which is gendered, sex, sexualised, classed, and generational in the research process” (2009, p. 16). Similarly, Hankins cautions that queer ethnographers have the potential burden of processing “too much” subjectivity in our relationships with participants and inadvertently, “reactivate historic and extant hierarchies and asymmetries that, in general, our work aims to ameliorate” (2014, p. 96). Thus, the queer ethnographer

must make their own positionality clear in the research process as to be truthful to the research subjects, thereby providing what Botha terms “radical transparency” – that is, an acknowledgment of what you are doing, why you are doing it, and how you are doing it (2021, p. 6). This radical transparency is also espoused by Heckert (2010), who champions the, “directly anarchist values of deep equality, radical transformation and listening” (2010, p. 43). I was transparent with my participants as to why I was conducting this research. I disclosed my own lived experience of sex work and expounded upon the research’s intimate importance, both on a professional and personal level. Upon revealing this, there was an implicit (and, often, explicit) acknowledgement of fidelity that comes with shared experience. I recognised that, because of our shared experiences, their fears concerning any potential testimonial or hermeneutical injustice were, mostly, assuaged. I, however, am astutely aware that my own lived experiences of sex work do not inoculate my research from causing epistemic harm. This research’s investment in queer and poststructuralist methodologies addresses this concern and considers the research process to be iterative and rhizomatic, always open to interrogation and re(negotiation) of its methodological and ethical underpinnings.

Some postmodernists have argued that understandings of temporality and spatiality are normative and that they are socially arranged to comply with cisheteronormative hegemonies (Halberstam 2005). I employ a similar strategy to that of Rooke (2009), who aims to queer ethnography by means of interrogating its normative boundaries of ethnographic time and space and the intersubjective nature of the field. Halberstam comments that: “Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to imagine that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (2005, p. 12). As Massey claims, the “regulation of the world into a single trajectory, via the temporal convening of space, was, and still often is, a way of refusing to address the essential multiplicity of the spatial. It is the imposition of a single universal” (2005, p. 71). For Horrocks (1995), time, space, and history itself are mythological insofar that they are constructs that are produced with the intent to fortify our perceptions of our shared social reality. Read (2013) implements Halberstam’s notion of “queer time” and “queer space” in relation to the brothel, suggesting that the brothel operates as a liminal space wherein traditional

heteronormativity is reconfigured or queered. During the exchange between sex worker and client, a heterotopic space is fabricated whereby not only heteronormative roles are subverted and challenged, but socio-sexual roles of both worker and client are renegotiated and subject to an alternative temporality.

Queer(ing) Narrative Analysis

Within recent years, scholars have examined the homological relationship between queer and narrative theory, with Warhol and Lanser aiming to demonstrate, “why gender and sexuality belong at the heart of all narrative inquiry” (2015, p. 1). They suggest that: “Narratives are critical to constructing, maintaining, interpreting, exposing and dismantling the social systems, cultural practices, and individual lives that shape and are shaped by performative acts” (Warhol and Lanser 2015, pp. 7-8). Sawyer suggests that patriarchal norms in storytelling, “are reproduced in causal plotlines, authoritative representations, bounded representations of identity including gender and sexuality, and a fixed point-of-view – even the traditional organisation of words on the page – all these forms undermine the reconstruction of non-binary possibilities of identity” (2021, p. 27). Queer approaches to narrative, however, are embedded within, “a consciousness of intersectional challenges, a commitment to pluralist bricolage, and a comfort with messy complexities that... foster an enabling flexibility without sacrificing theoretical rigor” (Warhol and Lanser 2015, p. 2). For Warhol and Lanser, a unified model of queer narrative is heretical insofar that queer theory rejects formalist boundaries associated with a classical narratological approach. Queer approaches to narrative analysis seek to disrupt heteronormative “master” narratives of social realities, offering instead an alternative space through which queer individuals can narrativise their stories of non-normative gender and sexuality.

Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots (2008) examine the traditional story structure i.e, a linear narrative with a coherent beginning, middle, and end. From a postmodern perspective, the traditional story characteristics, “are not inherent in stories, nor in people, but rather must be viewed as sociocultural constructs” (Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots 2008, p. 635). In contrast to traditional Aristotelian storytelling, some stories may not have an

identifiable beginning, middle, and end. Storytellers may omit certain details or begin *in medias res*, or perhaps certain elements of the story are ongoing and therefore have no definitive conclusion (van Hulst 2020). Postmodern narratologists postulate that, because narrative characteristics are not inherent in human nature, a universal definition of a story is impossible. Sawyer suggests that: “Telling our own stories is difficult, but the alternative is all too apparent: someone else will do it for us, and we will be present only through our absence” (2021, p. 36). As Das and Kleinman suggest, “Erasure is not achieved simply through inattention but by the production of a different kind of history by specific forms of attention” (2001, p. 9). Sawyer considers, “how queer stories (nonstable, multi-directional, non-categorical and non-binary, contingent, indeterminate, counterintuitive) may destabilise and recentre mainstream stories (clear, definitive, unidirectional, and intuitive)” (2021, p. 25). In other words, queer narratives are rhizomatic insofar that they do not conform to the traditional narratological frames associated with formalist (and cisheterocentric) storytelling, and instead endeavour to illuminate non-binary and pluralistic possibilities of queer stories.

Rhizomatic and Anarchistic Approaches

This research is closely associated with rhizomatic and anarchistic perspectives in relation to narrative and identity (Heckert 2010; Reynolds 2014; Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots 2008). Deleuze and Guattari define a rhizome as an underground root system – an open, decentralised network that branches out unpredictably and horizontally, according to the principles of multiple entryways, multiplicity, connection, a-signifying ruptures, and cartography (1987). They suggest that: “Any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order” (1987, p. 7). From whichever side one chooses to enter, they are immediately connected (the principle of multiple entryways). This democratic connectivity is central to the notion of the rhizome and rhizomatic thinking. As Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots state, there is, “no main entryway or starting point that leads to ‘the truth’. ‘The truth’ or ‘the reality’ does not exist within rhizomatic thinking. There are always many possible truths and realities that can all be viewed as social constructs” (2008, p. 637). For Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots, “the existence of multiple entryways automatically implies multiplicity” (2008, p. 637).

Within the principle of multiplicity, there is no clear hierarchy, structure, or order and this suggests that each point of a rhizome can connect to any other point within the rhizome (the principle of connection). At whatever point a rhizome is ruptured or destroyed, it will always grow further according to different lines or connections (the principle of asignifying rupture). Deleuze and Guattari compare the rhizome to a map (the principle of cartography) rather than a blueprint or a tracing. As with the map, a rhizome is open and receptive to constant change (1987). To wit, rhizomatic thinking is methodologically akin to queer and anarchist approaches in that they are marked by their ontological-epistemic openness and peripatetic nature.

For Heckert (2010), queer and anarchist perspectives are theoretically indistinguishable insofar that both approaches reject borders in relation to class, sexuality, and nationality. For Heckert, queer and anarchist approaches are also allied in their commitment to fluid and rootless, “ways of becoming, of learning to experience the unreality of borders, to know profoundly that they have no independent existence” (p. 43). In many ways, queer or anarchist approaches are better characterised as anti-methodologies insofar that they do not subscribe to the traditional boundaries of knowledge production, nor do they conform to the conventional researcher/researched relationship. Greenway defines a methodological anarchism as one which, “relinquishes control, challenges boundaries and hierarchies, and provides a space for new ideas to emerge” (2008, p. 324). Heckert draws on the Deleuzoguattarian notion of “becoming” in relation to methodology and “becoming queer” (2010, p. 43). They suggest that this process involves continually, “learning to let go of borders: between theory and data, researcher and researched, hetero and homo, right and wrong... This is never finished, accomplished, achieved... Becoming queer is always in process – experienced only in the present, in presence” (2010, p. 43). Heckert suggests that Deleuze and Guattari, “reject the notion of the independent subject, but see the ‘individual’ as a multiplicity interconnected with other multiplicities” (2010, p. 48). In this sense, queerness is rhizomatic inasmuch that it has no definitive beginning, middle, or end, and is an inherently mobile and multiplicitous experience. Heckert also states that the rhizome is inherently nomadic, “trapped by categories of discipline, borders of control. The nomad is continuously, creatively, joyfully queer (2010, p. 48).

Empirical Engagement with Sex Workers

The ethics of empirical engagement with sex workers (and other marginalised groups) is a highly controversial subject (Armstrong 2022; Botha 2021; Bruckert 2014; Murphy 2022). Discussions of ethical engagement with marginalised populations are fraught with platitudinous vocabularies such as non-maleficence (“do no harm”); academic research, however, has and continues to cause harm to sex workers and other marginalised populations (Botha 2021; Bruckert 2014; Reynolds 2014). Bruckert states that: “Academics exploit sex workers – they earn degrees, promotions, and status on the backs of sex workers. Period. End of discussion” (2014, p. 311). Bruckert suggests that poor people, prisoners, and the homeless (to name but a few examples), “have seen their words and their experiences transformed into data, appropriated, and used to advance the careers of academics” (2014, p. 311). For Bruckert, many scholars have contributed to the, “historic exploitation and (mis)appropriation of sex workers’ lives and realities” (2014, p. 311). That being said, Bruckert (2014) suggests that, while some academics have clearly exploited sex workers to further their own academic trajectories, others have engaged with the sex worker community to produce meaningful and well-resourced research and have actively championed sex worker rights. Bruckert states that, “tarring all academics with the same brush is not only unfair, it is exactly the sort of sweeping stereotypical assessments that sex workers are mobilising against” (p. 312).

Reynolds (2014) proffers an, “ethics of solidarity and justice-doing” as, “an activist working and living in the rhizome of interconnected communities striving towards social justice” (p 132). For Reynolds, a Solidarity Approach “led to an engagement with inquiry rather than research. This is important as inquiry allows for the messy, fluid, emergent dialogues that I thought would be more generative and useful than categories, evidence or truth” (2014, pp. 133-134). Reynolds suggests that solidarity, “speaks to our hopes and practices that move us towards our collective liberation, and the belief that our paths towards something *just*, are woven together” (2014, p. 132). As CohenMiller states: “The stories of justice-centred qualitative research thus act as learning tools for us (as readers, researchers, practitioners) to become better in our work, offering us a chance to make the world a better place” (2024, p3). Reynolds suggests that: “This ethical stance is not finite or fixed, but always in flux” (2014, p.

140) and that the, “ethics of solidarity require that I do not replicate exploitation or abuses of power in my work or the inquiry of it” (2014, pp. 132-133). They suggest that their activism and research is informed by a decolonial, intersectional, and antioppression framework (Reynolds 2014). For Bruckert, “complicity in the relations of power-knowledge cannot be wiped away with carefully constructed academic prose... [we] must engage with these issues of research and expertise that traverse broader issues of ethics and of power” (2014, p. 313). Reynolds suggests that their engagement with solidarity is rhizomatic insofar that it is, “recursive, messy, and non-linear...” (2014, p, 133). As Armstrong posits, “we must be open to hearing and valuing a diversity of experiences, and to sit with messy, complex and contradictory realities” (2022, p. 10). However, Easterbrook-Smith (2022c, p. 181) writes: “I am conscious of not claiming experiences which are not mine”, suggesting that stigma is mitigated by other identity categories we may inhabit.

In terms of my own research, this means interrogating my privileges and their attendant social advantages, such as my ethnicity (white Scottish) and gender (cis man). Like Easterbrook-Smith (2022c), I am conscious that I possess a degree of separation from sex workers who are marginalised in other or additional ways. Ursula K. Le Guin, daughter of anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber, says: “I was spared the huge burden of xenophobia, and the curse of cultural parochialism” (Baker-Cristales 2015, p. 24). Le Guin, discussing her *Earthsea* series (1968-2001), which features predominantly non-white characters, states that:

So far, no reader of colour has told me I ought to butt out, or that I got the ethnicity wrong. When they do, I'll listen. As an anthropologist's daughter, I am intensely conscious of the risk of cultural or ethnic imperialism – a white writer speaking for non-white people, co-opting their voice, an act of extreme arrogance (2004, n.p).

Le Guin suggests that, unlike others, she was not exposed to xenophobic beliefs as a child, and this would later develop into a reflexive sensibility when writing her stories. As Le Guin implies, however, anti-imperialist reflexivity is an interminable process, one which requires introspective and interrogative considerations of the Self within one's writing. Being a reflexive researcher ultimately means questioning our own experiences, values, and subjectivities, but also the reasons why we choose to engage

with our particular research topics. As Bruckert ponders: “Why do we social scientists undertake research? The answers come easily – to make sense, to shed light, to render the invisible visible... we do research in our own interests, in society’s interests, and in the interests of knowledge” (2014, p. 313). Johnston (2019) encourages researchers to embrace the difficulties found within social scientific research as a means of achieving personal growth. Johnston (2019) suggests that research has the potential to push our boundaries and challenges us to show up for our participants in ways we did not imagine or believe to be within our capacity. As Nelson notes, in addition to the production of knowledge, the research process can also become a “journey of self-exploration” (Nelson 2020, p. 923). Armstrong posits that: “In focusing on issues that are deeply personal, we can also gain a deeper understanding into ourselves and our experiences and integrate this into the knowledge that we produce” (Armstrong 2022, p. 12). Botha encourages researchers to engage reflexively with their research, writing: “I make a call to action – all researchers, please, engage with your own values, interrogate them, unpick them, doubt yourself, acknowledge your fallibility, acknowledge your mistakes” (2021, p. 9).

Participatory Action Research

and Participatory Action Research (O’Neill 2010; O’Neill and Hubbard 2010; O’Neill and Seal 2012; Murphy 2022). Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a transformative methodology closely linked to social justice (O’Neill 2010; O’Neill and Hubbard 2010; O’Neill and Seal 2012; Murphy 2022). The three key aspects of PAR include: “collaborative working and developing a subject-subject ethos from research design to analysis and write-up; critical recovery of history based upon community knowledge; and sharing knowledge in understandable and meaningful ways” (Murphy 2022, p. 224). In line with PAR, Murphy advises that: “Sex workers must be consulted in the design of research that will impact on their lives” (Murphy 2022, p. 224). Bruckert reminds us that: “Duplicity is built into the research process” in the sense that, “there are always some areas of the research agenda that are not fully revealed. At the very least, the extent of analysis and abstraction is unlikely to be shared at the onset of data collection” (2014, p. 314). However, Bruckert states that, “genuine community-based research that begins with the community has incredible potential to redress

power relations” (2014, p. 314). O’Neill states that: “Phenomenological and participatory modes of exploring and analysing sex work may produce knowledge as praxis, raise awareness, and develop critical reflexive texts that may help to mobilise social change” (O’Neill 2010, p. 231). For Johnston, qualitative researchers working within emancipatory paradigms, “are special because they are tasked with sharing another person’s story or collaborating with them for the purposes of enacting social change, accurately representing their (often marginalised) lives, and opening our own hearts to learn” (2019, p. 1). Johnston admonishes, however, that researchers engaging with emancipatory paradigms need to be aware of their own limitations, suggesting that researchers may, “burn out, experience our own triggers and psychological discomforts, or just fail to live up to the grandiose expectations placed on us in an intensifying neoliberal academy” (2019, p. 1).

According to O’Neill: “Using participatory arts and visual methodologies can help to foster reflective/safe spaces for dialogue, thinking through issues, and representing the voices of sex workers as well as project workers, residents, and other related individuals and groups” (2010, pp. 229-230). For O’Neill, Participatory Action Research methodologies (PAR) and Participatory Arts (PA), “have a vital role in the process of developing a radical democratic imaginary” (2010, p. 210), in which would sex workers would, “be able to participate fully as citizens of a fair and inclusive society” (Murphy 2022, p. 230). For Murphy: “To move towards a better future, we must first *imagine* it” (2022, p. 228). Borrowing from hooks (1984), who believes that theory can be liberatory in social justice work, Reynolds states that: “Theorising informed by liberatory intentions can open up possibility: the way things might be” (2014, p. 131). As O’Neill and Seal suggest: “Opening up new and more democratic ways of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ are dependent upon imagination, imaginaries and hope for the future” (2012, p. 82). As Riessman suggests: “Storytellers interpret the world and experience in it; they sometimes create moral tales – how the world should be” (Riessman 2005, p. 1). O’Neill and Seal (2012) suggest that radical democratic imaginaries are typified by the following:

The circulation, radicalisation and institutionalisation of democratic discourse; the critical recovery of the hidden histories of the marginalised and repressed; equal access to material resources necessary for self-development and meaningful

participation in social, cultural, political and economic decision making; anti-essentialism and resistance to all forms of domination and 'disciplinary normalisation' and inclusive, cultural citizenship (pp. 136-137).

I consider ethics to be an iterative and reflexive process, one that my participants were actively involved in. The project was granted ethical approval by the General University Ethics Panel. Interview questions and ethical guiding principles were developed in collaboration with 6 sex workers across both nations (in line with Participatory Action Research). The ethical guiding principles were drafted in accordance with the Sex Worker Research Hub's ethical guidelines (Sex Worker Research Hub 2018). The Sex Worker Research Hub is a collection of academics researching the sex industries; its guidelines are intended to provide an ethical framework for best practice in the academic engagement of sex workers. The established ethical guiding principles for this project are as follows: Autonomy (self-determination); Justice (actively challenging inequality); and Beneficence (do no harm). Upon my exploration of Māori worldviews (*Te ao Māori*), I came across the principle of *Tino Rangatiratanga*. While a direct English translation does not exist (and would not be possible), *Tino Rangatiratanga* broadly refers to the principles of self-determination, sovereignty, independence, and autonomy. Interestingly, while these principles may seem newfound within Academe, Māori culture has embraced these philosophies for centuries.

As a white European in Aotearoa New Zealand, I was cognizant of not only my immediate privileges, but also generational advantages that have allowed me to access Aotearoa New Zealand in ways many could not. As such, a conscious (and continuous) consideration of my privileges and the ways in which I could use my privilege to foster meaningful engagement with sex workers, both Pākehā (white New Zealander) and Māori, was of the utmost importance. Another Māori worldview that informed my fieldwork was *Whakawhanaungatanga* (loosely translated as the establishing of relationships). I was informed of this principle by an Aotearoa New Zealander colleague who suggested that taking time to establish relationships was an important element of conducting research in Aotearoa New Zealand (especially when conducting research with marginalised groups). This worldview is indicative of developing relationships before you seek or gain something from it (in this instance, sex workers' personal stories for the purposes of data collection).

Data Collection

Between February and October 2023, 20 interviews were conducted with sex workers from Aotearoa New Zealand ($n=12$) and Scotland ($n=8$). Inclusion criteria for the study was as follows: participants must be over the age of 18; currently living in Scotland or Aotearoa New Zealand; male or masc-identifying (cisgender or transgender), inclusive of non-binary and gender non-conforming identities and expressions; and be willing to share their experiences of sex work, specifically as it relates to misconceptions of male/non-binary sex work (see: **Appendix A and B** for the study's recruitment posters). As this study relates to socio-legal models of sex work, the participants were required to have experience of full-service sex work (that is, meeting clients in person), as sex work law and policy is commonly framed with full-service sex work in mind. Numerous participants engaged in other industry sectors (online sex work such as OnlyFans or camming, sugaring, studio porn, etc.), alongside full-service. When non-sex workers imagine sex workers, they sometimes do so through essentialist, unidirectional frames. That is to say, sex workers are rarely imagined existing within more than one sector of the sex industries, and they are even more seldom thought to exist within normative spaces of employment (Bowen 2021).

Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 30-90 minutes (see: **Appendices C and D** for interview schedules/questions). The semi-structured nature of the interviews afforded participants laterality to discuss and explore ideas and topics that were important to their story. Interviews took place both in person and online via Zoom, as some participants felt more comfortable with the latter (see: **Appendices E and F** for participant information sheets for interviews taking place both face-to-face and online). This is indicative of this project's commitment to the values of inclusivity and accessibility. This is especially important when dealing with marginalised communities such as sex workers, and it is important to consider people's individual access needs. Many neurodivergent people, for example, find it difficult to sit still for extended periods of time, make eye contact, or verbally articulate their emotions, all of which are implicit within the traditional social research interview structure. As Botha (2021) notes, much of academic research is inherently ableist, a structural issue which I was conscious of and attempted to address in my methodological design. All participants were provided with a detailed information sheet which included information about the researcher, the

project's background, aims and objectives, information concerning data security, storage, and archiving plans. Participants were also offered the opportunity engage in an arts-based practice during the interview, although only a few took part, with most preferring to discuss the questions without drawing.

For participants taking part in person, consent forms and information sheets were read through with them to ensure they had fully understood and were able to give informed consent. During interviews, participants were then asked to give either verbal or written consent. Sex workers have a complex relationship with academia and any process which involves the recording of personal information due to issues surrounding marginalisation, stigmatisation, and the illegalisation of sex work in many national contexts. Thus, in some cases, verbal consent was more appropriate. Verbal consent was given after the interview had started and the recording had begun. Written consent will be obtained via the participant consent form. For online interviews, consent forms were sent via email or WhatsApp. In the case of informal conversations with non-participants, verbal consent was obtained. To avoid constituting economic harm, participants were given £30 gift cards (approximately 60 New Zealand dollars) for taking part. This is in line with what Abel and Ludeke (2021) and Weinhold, Abel, and Thompson (2023) offered sex workers in terms of financial compensation for taking part in their respective research projects. Interview recordings were then sent to a paid transcriber for transcription, who had signed a non-disclosure agreement prior to accessing the audio recordings. After transcription, the transcripts were uploaded to SharePoint to ensure secure storage of participant data.

Generally speaking, stories of sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand were narrated with relative ease. Due to Aotearoa New Zealand's unique socio-legal landscape (full decriminalisation), sex workers can, by and large, tell their stories without fear of reproach. This was also evident in the recruitment process; I interviewed 12 sex workers in 12 weeks with few issues regarding recruitment. Recruitment was achieved largely through purposeful sampling and snowballing. Recruitment posters were posted online via X (formerly Twitter) and in person at the NZPC office in Wellington. Most the participants were Pākehā (white); one was Brazilian (identifying as both white and Latino); one was Māori; and several identified as white with Māori heritage. Four participants were trans men, three were cisgender men, and five identified as non-

binary. Sex workers in Aotearoa New Zealand are willing to share their stories and the absence of criminality offers a space in which to do so, both symbolically and literally. Five of the interviews took place at the NZPC's office in Wellington; five of the interviews took place at their office in Auckland; one was conducted online over Zoom; and one was conducted in a mutually agreed location in Nelson in the South Island. See **Photo 5** (below) for more detailed socio-demographic information on participants.

Photo 6:

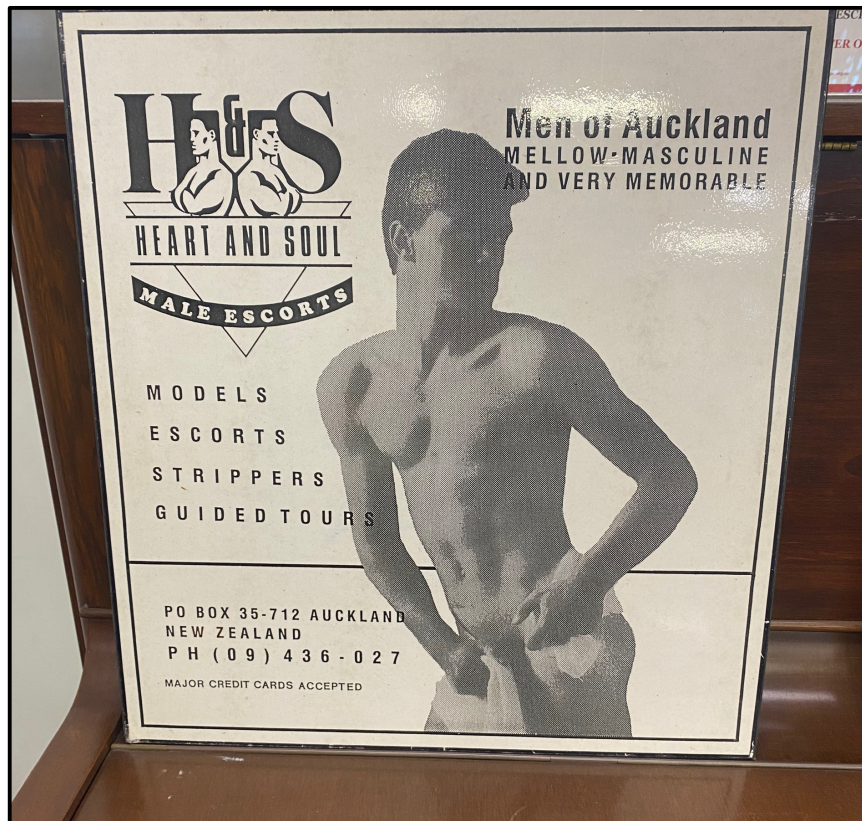
Name	Age	Gender Identity	Pronouns	Ethnicity	Age started sex working
Aiden	28	Trans man	He/him	NZ European (Pākehā) with Māori heritage	28
Kurt	Late twenties	Trans man	He/him	White NZ	15
Lochy	22	Genderqueer (leans towards masc)	Any pronouns	Pākehā	16
Luke	33	Cis man	He/him	White NZ	21/22
Thiago	37	Genderqueer/non-binary	Any pronouns	Brazilian (latinx)	31
Toby	33	Non-binary	They/them	Pākehā	21
Tommy Lee	26	Trans masc non-binary	He/him	White Scottish	24
Jake	22	Non-binary	They/them	NZ European	15
Prince	26	Non-binary	They/them	Pākehā	19
Jon	23	Trans masc (bewteen non-binary and a man)	He/they (any)	NZ European	18
Allan	55	Cis man	He/him	Māori	14
Harry	21	Cis man	He/him	Pākehā	19/20
Zach	23	Trans man	He/him	Pākehā	20
Caiden	32	Transmasc (non-binary)	They/he (he for sex-related things)	White Scottish	32
Jack	28	Non-binary	They/them (he/him for sex work)	White Canadian	21
Kenny	48	Cis man	He/him	White Canadian	19
Mark	30	Cis man	He/him	White Scottish	19
Max	33	Non-binary (AMAB)	They/them	White British/Welsh	31
Scott	22	Non-binary	They/them/it's/its	White Scottish	19/20
Steve	32	Cis man	He/him	White Scottish	28

Photo 7:



**Pre-millennium advertisement for Auckland-based male sex workers
(own photo, taken in the Auckland NZPC office)**

Photo 8:



Pre-millennium advertisement for Auckland-based male sex workers (own photos, taken in the Auckland NZPC office)

The NZPC are a government funded, harm reduction-focused organisation. Due to the decriminalised nature of sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand, sex workers can access these spaces easily and without trepidation. The NZPC regional addresses are public information; they are not clandestine because they have no reason to be. Sex workers are more willing to engage with research because they do not have any reason to hide their profession (other than personal preference). Contrast this with Scotland, in which sex work is partially criminalised, and the story is considerably dissimilar. Sex workers are not able to tell their stories with the same ease, especially if their work constitutes a crime (working outdoors or working with others, for example, as per Scottish sex work laws). Recruitment in Scotland was less fruitful compared to Aotearoa New Zealand, with only 8 participants recruited in 8 weeks Attempts were made to recruit further participants, but these attempts were unsuccessful. All participants were white Scottish, white European, or white Canadian. Two interviews were conducted at the Numbrella Lane (a sex worker wellbeing space) centre in Glasgow; three were

conducted over Zoom; and three were conducted in Edinburgh in mutually agreed locations. three participants were cis men and five identified as either transmasculine non-binary or non-binary.

In contrast with Aotearoa New Zealand, in which several potential participants indicated interest in the project past the point of saturation, several Scotland-based sex workers rescinded their offers of participation altogether. Unsurprisingly, there is a general anxiety when conducting research in criminalised environments. Sex workers do not wish to be put in situations that might compromise their safety (physical, emotional, or economic). Sex workers in Scotland are less invested in taking part in research projects because they do not feel it is worth the risk involved. One Scotland-based participant withdrew their interest in the study after considering it too risky to take part – that is, they feared being outed as a sex worker. Within criminalised environments, sex worker stigma is ubiquitous and operates on both structural and individual levels. Lack of awareness and acceptability of sex work in Scotland presents itself as both a social and legal issue. The legality of sex work can directly influence the social awareness and acceptability of sex work, as seen in the case of Aotearoa New Zealand. Sex workers in Aotearoa New Zealand generally agreed that sex work is largely tolerated among the general population. In contrast, Scotland-based sex workers uniformly suggested that sex work was both poorly understood and constructed as a problem rather than a profession. Stories of sex work cannot be disentangled from the broader socio-jurisdictional context from which they are narrated and, in many ways, shape the stories in conscious and unconscious ways (for both participant and interviewer). I would affirm that there is a clear correlation between the socio-legal contexts of sex work and the ways in which sex workers themselves position themselves within their own narratives and the social world around them.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted by using performative and rhizomatic approaches to narrative analysis. According to Riessman: “Narrative analysis in the human sciences refers to a family of approaches to diverse kinds of texts, which have in common a

storied form” (2005, p. 1). Marshall and Rossman posit that narrative analysis, “seeks to describe the meaning of experience for individuals, frequently those who are marginalised or oppressed, as they construct stories (narratives) about their lives” (1999, p. 5). Narrative approaches are concerned with how individuals talk about (and construct) themselves and others, as well as how language is being used and for what purpose (Peters, Kessi, and Boonzaier 2019). Academic interest in narrative approaches emerged from the “narrative turn” in the human sciences, away from positivist modes of inquiry. For Langellier, such approaches are: embedded, “in the lives of the ordinary, the marginalised, and the muted, personal narrative responds to the disintegration of master narratives as people make sense of experience, claim identities, and ‘get a life’ by telling and writing their stories” (2001, p. 700). For Snajdr, a master narrative, “is directed from and ultimately constructed and reproduced as social reality by dominant institutions, agents and systems” (2013, p. 234). Riessman expounds upon the relationship between master narratives and narratives of personal experience, stating that: “As nations and governments construct preferred narratives about history, so do social movements, organisations, scientists, other professionals, ethnic/racial groups, and individuals in stories of experience” (Riessman 2005, p. 1). Like ethnographic inquiry, narrative analysts document their research by composing fieldnotes and analysing interview transcripts. Riessman suggests that narratives, “do not speak for themselves or have unanalysed merit; they require interpretation when used as data in social research” (2005., p. 2).

Riessman outlines the various typologies of narrative analysis (thematic, structural, interactional, and performative), but suggests that, in practice, “different approaches can be combined; they are not mutually exclusive and, as with all typologies, boundaries are fuzzy” (2005, p. 2). For Riessman, performative narrative analysis examines how narratives are dialogically produced and performed within specific socio-cultural circumstances (2008). Performative narrative analysis pays close attention to the ways in which talk is intentionally produced in relation to the cultural context in which the narrative is being constructed (Smith et al. 2009). The influence of the researcher, the interview setting, and the language used by the narrator are also interrogated within such an approach (Riessman 2008). Narrative analysis can offer insights into someone’s personal experiences, but also a sense of interconnected meaning or, “more global assumptions or worldviews held by individuals or within the

culture under study” (Riessman 1993, p. 61). Cunliffe implements Goodall’s (2000) new or “narrative ethnography”, an approach which, “encompasses the belief that personal narratives are also collective ones, because we live and work in a dialectical relationship with our social, cultural, historical, and linguistic circumstances” (2017, p. 10). This is comparable to Raitanen, Sandberg, and Oksanen’s (2019) implementation of ethnographic generalisations, in which, “personal narratives are used to unveil otherwise hidden meanings, motivations, social practices, interactions and mythologies” (p. 5). Within the context of this study, in which myth is being examined within a multi-jurisdictional context, close attention is paid to transnational master narratives of sex work and how these are interpreted through the stories of sex workers in both Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand. This is an attempt to counter master narratives of sex work through anti-hegemonic accounts, what indigenous Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith terms “righting and re-writing” (1999, p. 28).

Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots (2008) and Loots, Coppens, and Sermijn (2013) integrate a rhizomatic perspective within narrative research. Loots, Coppens, and Sermijn (2013) distinguish between person-centred and culturally-orientated approaches to narrative, suggesting that: “In contrast to the story notion of narrative as a sequentially ordered, complete and closed text, the cultural-oriented approaches treat narrative as performance, as narrative in-context” (p. 108). Similarly, Peters, Kessi, and Boonzaier state that performative narrative analysis, “captures the social context in which narratives are produced and told. It takes seriously the conditions which inform narrative, and includes the perceived audience and the interviewer’s influence” (2019, p. 428). As Riessman (1993) suggests, when we tell stories about our lives, we are performing our (preferred) identities. This performance of identities, “includes the way scenes are organised, the grammatical resources employed and the choices made about social positioning – how narrators position audience, characters, and themselves; and, reciprocally, how the audience positions the narrator” (Loots, Coppens, and Sermijn 2013, p. 108). For Loots, Coppens, and Sermijn, narrative Selfhood is constituted through these performances, within the broader context of narrating. They state that: “According to this perspective, human subjectivity is no longer restricted to coherency, but comes in many kinds: diverse, fragmented, contradictory and open” (2013, p. 108). Within a rhizomatic narrative perspective, scholars position people’s stories, “as socio-cultural embedded performances, that

continuously and multifariously construct and reconstruct experiences and human subjectivity” (Loots, Coppens, and Sermijn 2008, p. 111). Loots, Coppens, and Sermijn also state that: “When considering stories as performances responding to life instead of a representation of life... they are horizontally connected with each other and more broadly with socio-cultural discourses and practices” (2008, p. 113). As Riessman (2008) suggests, “observations, long-lasting relationships, repeated conversations rather than the typical one-shot interview, and attention to the broader historical and political context beyond the interview or ethnographic situation are just as important and even more preferable in doing narrative research” (cited in Loots, Coppens, and Sermijn 2013, p. 113). Within rhizomatic analysis, the researcher is not divorced from the stories being constructed throughout the research process; they are part of the rhizome itself (Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots 2008; Loots, Coppens, and Sermijn 2013).

For Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots: “The stories that participant and researcher co-construct thus offer no more than a fleeting glimpse of the multitude of possible stories that could be constructed” (2008, p. 641). For Loots, Coppens, and Sermijn: “Which entryway is taken and which connections there are made during the speaking, depends on the context in which the telling takes place” (2013, p. 111). As Baker-Cristales suggests: “Because so many ways exist for ethnographic stories to be told and, indeed, there are so many stories to be told, ethnographers have to find and develop effective storylines” (2015, p. 15). In other words, many stories can exist simultaneously; some are simply not illuminated by the researcher. Rhizomatic stories are inherently polysemic, with multiple meanings being the hallmark of such an analytic paradigm. Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots (2008) explore reflexive, rhizomatic writing i.e., “messy texts”, suggesting that “reflexive texts that try to break with the representational technologies that are typical for the traditional, realist writing forms” (p. 647). For Denzin (1997), messy texts are reflexive insofar that they, “are aware of their own narrative apparatuses, they are sensitive to how reality is socially constructed, and they understand that writing is a way of ‘framing’ reality” (p. 224). A messy text, “announces its politics and ceaselessly interrogates the realities it invokes while folding the teller’s story into the multivoiced history that is written” (Denzin 1997, p. 225).

The first step of my data analysis was to read through the transcriptions of participant interviews to familiarise myself with the data. I read through the Aotearoa New Zealand-based interviews first, then the interviews conducted in Scotland. During the second read-through, transcripts from both nations were read in an overlapping manner – one from Aotearoa New Zealand, one from Scotland, and so on. During this phase, sections of the interviews were highlighted, and annotations were made concerning general points of interest. The next phase was to move these highlighted sections into a separate coding document. This is consistent with the “constant comparison” method – that is, comparing data sets (in this case, comparing participant narratives from both jurisdictional contexts) to identify similarities and differences within individual stories (Ellison and Weitzer 2016). Participant quotes were then allocated under broad headings: assumptions/misconceptions; gender and sex work; sex work and the law; and media and sex work.

The myths were then developed by analysing participant narratives and ethnographic fieldnotes. After this, attention was paid to the broader socio-legal ecologies in which the stories were narrated. Rhizomatic and performative approaches to narrative pay close attention to the cultural dimensions in which the narrative is being told (Peters, Kessi, and Boonzaier 2019; Loots, Coppens, and Sermijn 2013; Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots 2008). As aforementioned, the main myths consistent across both nations are:

- 1) **The myth of the “male” sex worker** – that is, the male sex worker is presumed to be cisgender (or not to exist at all). This myth was emphasised and explored by trans and non-binary narratives of sex work, destabilising and queering pre-existing ideas of men who sell sex. Assumptions of cisgender identities within male sex work serves to further invisibilise transmasculine and non-binary sex workers.
- 2) **The myth of invulnerability** – numerous participants remarked on the notion of male sex workers being largely insusceptible to harm, at least when compared to their female or femme sex worker counterparts. This renders male and non-binary sex workers invisible within victimhood narratives and broader socio-legal discussions surrounding the sex industries.

- 3) **The myth of hypersexuality** – many participants suggested that, due to their gender, there is often an implicit presumption of hypersexual tendencies.
- 4) **The myth of recreationality** – operating in tandem with the myth of hypersexuality, the myth of recreationality supposes that, for male and non-binary sex workers, sex work is inherently recreational or exploratory. Not only does this trivialise or invalidate the rich multiplicity of male and non-binary sex worker experiences, it serves to invisibilise male and non-binary sex workers from labour and legal-based discussions surrounding the sex industries.
- 5) **The myth of the monolithic “male” body** – numerous participants remarked upon the perception of a prerequisite for male sex workers to be youthful and adhere to normative societal conventions of attractiveness by possessing a specific body type (slim or muscular). In other words, sex workers must conform to monolithic ideas of masculinity. Such a perception is largely reserved for cisgender male workers, with transgender male and non-binary sex workers commenting on the limited knowledge surrounding non-cisgender bodies within society. The misconception that all male sex workers are young, muscular, and conventionally attractive serves to erase male and non-binary sex workers who do not fit within this normative paragon of youthful, masculine ideals. Several of these myths stem from broader social understandings of men/masculinity and a general lack of knowledge surrounding transgender and non-binary individuals, which will be explored later in greater detail.

Objectivity, Positionality, and Reflexivity

Within the social sciences, the concept of scientific objectivity is a highly contentious topic with various opposing fields of thought. Plainly, objectivity means that research is untied to social and cultural values – that is, it is distanced from the object of study. However, social scientists rarely discuss how objectivity is functionally achieved, especially scholars who favour quantitative methods (Botha 2021). Speaking of ethnography’s apparent lack of scientific objectivity, Rice and Maltz cite Heims, who refers to “value neutrality” within scientific research as a “politically useful myth” (2018, p. 3). Panfil (2018) states that being an openly queer academic who engages in queer criminology comes with specific implications and assumptions: that their research is

seen as activism or advocacy rather than scholarship, that their analyses are inherently “biased” and lack objectivity, as well as more general concerns about rigour and transparency. For Panfil, advocacy and scholarship are not at odds, especially in qualitative research, in which the, “subjectivity of the work is actually its strength, provided that our position in relation to the study and our participants is made visible and analysed just as the data would be” (2018, p. 261). Botha (2021) writes that they have been advised to leave their emotions “at the door” and that it is not “professional” to engage emotively with science. They write: “My sadness is taken as evidence of bias. I am told to be objective, and separate myself from the descriptions, the violence, and dehumanisation. Instead, I have leaned-in – in a radical act of defiance I am transparent, vulnerable, and honest” (Botha 2021, p. 7). Within my research, I have also leaned into this epistemological vulnerability, one which, at times, can be equally emotionally demanding and rewarding.

Within qualitative social scientific research, notions of objectivity have become increasingly inseparable from considerations of positionality and reflexivity. Positionality refers to the researcher’s own situatedness within their research and how this influences the research design, process, and results, while reflexivity refers to the, “constant critical self-reflection of the researcher throughout all phases of the research process” (Johnston 2019, p. 2). Hankins posits that, “across queer ethnography, reflexivity is not a by-product, not material for an introductory chapter or conclusion, but the very pulse of ethnographic unfolding” (2014, p. 97). For Armstrong, “knowledge produced by researchers who explicitly reflect on and interrogate their positioning is considered more objective than those who present themselves as impartial observers” (2022, p. 7). I would argue that no research can ever be truly objective, regardless of how rigorously the author recognises and reflects on their own positionality within their research. I echo a similar sentiment to that of Rice and Maltz (2018) inasmuch that scientific objectivity is, for many, an ideological currency used to give research credibility rather than something that can be functionally achieved within research. As Letherby suggests, “all research is ideological because no one can separate themselves from the world” (2003, p. 5). My research, as it relates to sex work, is not objective. That is, not in the traditional, positivistic sense of the term. I have a rhetorical stance insofar that I believe sex work is work and that arguments which position sex work as a form of violence against women are, ironically, a form of epistemic violence

against all sex workers, irrespective of gender. My work is heavily informed by my own advocacy work within the Scottish sex working community. Over the past several years, I have worked closely with ScotPep, an Edinburgh-based sex worker political advocacy group, becoming a board member in 2021. In 2022, I became a research assistant for National Ugly Mugs, a UK-wide sex worker violence prevention charity. By declaring a false sense of objectivity, I would not only be displaying academic dishonesty but would be betraying my devotion to, and respect for, the Scottish (and global) sex working communities.

Personal biographies (race, sex, sexuality, class, gender) and their attendant privileges influence the ways in which we experience, perceive, and navigate the social world (Armstrong 2022). Personal biographies undoubtedly influence our academic positionalities, especially in a field such as applied social science, wherein the social world (and how its constructed, understood, and experienced by people within it) is the principal point of entry for academic inquiry. Easterbrook-Smith suggests that, “the positionality of a scholar in sex work research will inform the questions asked and the findings which are brought to the fore in discussions” (2022, p. 181). As noted by Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots, “the researcher becomes part of the rhizome. As researchers, we cannot possibly remain outside the rhizomatic story as ‘objective observers’: We are within the rhizomatic story as a part of the dynamic construction process” (2008, p. 639). I am cognizant (and continuously reflective) of my personal biographies and privileges which influence the ways in which I engage with my research. I can access academia in ways others cannot. I am cisgender, queer, white, working class, and a sex worker. While some identity categories are fixed, most are mobile (such as class, sexuality, and gender). Identities (and positionalities) are rhizomatic insofar that they are iterative and open to continuous renegotiation. My positionality as it pertains to sex work is impacted by my own lived experience of sex work, but this is just as true whether I choose to disclose this personal identity or not. Why, then, am I choosing to disclose this if I could just as easily conceal it? Simply put, academics with lived experience of sex work are too often shamed into silence, further perpetuating the stigma which permeates academia and wider social discourses surrounding engagement with the sex industries (Armstrong 2022; Bruckert 2014; Easterbrook-Smith 2022).

Recently, several scholars have disclosed their lived experiences of sex work and the practical and emotional implications such a disclosure engenders (Armstrong 2022; Bruckert 2014; Easterbrook-Smith 2022c). Bruckert (2014) reminds us that, “perception is contextually conditioned” (p. 307) insofar that they did not feel shame or stigma until being exposed to anti-sex work rhetoric (both within and outwith the Academy). Here, Bruckert highlights the complex mechanics of stigma and its socially instructive nature. Armstrong (2022) suggests that, although it has been many years since they sold sex, stigma continues to have a formidable presence in their life. While other academics have discussed the associated stigma that comes with researching the sex industry (cf. Hammond and Kingston 2014), Armstrong states that their most significant struggle with stigma comes from, “the emotional consequences of concealing an important part of my human experience” (2022, p. 5). Armstrong describes the dilemma of “coming out” as a former sex worker as one fraught with “emotional paralysis” (2022, p. 6). Easterbrook-Smith (2022c) also reflects on their experiences as an academic with lived experience of sex work. They state that: “It is one thing to have the lived experience of being part of a stigmatised population; it is quite another to add an academic understanding of the breadth and depth of this stigma” (2022c, p. 177). Armstrong states that: “The politics of positionality in sex work research creates an emotional predicament for researchers who have sex work experience but feel unable to publicly disclose it because of stigma” (2022, p. 8). For Bruckert, “even being an ex-sex worker is an identity marker that can be ascribed definitive value” (2014, p. 309). Similarly, Easterbrook-Smith suggests that: “The identity of sex worker is viewed as permanent, a descriptor and stigmatised identity which persists after ceasing work in the industry” (2022, p. 177). For Armstrong: “To be reflexive, examining identity and related past experiences is important. This is challenging, however, for researchers who have stigmatised past experiences which, if revealed, exposes them to risk” (2022, p. 8). Armstrong suggests that, “like many researchers in a range of areas, I have come to realise that positionality is often more complex than the binary categories of insider and outsider”, and that their positionality, “is best described as liminal because I straddle insider and outsider status” (2022, p. 10). To wit, sex worker identity is rhizomatic insofar that the cultural implications of selling sex (such as social stigma, financial discrimination, employment discrimination, and travel limitations) are far-reaching and have material and emotional consequences for both current and former sex workers.

Johnston (2019) examines their experiences of researching people who have lived experience of psychosis as someone who has also experienced psychosis. Johnston discusses the outsider-insider framework within qualitative research, suggesting that “outsider” researchers do not closely identify with the population they are researching and, most likely, have not shared the lived experiences of the community in question. “Insider” researchers, by contrast, have usually had personal experiences that align with their targeted group, allowing for easier access to participants and greater levels of trust between participants and researchers. As such, the insider researcher has a greater responsibility to critically examine the role of the Self in the production of knowledge and consider their own biographies and personal experiences as it relates to their research. For Johnston: “Research carried out into disability by a disabled researcher cannot on the basis of experience alone be seen to be more legitimate than research carried out into disability by a non-disabled researcher” (2019, p. 3). Similarly, Armstrong states: “I believe that personal stories are incredibly valuable, but I feel strongly that these should not be used as ideological currency, wielded as power, and a ‘trump card’ to undermine different viewpoints” (Armstrong 2022, p. 10). For Johnston: “It is how the research project is conducted, how the participants are involved, how attention is paid to ethical issues and the extent of critical reflexivity, that have to be regarded as key factors” (2019, p. 3). Armstrong further reflects on the insider-outsider dynamic, suggesting that, “academics are often presumed to be ‘outsiders’ and are set apart from the communities they do research with”, and that, “the presumption of outsider status is complicated for researchers who do have lived experience but are not ready to be ‘out’ about their experiences” (2022, p. 8). While it may be true that many scholars who research the sex industries do not have lived experience of sex work, “the supposition that academics will inevitably be outsiders is in part anchored in stigmatic beliefs regarding who current and former sex workers are, and the spaces in which they exist” (2022, p. 8).

Academic, Advocate, Activist

The complex relationship between academia and activism has been assessed by many social scientists as both contradictory and complementary (Botha 2021;

Bruckert 2014; Heckert 2010; Reynolds 2014). Heckert (2010) references the, “powerful overlaps in the disciplinary identities of activist and academic” (p. 51). Similarly, apropos queer and feminist theory, Warhol and Lanser, “understand theory as itself a form of academic activism, in that it continually overturns assumptions which have served to keep gender inequalities and heteronormative epistemologies in place” (2015, p. 7). For Reynolds (2014), the intersection between academia and activism is plagued by “histories of appropriation” and suggests that, “engaging in research and publishing is not a neutral activity” (p. 129). Bruckert questions whether academic books and peer-reviewed articles (which are not commonly accessible for non-academics both in terms of florid content and access rights) are useful to marginalised groups, especially those who are struggling to survive. They state: “Writing academic articles and presenting at international conferences in exotic locales does little to improve the lives of the individuals who entrusted us with their stories” (p. 317). Heckert (2010) expresses a similar concern, questioning to what extent we, as qualitative researchers, are exploit our participants by collecting their stories. When Heckert shared this concern with one of their research partners, they were reminded that, “by listening, I was giving something as well. Giving and receiving, receiving and giving: an anarchist economics of research and a compassionate queering of borders between Self and Other” (2010, p. 51).

For Deleuze and Guattari, philosophy should be “utopian” inasmuch that it should aspire to, “summon forth a new earth, a new people” (1996, p. 99). Utopia, here, is not understood as a paradisiac space, but rather a process of social and political imagination. In reference to Le Guin, Baker-Cristales writes that, “the elusive utopia in LeGuin’s work is not a particular kind of society or world, but self-transcendence and the ability to understanding the Other” (2015, p. 22). I recognise Deleuzoguattarian notions of utopia as a radical, transformative space where politics and practice converge to create new, pluralistic possibilities. Heckert also cites Bourdieu, who once described the interview process as a way of, “creating a transformative space, which changes both the interviewer and interviewee” (2010, p. 52). For Heckert: “Space to share stories, to hear/read one’s own stories and stories of others is what is transformative about methodological anarchism – it creates space for new possibilities to emerge” (2010, p. 52). Heckert claims that the interview can be a mutually beneficial space, but cautions that, “the interviewee must have the opportunity to speak about

what is important to them as well as what is important to the interviewer” (2010, p. 52). Johnston shares a similar empathetic sensibility, suggesting that being an empathetic researcher means, “that we sympathise with our participants, we try to understand them, we are kind, we avoid judgment, we share our emotions, and we build compassionate relationships, however long or brief, so that they can learn to trust us” (2019, p. 1). Heckert (2010) says he encouraged participants to talk about issues that seemed important to them, even when they did not directly relate to the aims of the research. Similarly, Cunliffe posits that: “Reflexive and critical researchers who connect with the lived experiences and/or inequalities of their research participants accept that research is an engaged and emotional experience, carrying an ethical responsibility to participants and for articulating the position we take” (Cunliffe 2018, p. 14).

Reynolds (2014) suggests that bridging the worlds between academia and activism is imperative for “justice-doing”, stating: “I believe that theorising holds the promise of justice-doing and that liberatory theorising can engender liberatory practices. I have approached theory with an intention of excavating histories of both acts of resistance, and of acts of justice” (p. 131). For Reynolds (2014), activism is informed by theory insofar that it enables, “drawing links across differences, and making public acts of power that are often obscured in the mystification of media, and what passes for normal: the way things are” (p. 131). Botha (2021) provides a critical reflection on this, discussing the intersection between academia, activism, and advocacy. They do so by discussing their experiences as an autistic person within academia. Botha argues that researchers implement scientific objectivity as a means of silencing autistic voices within research, and that claims of value-free objectivity (which are then used as a way of dehumanising autistic persons) embody specific social and cultural values without acknowledging positionality or privileges within research. They proclaim themselves as an “advocate, activist, and academic”, a triumvirate of conflicting and complementary identities which I myself am aligned with. They ponder whether autism research is, or ever truly can be, hospitable to autistic involvement. A similar quandary can be raised in relation to sex workers and their involvement in academic research. That being said, Bruckert suggests that research *can* benefit sex workers: “I want to say that while we must problematise the power optics, the reality is that the academy

is the first point of contact for policymakers and, as such, sex worker and researcher communities need to strategise” (2014, p. 312).

I embrace the notion that sex workers are the experts on sex work and their own experiences (Smith and Mac 2020). However, this position is not immune to critique, with Bruckert (2014) questioning the notion of expertise within sex work scholarship. They agree that sex workers are the experts on their own lives, but questions, “are they the only experts?” Are they the experts of others’ lives? Is a sex worker necessarily the expert of the industry? Is there a hierarchy of experiential expertise, and if so what is it based on? (p. 312). Suggesting that expertise which exists outwith the academy is not as credible as academic knowledge is highly exclusionary and is often imbricated within the complex interplays of racism, classism, and ableism (Reynolds 2014). This strategy of delegitimisation has been noted by hooks (1991), who suggests such tactics, “reinscribe the politics of domination by designating work as either inferior, superior, or more or less worthy of attention” (p. 4). Klesse implements the term “interview partners” as a means of acknowledging, “that the production of knowledge in the context of qualitative interviewing is a joint enterprise and an active collaboration between researcher and research participants” (2006, p. 579). Hankins (2012) cites Halberstam’s notion of “the death of the expert” (p. 446) i.e., the discursive relationship between queer scholars and their subjects (or “subcultural producers”). Bruckert (2014) explores the academic notion of giving “voice to the voiceless” – that is, marginalised persons. Within the knowledge-power dialectic, not all knowledges are equal or perceived as credible. Many do not believe sex workers are experts on their own experiences, a form of epistemic harm which works to invalidate or silence sex worker voices. As Bruckert puts it, “knowledge does not exist outside of power – it is woven into its very fabric” (2014, p. 316). Bruckert also posits that: “Marginalised people do not need us to give them voice: they have their own. They do, however, need us to get off the proverbial soapbox – or at least share it” (2014, p. 318). Ericsson and Kostera conceptualise “alterethnography”, an, “epistemological approach inextricably linked with a writing style communicating Otherness and difference” (2020, p. 1404). The authors suggest that such an approach is concerned with, “more than giving voice – it is writing as responsibility towards alterity” (2020, p. 1404). The very idea of giving a voice to someone reproduces the very power structures that render marginalised persons unheard. They

have voices; their voices are not respected, however, both within society and the Academy. This research embraces alterity as a means of amplifying marginalised and Othered voices and giving them authority within this project.

Reflection

(Content warning: this section contains references to a family death and mentions of suicide). My time in Aotearoa New Zealand can only be described as complicated. I am writing this on the plane home. It was easily one of the best and most rewarding experiences of my entire life, but also one of the most challenging. Some of these challenges I had foreseen; others, however, presented themselves in a more unexpected manner. The week before I was due to leave Aotearoa New Zealand, I was in the South Island in Nelson conducting my final interview.

Photo 9:



View from the plane over Aotearoa New Zealand's South Island (own photo)

When I woke up the following morning, my mother called and told me that my eldest brother had died by suicide. Anyone who has been bereft by suicide will tell you it is an intensely complicated loss and, for many, is entirely incomparable to other forms of bereavement. Sadness, anger, frustration, guilt, pain, and an excess of other emotions, often overlapping and in competition with one another. I was fortunate enough to be able to take some well-needed time off from my studies, which was imperative for both my grieving and healing. I had previously begun meditating in Aotearoa New Zealand as a way of coping with anxiety and stress. One very important

thing that meditation has taught me is that comfort and discomfort often exist conterminously. My time spent in Aotearoa New Zealand comprised of many moments of tension or unease, but was matched with just as many moments of joy and calm. Learning to lean into discomfort, into feelings of tension, has impacted the ways in which I conduct my research. I noticed that, during my first batch of interviews, I was enthusiastic to the point of speaking too frequently. If there were pauses, I would look to fill them, not wanting myself or the participant to feel awkward. However, as I later learned, these moments would end up providing some of the most articulate and meaningful stories. These brief silences or respite are, at times, necessary, however uncomfortable they may seem. Truly listening to someone's story requires you to respect the way they choose to tell it, silences included. There is meaning in the silence. There are moments of comfort in the discomfort.

My research holds a very dear place in my heart. Rather than allowing personal circumstances to adversely affect my research, I have embraced the uncertainty. I realised that, try as I may, I could not predict what the rest of my PhD journey would look like. I could not control the process but I could control, to an extent, how I responded to the difficulties along the way. The research process is, like people and life, a rather messy one. Process, in this context, sounds entirely too formal; a process implies order. My research journey (and my academic journey in general), however, was one that clearly evades order. I have leaned into the disordered nature of my research, which is not to say it is not scientific or rigorous. It is, however, deeply unconcerned with notions of replicability or objectivity. My research is not objective, and I steadfastly resist replicability. While similar results may be generated by those conducting similar projects, the stories I have presented are fundamentally unique. Even if I wanted to replicate this study, it would be impossible to do so. Further, my own position within my research is in a constant state of flux. The way I conduct interviews (the posing of questions, the framing of situations, and the way I may or may not influence the participant's answers) is always evolving. My participants' answers cannot be replicated verbatim; two researchers may pose the same questions only to receive different responses. I am part of the story, the rhizome, the journey; it is unpredictable and there is a power in leaning into the unpredictability of your research.

Music provided great comfort and healing, especially towards the latter half of my stay in Aotearoa New Zealand. I returned to one song over and over: “Without You Without Them” by boygenius. Upon reflection, I became keenly aware of why this song became so meaningful to me during my fieldwork, especially my chosen emphasis on rhizomatic narratives and storytelling. The song goes:

*“Give me everything you’ve got
I’ll take what I can give
I want to hear your story and be a part of it...
Speak to me, speak to me, speak to me
Until your history’s no mystery to me”*

I became a part of my participants’ stories, and they became a part of mine. As times goes on, the precise particularities of my research will, undoubtedly, become somewhat hazy. However, the feelings conveyed through these narratives, the spirit of someone’s experiences, and the essences of humanity shared within these moments – those will be significantly more difficult to forget. I return now to a question I posed earlier in this chapter: Why me? Was I really the right person to conduct this research? The very fact that I was the person conducting this research was proof that I was the “right” person. The fact that I was vouched for by colleagues and friends before meeting the NZPC staff, the fact that the NZPC trusted me enough to use their space, and the fact that many sex workers taking part in my study thanked me for dedicating years of my life to this topic, was enough evidence that I was, indeed, the right person.

Summary

This chapter has explored my methodological approaches and their attendant ethical considerations. Attention was also paid to issues surrounding academic objectivity and positionality within qualitative social science research. This chapter also considers the emotional weight of conducting research within one’s own community, particularly during periods of heightened personal hardship.

Chapter Four

Demythologising/Queering the “Male” Sex Worker

Introduction

The first section of analysis will be dedicated to deconstructing and destabilising the mythologised idea of the male sex worker – that is, the image of the male sex worker that permeates popular culture. This is not to suggest that the male sex worker is a prevalent figure within society; previous research has indicated that the invisibility of the male sex worker is one of the most salient challenges that male sex workers contend with on a global scale (Curtis and Boe 2023; Raine 2021). This finding is corroborated by my own research, with many sex workers from both Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand suggesting that the most pervasive myth is that male sex workers simply do not exist. This myth is the easiest to disprove, of course, as the existence of non-women sex workers has been documented for millennia (Jordan 2010). Participants suggested that when male and non-binary sex workers do appear in the cultural consciousness, albeit infrequently, they are imagined in stereotypical or specious ways that do not reflect the diversity within these groups. As scholars have previously noted, a male sex worker is typically synonymous with young, conventionally attractive cisgender men (Dennis 2008).

Myth #1: The Myth of the “Male” Sex Worker

This mythologised image of the male sex worker exists in strict opposition with the participants taking part in this study, with only 6 participants identifying as cis men and the rest identifying as trans or non-binary ($n=14$). This study did not seek out a specific number of cis or trans participants, but was open to all sex workers who felt the study was relevant to their gender and experience of sex work. This is not to suggest that trans and non-binary workers represent a higher population than cis workers, but rather serves to highlight the myth of all male sex workers being cisgender men. The

existence of transmasculine and non-binary sex workers serves to complicate or queer pre-existing cultural paradigms and myths of male sex work. This diversity reflects a broader spectrum of gender identities and experiences, emphasising the critical need to resist reductive, monolithic representations and instead embrace a more comprehensive, intersectional paradigm of sex work. The intersectionality of these experiences, specifically the cultural convergence of homophobia, transphobia, and whorephobia, demands a more comprehensive analytical approach that considers the unique challenges faced by transmasculine and non-binary sex workers.

This section will highlight narratives that explore the diversity in gender identity and expression among the “male” sex working communities in Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand. In doing so, I aim to demythologise the male sex worker by way of queer theory – that is, by dislocating the concept from its rigid ontological and epistemological boundaries and emphasising the multiplicitous, multidirectional possibilities of maleness, mascness, and gender fluidity within male sex work. Male sex workers are largely invisible within wider society; however, experiences of marginalisation are not homogeneous, with transmasculine and non-binary sex workers representing hypermarginalised sub-communities. The existence of trans men within the male sex working community (and wider society) is slowly becoming more acknowledged; however, many of the trans and non-binary individuals taking part in this study suggested that one of their biggest challenges in sex work is their invisibility and the lack of knowledge surrounding trans and non-binary identities. Cis male sex workers are mostly invisible due to limited public understandings of men who sell sex; trans and non-binary sex workers, however, are doubly obscured because of the invisibility of trans men and non-binary persons within broader society, meaning that the latter group represents an intensely invisible and poorly understood population. As such, this chapter will be dedicated to the narratives and experiences of trans and non-binary participants.

There are several reasons for this: firstly, trans and non-binary sex workers are rarely afforded opportunities to have their voices amplified. Secondly, as this thesis is committed to demythologising and queering the notion of the male sex worker, trans and non-binary sex worker narratives complicate the pre-existing mythologies of male sex work, and are often emblematic of the performative, pluralistic, and rhizomatic

possibilities of gender being both accomplished and undone vis-à-vis sex work. For instance, several of the transmasculine and non-binary participants engage in “backpassing” – that is, a transgender or non-binary person performing as their assigned gender at birth during transactional sex as a means of attracting more clients. Further, several of the transmasculine and non-binary participants advertise themselves as men despite not fully identifying as such within their personal lives. This marketing strategy reveals the complex choreography of gender enacted through transactional sex that will be explored in detail throughout this chapter. As this chapter is dedicated to trans and non-binary voices, there are few cisgender voices present throughout this chapter, including my own. I am the curator of these narratives and it would be irresponsible for that fact to remain unrecognised. I consider it an immense privilege to be able to share these stories, and I believe that, as well as challenging the dominant paradigms surrounding male sex work, these stories exist to challenge the normative understandings of gender and sexuality more broadly. Participants with a parenthesised S after their name indicates that this participant was based in Scotland, while a parenthesised ANZ signifies they were based in Aotearoa New Zealand.

I wish to highlight an autoethnographic vignette, in which my own understanding of gender and sexuality is troubled during my fieldwork journey. This vignette represents a transformative moment during the research process:

Something that I have been observing during this process, on this journey, is my rather ambivalent relationship to sexuality and gender. I have always identified as bisexual and queer rather than gay, but being here [in Aotearoa New Zealand] makes me realise just how “non-binary” my feelings towards gender and sexuality truly are (while still identifying as a cisgender man). When I meet someone who is trans, non-binary, or bisexual, I sometimes feel a much deeper connection to them. I would imagine this is because there is an inherent plurality within these identities or, at the very least, the *possibility* of plurality. I began this research journey hoping to learn about others – I have achieved this, but I have also discovered things about myself through them. Not only do trans and non-binary experiences illuminate the fluid and mobile nature of gender, they have the potential for opening new ways of *experiencing* gender in a cisgender world. Even for cisgender individuals, thinking critically about

gender can allow for a more nuanced and perhaps even empathetic understanding of genders that we do not identify with. A post-gender, post-sexuality society, one in which no one would be discriminated against based on their gender or sexuality, is an enticing thought. This future may or may not be possible, but what might we find on the journey? This process begins by allowing ourselves to imagine different ways of experiencing gender and sexuality, ones which may challenge our pre-existing ideas of how gender and sexuality function, both individually and collectively.

(Excerpt adapted from audio fieldnote)

Performing Sex Work/Performing Gender

Scholars have highlighted the performative nature of sex work, either in relation to gender and sexuality or in a broader sense (Hankins 2012; Read 2013; Stardust 2015). However, little academic attention has been paid to exploring the narratives of trans and non-binary sex workers and how they perform and negotiate trans and queer identity through experiences of sex work²⁶. Through the stories of trans and non-binary sex workers, the performative possibilities of gender vis-à-vis sex work (and how gender performativity is achieved and sustained through transactional sex) are illuminated. Scott (S), a non-binary sex worker who backpasses, says: “Yeah, I mean they think that they’re paying you to do a sexual act with you... they’re paying you for a performance”. Caiden (S), a non-binary sex worker who sells sex as a binary trans man, also shares a comparable experience by suggesting:

Yeah, it just feels like another kind of form of... I’m meeting somebody’s needs and it doesn’t feel that wildly different sometimes to, like, day jobs. And the other stuff I do is like performance stuff, so... I mean that also kind of comes into it, because it kind of feels somewhere between caring and the performance.

²⁶ See: Chudyk’s (2023) research that explores transmasculine sex workers and the contradictory performance of feminised labour within sex work.

Caiden's understanding of his sex work being an act of care imbued with performative elements highlights the emotional weight of engaging in sex work and the idea that sex work, like gender, is part of a complex tapestry of human experience. Performativity does not equate to falsity, but rather ritualised, rehearsed, and repeated acts (Butler 1993). Contrarily, Aiden (ANZ) says: "That's another sort of myth that's out there, I suppose, that like sex work is all very performative and fake and some is but some isn't". Aiden is a binary trans man who markets himself as such to clients. Aiden's partial rejection of the performative dimensions of sex work may be partially ascribed to the synchronicity of his gender in both his personal and professional life, unlike Scott (S) and Caiden (S). Aiden also states that:

Luckily, I feel pretty seen as who I am, which is quite nice because, again, I'm very bad at lying about myself, so I'm not one of these sex workers who is like, 'here's my sexy persona', it's more like... here I am and here's what I can do.

Lochy (ANZ), a genderqueer sex worker who presents as male for clients, states: "I guess I do kind of get some enjoyment out of sex work just like being able to like play a character almost". Luke (ANZ), a cisgender male sex worker, states that: "It's just like having fun pretending to be someone else for a bit". Luke says: "Yeah, I would like to think of myself as being a fairly compassionate person and I studied performance so I'm good at pretending to be a different human". Sex workers are cognizant of the performative elements of erotic labour, with Lochy using the expression, "play a character", and Luke implementing the word "pretending" to signify the (at least partially) manufactured nature of sex worker identities.

Several participants mention drag in relation to sex work. Allan (ANZ), a cisgender Māori sex worker who is the only participant to have experience of sex work pre-decriminalisation, says that he would dress in drag as a "disguise" and that it would enable him to avoid persecution from the police. Allan also states that, "you could make more money dressed up than as a male worker". Jon (ANZ), a transmasculine non-binary sex worker who backpasses, expresses: "If I wasn't doing sex work I would probably be doing drag", and that, "It's just fun, you know, the performance, I just love dressing up really!". I refer here to my own autoethnographic writings on the similarities between drag and sex work, having lived experience of both forms of labour. I write:

“Drag is supposed to represent a progressive, political art form rooted in rebellious gender expression. At times, however, it feels like we’re actively participating (and perpetuating) in an entrenched system of cisheteronormative ideology”. Speaking of gendered stereotypes, Prince (ANZ) is a non-binary sex worker who mainly presents as a binary trans male during sex working. Prince (ANZ) says that:

I don’t think a lot of sex workers like pay much attention to that and I don’t think we talk about it a lot... the fact that how we are pretending in gendered ways, or like how we reinforce... how we as sex workers are reinforcing like these myths and then the clients... it’s like leading a horse to water kind of thing.

Prince (ANZ) is alluding to the idea that the sex industry reinforces gender stereotypes (or myths), ones which are derived from heteronormative hegemonies and binary conceptions of gender. That being said, Prince (ANZ) also speaks to the possibilities of undoing gender within transactional sex

Cross-dressers that booked me and people who really evidently wanted to like have a play with gender when having sex and it was really cool... I got to see a whole other side of like sex worker clients and I could also like witness how like misogyny and a lack of experiencing misogyny came into play as well within that.

Prince’s (ANZ) comments highlight the complex and often contradictory performances of gender and the myriad of ways in which individual sex workers can navigate and negotiate gender within spaces of transactional sex.

Several participants explore the notion of authenticity in relation to sex work. Lochy (ANZ) states that: “I think there are some people that think that sex, if you have done sex work, then sex is like not as meaningful, or like sex is just like something that you can, I don’t know, it’s like they think it’s like less authentic, which is really stupid”. Lochy alludes to non-sex worker views on transactional versus non-transactional sex and the inability to reconcile the differences between the two. Irrespective of the degree to which transactional sex is inherently performative, the issue of authenticity is a contentious one and is mentioned by several other participants. Jon (ANZ) recalls a

time when working at a brothel in Auckland, expressing that, during a staff meeting, the brothel workers were reminded that they, “are actors”. Jon agrees with this sentiment and states, “you are trying to put a certain version of yourself out there, it is still authentic, it’s just a certain kind of authentic”. For Jon, authenticity in sex work is not negated by transactionality, but rather seen as an alternative form of authenticity. In relation to gender, Butler (1990, p. 23) states that all forms of gendering are constructed and none are truly original, but some are privileged as authentic while others are not. For Butler: “The parodic replication and resignification of heterosexual constructs within non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called original” (1990, p. 41). Butler’s analysis of performative gender not only applies to queer and transgender identities, but also to the notion of sex work in a broader sense. To imply sex work is inauthentic or simulational of non-transactional sex would be to dismiss positive experiences of sex work, specifically in relation to gender and sexuality and how they are negotiated through sex work. As noted by numerous scholars, some transgender sex workers view transactional sex as a space through which to explore and affirm transgender identity alongside monetary gain. While exploratory and gender affirmative practices are not unique to transgender sex workers, they are seemingly more prevalent within this population (Matten et al. 2018; Nadal et al. 2012; Sevelius 2013). This is evident in Prince’s (ANZ) story. Here, Prince discusses times in which they have not had to conceal elements of their gender and the positive emotions that come with that experience:

For me like sex work then became really euphoric because I was able to like not hide my gender and then because I wasn’t hiding that, it was really cool seeing how like clients interacted with that, where like being, having like ‘straight cis sex’ and the sex industry, it is, yeah, super, super gendered... I can see as well like even, yeah, cis gay stuff, sex work being like heavily gendered as well and seeing that difference. I think that there was a difference because I was being really like quite authentic with like my gender, kind of showing clients that like well we are in this room, it’s just you and me, like, what have you got to lose, like let’s have a play kind of thing, it doesn’t then have to be like this kind of serious and like misgendered and like this normative like and we don’t have to fuck like this like there are so many different ways that you can get off and it’s like to explore that and many of them actually, like I think

like once they, like, can see that they kind of drop their guard down a little bit and then were able to explore that a little bit more within themselves as well.

The word “authentic” is used here to denote a sense of gender euphoria – viz., the powerfully positive experiences associated with gender, the inverse of gender dysphoria (Beischel, Gauvin, and van Anders 2021). Prince suggests that the transactional space becomes one in which gendered norms are navigated (and displaced) and gender identity is negotiated *through* sex work. Similarly, Tommy Lee (S) states that, “doing sex work definitely made me feel more empowered in my body and I think that’s like from a transmasculine perspective”. This is not to suggest that trans and non-binary sex workers’ sense of euphoria or empowerment is a requisite for troubling gender within spaces of transactional sex. Holding space, however, for a multitude of sex worker experiences is paramount to the cultural intelligibility of trans and non-binary sex worker narratives.

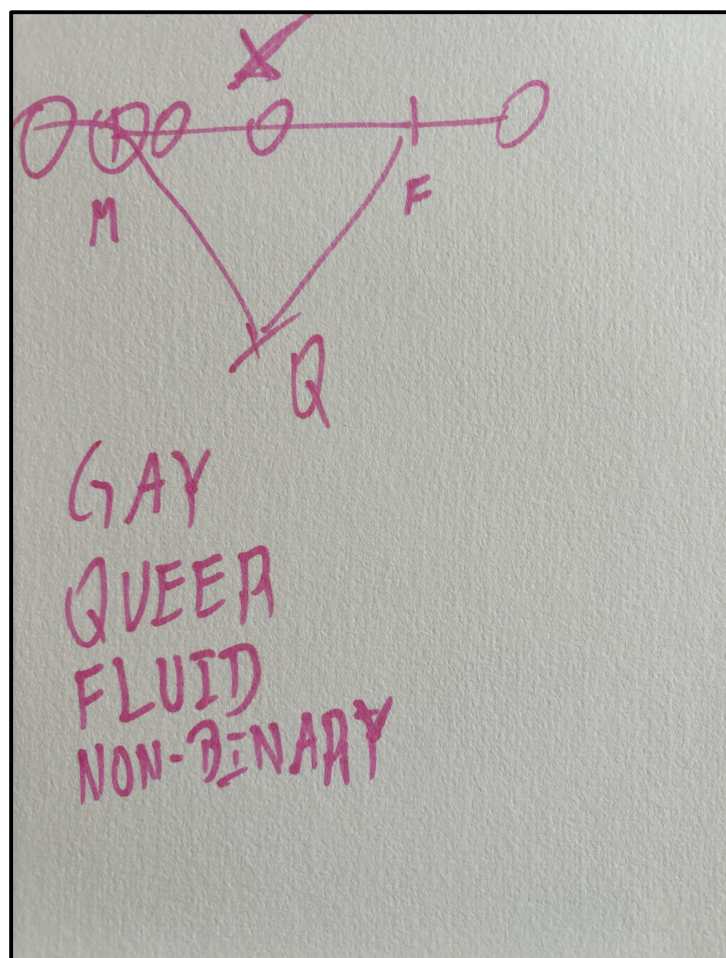
As part of the data collection process, participants were given the choice to express themselves visually. Most participants elected not to participate using this method, but there were several who did. One participant, Thiago (ANZ), chose to visually express how they perceive gender and sexual identity. Thiago, a Brazilian migrant worker living in Auckland, shares his experience of gender fluidity. In their working life, Thiago performs as a cis man and meets with male clients. Thiago was assigned male at birth but identifies as genderfluid or non-binary, as indicated by the M/F/Q on their visual representation of gender (see below), with M/F/Q signifying male, female, and queer, respectively. Thiago also suggests that gay can also represent gender as well as sexuality. They explain:

I think being queer, being gay, there’s something above that, the elegance, the way I walk, the way I talk, it is not feminine or masculine, it’s gay... so I like saying that I am gay. We use genderqueer but I think gay can also be a gender identification.

Here, Thiago’s experience of performing as a gender that is antithetical to their own internal sense of gender highlights the peripatetic and performative nature of gender and the variability of queer identities within male sex work. Thiago expresses a

physical embodiment of queerness, one that can be characterised as performative in relation to both gender *and* sexuality. Thiago's conflation of gay and queer highlights the social constructedness of language in relation to gender and sexuality, while also exposing potential rhetorical slippages – that is to say, queerness is both an individual and collective experience, one which represents different things to different individuals. Thiago's experience of gender and queerness in relation to sex work is highly dependent on personal biographies and cultural context, as are the ways in which their experiences are storied. Words carry heavy semantic charges, ones which may be interpreted in a variety of different ways by the speaker and reader. Thiago's narrative highlights the polysemic nature of gender and sexuality (and the words used to express such concepts) and the polysemic qualities of how experiences are performed and storied in a broader sense.

Figure 1: Thiago's Gender



Lochy (ANZ), a genderqueer sex worker who performs sex work as a cis man, explores their sex worker identity through music, specifically the music of artist Lana Del Rey. Lochy suggests that they listen to Del Rey's music to and from interactions with clients as a way of creating a fantasy around their work. Lochy states that the world within Del Rey's songs allows them to inhabit a, "melodramatic fantasy", and that it, "made the work feel more tolerable to kind of play... make-believe". Lochy further comments that: "Most of the artists I listen to are female and... I've always found female singers a lot more relatable (or found the positions they hold in their stories more desirable) to the situations I find myself in through sex-work". Lochy's identification with a female singer's positionality in relation to sex work exemplifies the choreographic nature of gender vis-à-vis sex work, with Lochy, a genderqueer person, able to enact a male performance, one which is shaped by a cis woman's experiences. As Hankins suggests, "a queer relationship with music disrupts and reworks received macroaccounts of meaning and arrives at no clear declaration or terminus" (2014, p. 87). This serves to complicate the binary view of gender within male sex work and highlights the performative possibilities of gender more generally, with Lochy's usage of "fantasy" and "make-believe" concretising the performative elements of their sex work. When sex workers are permitted to share their stories, the complex, often contradictory realities of sex work are illuminated. It is through their narratives that binary, mythological conceptions of sex work are disrupted, and non-binary, prismatic understandings can emerge. Lochy mentions Del Rey's song "Diet Mountain Dew" – here is an excerpt of the lyrics:

*"Maybe I like this roller coaster
Maybe it keeps me high
Maybe the speed it brings me closer
I could sparkle up your eye*

*You're no good for me
Baby, you're no good for me
You're no good for me
But baby, I want you, I want..."*

Figure 2: Lochy's Drawing



"I could sparkle up your eye..."

Lochy's narrative identification in Del Rey's music is not due to his experiences closely resembling the narrative in Del Rey's songs, but rather an inhabitation of a fantastical world, one which they connect with through their individualised experiences of sex work. Lochy's visual representation of an eye, which he drew during our interview, is perhaps a subconscious reference to Del Rey's lyric: "I could sparkle up your eye". Speaking to the choreographic nature of gender apropos sex work, Lochy suggests: "I feel like gender kind of is performance anyway and I'm just, like, buying into a certain kind of performance". When asked about clients' perception of their gender, Lochy suggested that, "they probably don't really consider my gender that much". Lack of awareness surrounding non-cisgender identities (and how this materialises during interactions with clients) was a prominent theme among sex worker narratives across both nations.

Lack of Knowledge Surrounding Trans Identities

Several participants mention that the lack of knowledge surrounding trans people impacts their relationships with clients. Caiden (S) states that, “honestly, about half the time... people contact me and they assume when they see trans... they assume that we’re trans women... I think people just don’t assume I would be a trans man”. Caiden is non-binary but performs as a binary trans man during interactions with clients (and in his personal sex life) due to the lack of public understanding of non-binary expressions of gender. They state: “Yeah, definitely with sex work and then just like you know casual sex as well. Like I’m always kind of like, they/them on the street, he/him in the sheets!”. Jack (S) is a non-binary sex worker who performs as a binary cis man with clients, suggesting that they identify as: “they/them... but sex worker wise I just use the he/him because it’s much easier when dealing with clients”. Max (S) states: “I think ... I mean just being non-binary I think is difficult to perceive by most people”. Jon (ANZ) says that clients have mistaken them for a trans woman on several occasions: “I got asked twice if I was a man and I was like well... I could say yes but you would think of something entirely different than what I am because if I said yes you would think, ‘penis’”. Comparably, Aiden (ANZ) explains that in, “some of the messages people send me where they don’t understand who I am (or what)... the things that affect me the most, people’s conception of trans people or lack of knowledge of what a trans person is”. Max (S), a non-binary sex worker, states: “I mean, I think the clients have very regressive ideas about being trans and equating being transgender to being a transvestite or being transsexual”. Aiden (ANZ) suggests: “I’ve also had a lot of people text me who are clearly not at all interested in booking a session but want to talk to me about what being a trans man is” and that:

I have to sort of gently say, ‘this phone is for booking appointments, not for explaining my identity’, because initially I started sort of just replying and then I realised that if people are just going to be texting me and never actually booking me, why am I trying to explain my existence to them. So, it’s easier to just say hi, valid question, but this is not what this line is for.

Max (S) explains: “I think the idea of being a non-binary sex worker, it’s like, ‘yeah, but, what is it ... what are you selling? What is it? What are you...?’, is, I think, the

conception that people have". Caiden (S) says that many of their clients are "people experimenting" and that they do not have issues with this when they are being paid for their time. Caiden also states, however, "but I also get these people like message me on Grindr for when like I'm just looking for like my own fun, and I'm very much like no, I'm not like your experiment, I'm not educating you". However, Caiden also suggests, even when they are being paid for their time with "experimenting" clients: "I feel like I'm doing some kind of weird community outreach by educating these people, I don't know!". Caiden's words convey a sense of conflict, one that is born out of a lack of knowledge surrounding trans and non-binary identities and the burden placed upon marginalised groups to provide pedagogical labour to groups who exercise higher levels of social latitude and privilege. Even when they are being paid to provide such a service, Caiden compares this labour to "community outreach", suggesting that selling sex as a non-binary person is fraught with emotional complexity. For Toby (ANZ), "it's really unfortunate and it's so weird... I don't actually think this stuff is particularly complicated, I think it's just a reluctance to engage in that like, in that work, to find out about it". Clients' reluctance to educate themselves on transgender identities before engaging with a trans sex worker illuminates their position of privilege and power within the transaction. Marginalised persons are often required to explain or defend their existence to non-marginalised individuals – in this case, trans sex workers explicating their identities to cisgender clients.

Numerous participants remark upon the additional emotional labour of being a trans sex worker – that is, having to explain their identity (and existence) to prospective clients for free. As Toby (ANZ), a transmasculine non-binary worker who presents as female for work, suggests, being a trans person:

often involves answering a lot of like invasive or like fielding a lot of like invasive and inappropriate questions about your body. I think it happens a lot more with sex work because, obviously, that's like pertinent to the kind of services you can provide and that's one of things that's kind of discouraged me from marketing myself as trans because I think it would hugely increase the number of stupid enquiries I get. I do also already get a lot of clients who get confused and I think like look at my photos, have figured that I'm trans, have misunderstood what kind of trans I am and so I get quite a lot of clients who

assume that I'm a trans woman and like usually they seem very disappointed when they figure out that I'm not which is fine but yeah, I can imagine that those enquiries would only get like more frequent and more annoying to deal with if I just advertise myself as trans.

Cisgender clients expecting trans sex workers to explain their identities is indicative of what Berenstain terms epistemic exploitation, who writes: "Epistemic exploitation occurs when privileged persons compel marginalised persons to produce an education or explanation about the nature of the oppression they face" (2016, p. 570). The lack of knowledge surrounding trans sex workers (and transgender identities more generally) has emotional consequences for trans sex workers; in this case, the emotional burden of having to explain (and sometimes justify) their very existence. Epistemic harms, such as epistemic exploitation, are exacerbated by prominent myths of male sex work, including the assumption that all male sex workers are cisgender men. For Aiden (ANZ):

It's not necessarily the things that you think would be hard, what I thought would be hard was sleeping the strangers. That bit's easy. What's hard is promoting yourself; what's hard is having people even realise that you exist; what's hard is coming to the realisation that trans people are so invisible in society still, so that's been hard, and also what's hard is it gets you down a bit sometimes. I get down about the fact that there's not much interest in me, that certain people are doing a lot better than I am, so there are certainly elements of this that can get you down. I think it's very important to have support and to be able to have people you can talk to about it and people who can give you those reality checks.

As Caiden (S) states, "some people just don't understand how like I exist and what I am... I'll have been over it and they're like, 'so like what were you born as?', And like, 'what's your natural gender', and stuff like that". Caiden also shares a frequent comment of confusion they receive from potential clients: "Like, it says you're trans but you've got a cock, like all your pictures are of dicks, I'm like no, that's my clitoris, like it's just big!". Lack of awareness surrounding trans people, specifically transmasculine individuals, leads to educational (and potentially uncomfortable) interactions with clients. In this case, Caiden's prospective client is unaware of the

physical changes brought on by testosterone (what some transmasculine or non-binary people refer to as “bottom growth”), meaning that Caiden, in order to secure a booking with the client, is required to educate them on their personal gender transition. The accompanying pedagogical labour required of some trans sex workers is aggravated by binary conceptions of trans people – that is, normative assumptions about transgender identity being limited to strict gender categorisations based on cisgender bodies.

The limited understanding of trans identities and bodies in wider society has both material and emotional effects for trans sex workers. Caiden (S) suggests that:

It's kind of like a... pick your battle sort of thing, I don't know. I have put like the language I use for my body and... like I will start off with like language I'm comfortable with... it depends who I'm talking to, sometimes I can get a vibe, like if they said like you know they've been with like a trans guy before, then I'll kind of like maybe go in with it a bit more, like OK this is just a language I'd use. Like I don't really like using the word like vagina or like pussy, like... I don't really like those words, so I usually just use like front hole, and I would sometimes like say that, and then like put in brackets, like (vaginal) or whatever, if I think they're not going to understand ... or I'll just kind of yeah, lead with like using a language I'm comfortable with and hope they get it

As Caiden suggests, the lack of knowledge surrounding trans individuals and trans bodies can create potentially uncomfortable situations (and potentially trigger gender dysphoria) for trans sex workers. In Caiden's case, it relates to specific body parts and normative gendered language. In a similar vein, Kurt (ANZ) states:

Yeah, it's a different audience and a different way of being treated by clients because you know there's a language to put up with clients that I don't think anyone of other genders, you know expressions or anything, really has to deal with and it's part of being a niche.

Kurt refers to the “niche” of being a transmasc sex worker and its unique challenges. Like Caiden, Kurt infers that being a transmasc worker involves “putting up” with the gendered language that clients use. Kurt states:

If I'm expecting to see a nice person, usually at the start we will have a conversation, say my kind of like, 'I've been fucking gay men like over a decade now, I've got very thick skin, please be direct, ask me things, talk to me'... that's like the usual way that we address the language thing and most of the time, people are pretty good about that, unless I get a client who is booking me specifically and pretty much only because I am trans and that I know that if I try and police the language then they won't book me again.

Kurt says that challenging the language being used with certain clients will result in a reduced possibility of return bookings. This poses a potential problem for trans sex workers because of the possibility of financial precarity. This also leads some trans sex workers to conceal specific elements of their gender identity or expression or, in some cases, perform as a different gender entirely.

Trans sex workers will often advertise themselves as a gender incongruent to their own as a way of attracting a higher number of clients. Scott (S), a non-binary worker who presents as female for work, says:

In my mind, I will only ever be able to successfully sell sex as a woman. And this is now becoming a problem in my life, because while this is something I was comfortable with for a long time... I've had a proper referral for hormones and I'm able to access hormones from the gender clinic, and I've had to make the decision to not go on them, even though it's now available to me because I'm already dealing with a lot of stuff, and then like dealing with like second puberty and more mood swings, and particularly physical changes that are going to affect my work, I think it's just not worth the risk right now

Scott's difficult decision not to undergo hormonal replacement therapy is symptomatic of how the lack of public understanding of trans people and trans bodies manifests for trans sex workers. For many trans people, undergoing HRT can be a lifesaving health intervention; thus, the decision to delay physical transition because of sex work is an unfortunate effect of hegemonic, cisheteronormative understandings of gender and the bodies we associate with specific genders. Prince (ANZ) also speaks of the potential of financial precarity placed on trans sex workers who physically transition:

I cannot be coded as cis anymore, I can't hide being trans because I'm visibly trans, it impacts the amount of work I get because there are really deeply ingrained stereotypes of what sex work is, who sex workers are, what clients are, what they are buying and when you can't like... you literally can't like perform that. Yeah, your ability to get the same number of bookings as like... it's not there but there are ways and sex workers find ways to be able to like counter that, you just have to get creative.

Trans sex workers who do undergo HRT (as well as gender affirming surgeries) are also subject to limited public understandings of trans bodies, with Prince (ANZ) stating that: "I think a lot of trans masc sex workers who are on T [testosterone] and have had top surgery clearly don't look like a woman, they tend to advertise as FtM [female to male]". Prince suggests that this is because, "there's not a lot of understanding from Johns about gender shit". Prince is a non-binary sex worker who has had top surgery and takes testosterone; in their working life, they typically present as a trans man (FtM) because, as they suggest, clients (Johns) do not always fully comprehend the complexities of gender and transness. Aiden (ANZ) expounds upon this by saying:

Especially trans masc sex workers, because there's so many different ways that people can transition, it's important to know that not everyone is going to be the same. Some people do take hormones, some people don't. Some people, like me, have had top surgery, some people haven't. Some people have had bottom surgery, some people haven't.

Although sex workers highlight the multiplicity of trans identities and expressions within their personal lives, the majority of participants sell sex as binary men or women when sex working. This can largely be ascribed to poor public understandings of trans people and non-binary expressions of gender more generally.

Several participants identified themselves as simply "trans" instead of trans masc or non-binary, suggesting that, although they are often coded as male (with varying degrees of intentionality), they feel ambivalent towards being identified as such. Prince explains: "The clients don't see me as male, like they see me as trans and regardless if whatever they put before or after the trans, just trans that they see me as trans so

yeah". Toby explains: "I refer to myself as a non-binary but also in practice I actually often just call myself trans or transmasc, like I will kind of use all of those terms interchangeably". Similarly, Jon (ANZ) states: "I am physically transmasculine and I identify as somewhere in between a man and a non-binary person, it depends on the day, it kind of shifts between that". Tommy Lee (S), a transmasc non-binary sex worker, states:

I just wish that clients would have more respect... but I think that also comes into like you know being fetishised and just kind of being perceived as like, not even as a man or as a woman but just like as something Other.

This sense of Otherness is a common thread among gender diverse participants. Prince (ANZ) explains:

They [clients] weren't like, either call me a 'she' or like 'he', they would kind of go between but mostly, yeah... they would call me a boy a lot, which was so interesting, I think because of that, like androgyny aspects to being like, like, you know, pre-pubescent or something, like for them to like wrap their heads around maybe.

Prince speaks to the fluid nature of gender within their interactions with clients insofar that they were being coded as both feminine and masculine. Jon (ANZ) considers the possibilities of selling sex as more than one gender (in their case, as a trans man and a woman): "Yeah, I mean I don't know how well [the brothel] management would take it if they knew I was doing both at the same time". Jon's situation also highlights the peripatetic nature of gender within "male" sex work, suggesting that they could sell sex as more than one gender in the same space. Participants clearly allude to the performative aspects of sex work; however, some participants' stories also highlight the rhizomatic nature of sex work.

Rhizomatic Identities and Sex Work

Numerous participants' stories highlight the rhizomatic nature of gender within sex work. The invisibility of trans and non-binary individuals is reinforced by the cultural

apparatus of cisheteronormativity, a framework by which cisgender identity and heterosexuality are presumed. The invisibility of transmasculine and non-binary sex workers within wider society is bolstered by these normative understandings of gender – that is to say, when sex workers are imagined, they are imagined almost exclusively as cisgender and heterosexual. As Scott (S) suggests, these invisibilities engender the contexts in which some sex workers backpass (performing sex work as their assigned gender at birth) as a means of attracting a larger pool of clientele. Scott suggests:

Yeah, I think they're [transmasc sex workers] not seen as a thing. And I know they are because I've seen some on like the website that I advertise on, but they don't seem to have like any traffic at all, and I will see... transmasc profiles pop up and then pop down. So, I'm assuming they pop up, decide that's not working, come down, and then go back on as a woman, I assume.

Scott's experience of backpassing is illustrative of both the performative and rhizomatic nature of gender. Scott performs femininity (they mention that they adhere to social signifiers of femininity, such as shaving one's face and legs) to maintain a liveable income through sex work. This not only speaks to the performative nature of gender and sex work, but also the rhizomatic qualities of gender *through* sex work. Scott can effectively perform as a different gender from their own during client interactions and then return to living as a non-binary person after, highlighting gender's unfixed nature in both transactional and non-transactional contexts. Jon (ANZ), a transmasc non-binary worker, shares their experience of backpassing. In relation to selling sex as a man, they state: "It's so much harder to find work, you get paid a lot less, I was like cool, I'm just going to hang on to dressing up as a girl as much as I can until it doesn't work anymore". Jon also shares that: "I spent a couple of years on and off at this one brothel. It was alright. I did get clocked for facial hair once". Jon's story of backpassing (which they liken to being a "man in drag") includes an experience of being "clocked", a term used by trans people to denote being perceived as trans, commonly by cisgender individuals. Like Scott, Jon adheres to the social signifiers of gender to achieve an artifice of femininity; however, when these signifiers are challenged, their gender within sex work is unsettled. Toby (ANZ) states:

Even though I do backpass for work, I think that probably elements of like masculinity do play into my appeal into marketing now in terms of the clientele that I attract... like I know a lot of my clients are also attracted to me because I see them on Grindr all the time... I would say probably most of the clients I see now are men who have sex with men.

Toby's experiences of selling sex as their birth gender to both heterosexual and queer male clients highlight the complex nature of gender and sexuality vis-à-vis sex work and the non-essentialist essences of client desires. Toby also states:

I've been included in research of experiences of female sex work which kind of makes sense because that's how I'm marketing myself but also my experiences are different for many reasons and one of those is probably like the pool of clients that I draw on.

Toby's story underscores the mobile and multiplicitous nature of gender, suggesting that, although they backpass and sell sex "as a woman", their clientele is mostly queer men. This rhizomatic relationship between gender, sexuality, and sex work illustrates the reductiveness of normative and binary understandings of what many recognise as complex and often contradictory experiences. Other sex workers, such as Jon (ANZ), emphasise the potential positives of backpassing: "I do really appreciate being able to, or being at a point where I can really flip flop". Jon refers to "flip flop"-ing between genders as a positive, allowing them to live their life as a non-binary person while maintaining income through performing sex work as a woman. They suggest: "It's so useful and it's a bit of a relief, honestly, yeah, no, because it does, for me, kind of adds some layer of... I don't, know getting into character I suppose". Here, Jon illustrates the ways in which gender within sex work is, for some, both performative and rhizomatic and how they convolve in both complementary and contradictory ways.

Prince (ANZ) also explores this complex and often contradictory sense of gender within sex work, suggesting their gender presentation in sex work has "evolved". They state:

I presented as a woman through the first... like three years of, maybe four years of sex work... how I presented in sex work shifted as I presented in ordinary life and started transitioning as well, so yeah, I went from being very easily woman identified, long hair, titties, like lingerie (the cheap stuff) and then as I started exploring my gender more I had to change how I was presenting in sex work because in daily life I had my hair cut short and so I would wear a wig with clients and then that was particularly around the time as well that I was saving for top surgery, so I would be, I was working full time at the time as well and so I was working full time in an office and then working three nights a week at a brothel, just really grinding and wig on, yeah.

Prince's story is indicative of both the performative and rhizomatic possibilities of gender within sex work. Prince's "evolution" involves performing as a woman in sex work (and being perceived as such in their personal life) to performing as a woman in sex work and being perceived differently in their personal life due to their subsequent gender transition. Prince's use of a wig also speaks to the comparison between drag and sex work, with Prince using traditionally feminine signifiers (such as long hair) as a way of producing an acceptable feminine artifice for their clients. Similarly, Tommy Lee (S) states:

So I've lived as a woman, I've lived as a lesbian and I've had sexual experiences throughout my life under different identities and men have perceived me sexually under these different identities for, you know, forever and the way that men perceive sex with other men is very, very different to sex with women or whatever, so it gives me an understanding of those expectations and preconceptions.

Tommy's experiences expose the non-linear and multidimensional nature of trans identity within (and outwith) sex work. Tommy's experiences of queerness also reveal the complex, culturally constructedness of gender apropos sex (both transactional and non-transactional). Tommy and others suggest that their liminal experiences of gender and sexuality contour their interactions with clients insofar that they have experienced gender and sexuality in a multiplicity of ways. Jon (ANZ) expresses:

What I've realised over the years about me and sex work is that it's actually been a really nice outlet for me to still be... to find myself able to dress up in a way that I can control and I still, you know, I can take it all off and I can still be myself but also I can dress up and express myself a little bit in ways that I felt like I didn't have control over earlier before I transitioned, now... I'm doing it in a way that I am comfortable with.

For Jon, backpassing is both a means of economic gain and a space through which certain elements of gender are rendered expressible and explorable. Not all sex workers taking part in the study desired to play with gender during interactions with clients, however. It should be noted that any exploratory elements of sex work discussed by participants were a secondary or tertiary experience, with the primary reason for engaging with sex work being financial.

For some participants, the unfixed and rhizomatic nature of gender can create potential issues or uncomfortable situations. Zach (ANZ) states:

I think there was definitely a desire to preserve my masculinity in sex work, because like I said, I think that there were... there were moments where clients were keen to... focus on the more feminine side or create a feminine side within me, like I don't know... like... yeah, and I guess that's specifically kind of relates/connects to the body, you know.

Here, Zach alludes to the choreographic dimensions of masculinity by rejecting his "feminine side". He suggests that some clients desire to project femininity onto him, potentially due to his transmasculine body. Clients may expect transmasculine sex workers to fulfil specific sexual roles due to socially prescribed notions of gender, sex, and sexuality. As Kurt (ANZ) explains, "there is a very wide variety in transmasculine workers; we are all going to have different bodies and different things that we do". Zach (ANZ) states:

But I think... and I'm not like hypermasculine, you know, I'm not super pressed about it, generally speaking, but I think that there was a ... definitely a desire to be seen as a man and to be seen as masculine and not to kind of engage in work that was going to... you know.

Trans men and transmasculine individuals engaged in sex work are not a homogeneous group. Some adhere to the social signifiers and stereotypes associated with masculinity while others do not. Zach's declaration of not perceiving himself as "hypermasc" but wanting his masculinity to be appreciated by clients (and for them not to feminise him) is also indicative of the general lack of awareness surrounding trans men and the multitudes of masculinity within transmasculine identity. Kurt (ANZ) suggests: "I use all of my body... but lots of transmasc workers don't. I think there is a misconception that if you are booking a transmasc worker, you are going to get to fuck someone's pussy, no matter what". Caiden (S) states that: "And a lot of people as well want to push like... femme language and what they can get away with, like can I ... you know can I say this, can I still call you like a good girl?". Max (S), a non-binary sex worker who was assigned male at birth, says:

I feel then that I'm forced into the box that Adult Work gives you... which is bad, and then the box that clients' expectations give you, which is bad, and it feels like in ... it feels like I should be leading with who I am, and unfortunately I feel as though I'm leading with what the marketplace is asking for, in a way. So, I really struggle how to... know how best to reconcile myself with all of it... I still don't know what to do. I have conversations with other sex worker friends, and one of them was telling me like, you just put on a suit in your photos and just look like a gorgeous bloke and just do that. And I'm like, I don't know, that's probably a good idea.

Max's reluctance to perform masculinity in sex work due to the incongruence with their internal sense of gender is symptomatic of the sex industry's preoccupation with binary gender, with sexual advertising websites leaving much to be desired in relation to trans and non-binary identities. Non-binary identities, specifically, are commonly rendered unintelligible within these contexts.

Prince also highlights the myth of all clients being cisgender men and that their own experiences of gender and sexuality are always static. Prince explains:

Yeah, I would say maybe a myth would be that we are also only open to having cis male clients because I know that me and a lot of other people are open to

having bookings and having clients who aren't cis men but also... I think that there's generally like a lot of fear of stepping outside of what sex work looks like to a like neoliberal society and that being like heteronormative, cisgendered, for cis men only, provided by a woman, and that there is a huge realm outside of that. Once you like push away all of the surface stuff, yeah, it's there I think.

Allan (ANZ), a cisgender Māori sex worker, says: "Oh I am her for pay, I can be she-for-pay if you want". This emphasises the gender fluidity within male sex work, with Allan performing sex work with a femme persona when required. Allan also states that when he is selling sex as a cis man, he typically attracts cis gay clients; by contrast, when he sells sex under his femme persona, he says: "the clientele changed immediately, it wasn't the gay guys anymore, it was like the straight guys!". This also speaks to the multidirectional nature of gender and sexuality for both sex workers and clients, with Allan electing to perform either masc or femme identity and catering to different clients' sexual desires, with his straight clients preferring a cis man performing elements of femme identity. Luke, a cisgender sex worker says: "I've got one client who asked to see me in lingerie and I once managed to fill like 40 minutes of a booking by just putting makeup on while he watched". Luke, like Allan, expresses femininity through sex work when required, highlighting the performative and rhizomatic dimensions of male sex work for cisgender men. Scott (S) suggests:

I never really talk about my gender with clients unless... because I do the dominatrix stuff, I do have a lot of guys who are into cross-dressing and then we end up talking about it, and it becomes like clear that it's actually like a gender issue and not just a sex thing. And then, I will try and bring some trans experience.

Similarly, Prince (ANZ) states:

Yeah, well what comes to mind is my experience with my first client who was a crossdresser where that was just amazing because I had not really been in such a full gender fuckery experience with a client who's actively and shamelessly crossdressing and how heartening and wholesome that was. Like, it made me so happy to be able to like provide that experience for that person

and engage in something that was so different to what stepping outside their door looks like, yeah, it was just really beautiful, really nice.

To wit, sex worker experiences of gender and sexuality during transactional sex are also dependent on the gender and sexuality of the client and the ways in which they choose to explore their own gender and sexuality.

For some, selling and purchasing sex (with its inherent transactionality) is a safe space through which to explore and negotiate elements of gender and sexual identity. Caiden (S) also shares his experiences of selling sex to heterosexual men as a non-binary person who presents as a binary trans man during sex work, saying:

I get a lot of guys who are either like straight and have never been with like a masc person before and want to experiment there, so I get like ... yeah, like straight guys and they'll say, 'oh I've never kissed anyone with like facial hair before', or like, 'I've never been with anyone masc', and they want to like experiment. I kind of hate that sometimes because I don't feel great about myself doing that, because sometimes they like it and it's fine, but I feel like a lot of time they don't like it, and they just don't look at my face and just like fuck me as fast as possible and get out, do you know?

Caiden's experiences illuminate the potential problems associated with being a transmasculine or non-binary sex worker, partially ascribed to clients' discomfort with their own gender or sexuality. On the other hand, Caiden explains:

But then I always get a lot of gay guys who have never been with someone with a body like mine before, and they want to again experiment with that. They tend to have a better time. I don't feel like... I've never really had like a time that they've not enjoyed it, like you know those guys usually... they usually seem happier, I don't know!"

Toby (ANZ) shares a similar experience with clients, suggesting that some clients book them as:

Quote unquote, 'like a woman', and so I think the thing that they are getting from me is at least in part like some kind of masculinity and perhaps a safer version of that. I suspect that's it, like I also know that quite a few clients who see me either also book trans women or they talk about wanting to book trans women and they will often book me for like strap on service and I'm like... oh okay, I'm the safe like next step before you will book the person who would actually like to be having sex with.

Jon (ANZ) states that:

I've been able to you know cover the stubble because, as much as I fucking love facial hair and having facial hair, the boys don't like it if... yeah, no it kind of makes them feel a bit insecure in their own preferences which I'm like, I love pushing that but I probably shouldn't you know but if I want to make money, I shouldn't be rocking guys' worlds and making them realise they might actually be bi! That was my biggest clientele when I was doing private though – was a lot of bi guys, or at least a lot of guys that were kind of realising that, or coming into that, so I felt like a little bit of a, you know, a gay shepherd. It's okay, it's safe, you know, you can safely explore this and it's fine.

Toby (ANZ) and Jon (ANZ) use the term “safe” to indicate sexual exploration and fluidity among clientele, which is encouraged by their own peripatetic gender identities within sex work. However, Caiden (S) expresses uncertainty towards clients' sexual exploration vis-à-vis transactional sex with trans or non-binary individuals. For some trans and non-binary sex workers, client exploration or negotiation of gender and sexuality represents a positive emotional response. Others, like Caiden, however, may find these situations difficult to reconcile internally.

Although the practice of backpassing is an economic necessity for some, it may serve to further invisibilise trans and non-binary sex workers. Prince states:

because of those like reinforced understandings of like sex work and who should be paying and what type of people are working and what is like the work look like, it makes it difficult for us to actually like get bookings I think.

Toby (ANZ) tells of their experience of working in a brothel, a traditionally femme-centric space, saying:

Yeah, I think the last time I did work in a brothel they really clearly didn't know how to market me, it was like it's really straightforward. I don't have trouble finding clients independently, I show in my ads, it's very clear what I look like, you don't have to worry about clients showing up and not knowing what they are getting... but they just freaked out and couldn't figure out how to market me and I got basically no work there... the same brothel experimented with hiring trans workers and maybe even for a while had a couple of male workers on the books but they just didn't get any work because they didn't really understand how to market them.

Jon also speaks of the lack of transmasculine representation in brothels, expressing that:

The thing that sucks is, especially in Auckland, like, brothels have gone down the shitter, there used to be a lot more venues, it used to be a lot more accepting, there used to be a place called The Blue Room and that was for trans people – it was a trans brothel. I wish I was around for that because hell I might have been able to, yeah, with the context of working at a trans brothel and then showing up looking masculine, they go [gasp] trans man, I get it, you know, I feel like it would be a lot more obvious about what you are doing.

The lack of trans and non-binary representation in brothels is indicative of the larger structural issue of invisibility, which many trans and non-binary participants raised during their interviews.

Summary

This chapter has explored the multidimensionality of gender as it relates to male sex work and has also highlighted the performative and rhizomatic possibilities of navigating, accomplishing, and troubling gender through spaces of transactional sex. I thought it prudent to emphasise the voices of trans and non-binary sex workers during this chapter, as their experiences are so often overlooked or absorbed into

other research categories. Speaking of the ways in which trans and non-binary sex workers are made invisible, Toby (ANZ) says:

I've seen a lot of brothels where you look at the roster and it's like, oh wow, it's incredible how you have found 15 of the same woman and it's really obvious that what has happened is that the owners is like this is sexy, I will hire only people who look like this so they have just hired on their own like, you know, ideas about desirability and reproduced their own ideas about like who is a sex worker there within their own like sphere of control and I think you sometimes see that with academic research as well where trans masc people, trans men don't exist as sex workers within a lot of research I think because they don't exist as sex workers within the like imagined, like, imaginary world of the researcher, so it doesn't even occur to people to look for us.

This research is committed to not only sharing the stories of trans and non-binary sex workers, but also to respecting and valuing them as representations of complex, lived experiences which exist within full, human lives. Sex work is part of their story, but it is not the entire story. I conclude this chapter with a vignette adapted from a conversation with a transfeminine Māori sex worker (who was not taking part in the research proper):

She was telling me about Māori and Pasifika people and the intersection between indigenous cultures, sex work, and queerness. She also told me about the history of sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand, pre-decriminalisation. She told me about the communal struggles of sex workers, drug users, and queer people, and how they were fighting for a better world for marginalised people. We spoke for a long time, although I could not tell you how long. Within the walls of the NZPC, I was regaled with a rich oral history, one in which a new future was first imagined and then fought for arduously. Speaking about transness more generally, she told me about the first time she had, knowingly, met a trans man. Someone had told her that he was a trans man; she approached him and asked, "Are you... like me?", to which he said yes. For her, it was not about difference; it was about Sameness. They may have different life experiences, but they share a common difference that connects them. That really struck a chord with me, especially the way she positioned herself within the question, almost as a way of decentralising Otherness.

(adapted from audio fieldnote)

Chapter Five

Myths of the “Male” Sex Worker

Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, the myth that all male sex workers are cisgender permeates the stories and experiences of male and non-binary sex workers across both Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand. This chapter will focus on the remaining myths (#2, #3, #4, and #5) related to male and non-binary sex workers and aims to both highlight and complicate these myths vis-à-vis the narrative accounts of the participants taking part in the study. This chapter will also explore participant experiences as they relate to sex work law and policy, as male and non-binary sex worker voices are largely absent from discussions surrounding socio-legal models of sex work (as well as their implementation and effects). Further, this chapter argues that myths surrounding male sex workers are connected to (and exacerbated by) general misconceptions surrounding queer men and that some of these myths are intensified by the criminalisation of sex work (as in the case of Scotland).

Myth #2: The Myth of Invulnerability (Male Sex Workers Do Not Experience Violence or Harm)

Several participants spoke about the misconception that male sex workers do not experience violence or harm. This myth can be partially attributed to mythological understandings of masculinity inasmuch that men are imagined as strong and always able to defend themselves from threat more easily than women. According to Raine (2021), studies that explore violence against male and transgender sex workers are scarce, with most of the scholarship being devoted to the experiences of cisgender female sex workers. Raine suggests that, although studies of violence as it pertains to male sex workers are extant, violence against male sex workers is significantly underreported and under-researched. Tommy Lee (S) states:

Bad things can definitely happen as well, you know. I don't think that's taken seriously because a lot of the times when it comes to like violence, people always think that men are the person that's being violent but like yeah, that obviously is not always the case.

Tommy Lee's (S) reference to men not being taken seriously in relation to being the targets of violence (rather than the perpetrators) is indicative of testimonial injustice. In this context, male or non-binary sex workers are not trusted to narrate their own experiences of harm. Similarly, Kurt (ANZ) suggests that one of the most prominent myths concerning male sex workers, cis or trans, is:

That we [male sex workers] are safer. I think that's one I... like I quite strongly rebuke. I guess again, that community stuff, working in an agency or in a brothel, that is always going to be safer than being independent and going to someone's house or an apartment or meeting them on the street... like we have all of the same framework of protections but the social structures that enable that safety do not really exist for us.

Jack (S), a non-binary worker who presents as male when seeing clients, explains that, "as someone has experienced violence from clients on multiple occasions, I know how difficult it is to sort of progress through any systems or receive any support, you know what I mean, on the basis that the male presenting". Jack also explains that, on one occasion, a client pulled a knife on him. Once the police arrived, Jack said they believed his story but were unable to do anything because of a lack of witnesses. This illustrates that, even when sex workers' testimonies are believed, they lack legal recourse and ways of accessing justice. Jack also explains that incidents of harm occurring during sex work are rare compared to non-transactional sex, suggesting that they have been subject to sexual harm numerous times in their personal, non-sex working life. This implies that sexual harm among male and non-binary sex workers could be a by-product of the ways in which sex between queer men/non-binary individuals is imagined and arranged within society. This is coupled with other sociogenic factors such as criminalisation of sex work, homophobia, cissexism, transphobia, and whorephobia. Scott (S), a non-binary sex worker, says:

If we're going to accept the sex work as work, then... we have to accept that there's bad days and good days, and that being... not prone... like open to those sorts of violence, it's not great, but... there's things you can do about it other than saying like this is an inherently bad thing that shouldn't happen. Like should we stop construction happening, just because you're at risk of like fall injuries? No, you put in health and safety to stop falling. You put on protective equipment.

Similarly, Luke (ANZ) states:

It's not the inherent danger of the industry, it is a danger of any industry where the workers are seen as marginalised, disposable or less worthy of care and that's not a problem with the industry, that's a problem with civilian perception. What's the worst part of your job? This question. It shows a mind-set that assumes that my job sucks. It doesn't.

Participants refute the idea of male sex worker invulnerability, suggesting that, like female sex workers, they too are susceptible to the various forms of harm sex workers are vocationally exposed to. As scholars and sex worker rights activists have suggested, however, participants suggest that these harms are structural rather than being an intrinsic quality of the sex industries.

As noted by Bacio and Rinaldi (2022), the lack of social and academic attention for male sex workers can be partially attributed to men's greater social latitude, being seen as a normative, "inhabitant and legitimate occupant of public spaces – of eluding social control and stigmatisation" (p. 8). In other words, when they are constructed within the popular imagination, male sex workers are thought of as generally safe (that is, non-victims). However, due to social stigmas surrounding selling sex and homosexuality, male sex work is largely absent from public imagination. These stigmas reinforce monosemic understandings of both queer male sexualities and male sex work, as well as encouraging the formation (and perpetuation) of myths relating to queer male sexualities and male sex work. Raine states that: "Globally, male sex workers experience a dual stigma of engaging in sex work and selling sexual services to men, which amplifies violence risk" (2021, p. 350). Another arena in which violence or harm against male sex workers is overlooked is within sex work law and policy (to

be discussed further later in this chapter). In their study of male sex workers and their experiences of FOSTA-SESTA legislation, Eichert (2020) found that male sex workers were harmed by this legislation, stating that, “even some of the most privileged sex workers also experienced significant harm because of FOSTA-related censorship” (2020, p. 244). Monolithic understandings (and misinterpretations) of male sex work can, at least partially, be ascribed to monosemic constructions of masculinity and maleness more generally. Men and masc people are rarely afforded space within the cultural imagination apropos narratives of victimhood (for example, men who have experienced physical or sexual assault). Annihilatory narratives (ones which position maleness and victimhood as incompatible) such as this constitute epistemic harm against male and non-binary sex workers and work to concretise myths surrounding male sex work. In other words, myths of male sex work are not only accepted, they become truth; they become *reality*.

Myth #3 and #4: Male Sex Work is Inherently Recreational (All Male Sex Workers are Hypersexual)

The next two myths are interconnected and serve to animate and bolster one another. The first myth is that all male and non-binary sex workers enjoy sex work and that there is an inherent recreationality among men who sell sex. Inherent recreationality is correlated to a presumed hypersexuality that many sex workers taking part in the study remarked upon. It is my contention that oversexualisation of male sex workers is a form of sex worker stigma or discrimination (also known as whorephobia) and stimulates an array of stigma-fuelled situations which can produce emotional and material harm for sex workers. Whorephobia can be broadly defined as hatred or fear of sex work and sex workers (Simpson 2022). Oversexualisation removes male sex workers from both labour-centric and socio-legal discussions of the sex industries (or diminishes their capacity to engage with such discourses). Sex worker stigma and discrimination are a pervasive social problem, one which affects sex workers on a global scale (Armstrong 2021a). While these issues have become well researched in recent years, the focus remains primarily on female sex workers, with male and non-binary sex workers rarely receiving academic attention. Whorephobia manifests on both a structural level (for example, laws and policies which criminalise or restrict the

selling of sex, as seen in the Scottish context) and interpersonally (harms faced by sex workers on an individual level e.g., hatred or abuse directed at sex workers from clients or non-sex workers). For male and non-binary sex workers, the effects of these harms go largely unrecognised.

Numerous participants remarked upon this kind of whorephobic treatment, one related to presumed hypersexuality, from both clients and non-clients. Kenny says: “I think one of the myths is you’re hypersexual and... yeah, you will always be ready for sex, you want it all the time... which is ... definitely not true for, you know, most people”. Similarly, Luke (ANZ) suggests that one of the main myths concerning male sex workers is: “That we [male sex workers] are easy”. Jon (ANZ) states that he finds it difficult to be taken seriously by clients, suggesting that a common client mind-set is, “so you are just doing it for fun as well, so I don’t have to pay you, or I don’t have to pay you as much because you’re a guy so you obviously always want sex...”. Mark (S) highlights the myth that men are, “inherently sexual,” and that, “the misconception of sex workers is that it’s completely just a choice and that it’s enjoyable and we’re just having fun, and we’re just doing it because we’re always horny”. Moreover, Max (S) offers that: “Clients will sometimes message you, thinking that, oh you’re a sex worker, you must love sex”. Thiago (ANZ) also comments on this, saying:

I do not get sexual pleasure from what I’m doing. I get professional satisfaction, I get money, yeah, I like the money, I get personal satisfaction, I feel special doing what I do but no, I do not get sexual satisfaction, so if I want to get sexual satisfaction I have to go on Grindr like anybody else.

Kurt (ANZ) suggests that: “I think, I want to say it’s a misconception... that we are all slutty, more promiscuous”, and that, “If you’re a hooker then you must be like a nympho, you must always be up for it”. Steve (S) comments on what he views as a perception that most male sex workers are, “going to be single. A bit of a slut. And that they’re using sex work as a means, or as a vehicle just to get more sex, or just to make them feel better about themselves or something”. As Steve suggests, male sex work is rarely seen through the lens of vocational analysis, commonly being viewed through recreational or exploratory paradigms. As Jack (S) states: “The enjoying thing is a big one, that they’re all using it for drugs or just partying or going out”. Jack continues:

Female sex workers, they can be single mothers or sort of doing things that are kind of productive in society... it's sometimes ignored that male sex workers can be doing the same stuff, like using it for studying or using it for quality life or stuff like that, it's not just for drugs... not diminishing anyone who does do it for drugs, because that's a whole other story or a whole other stigma that they have attached to them!

Caiden (S) says that: "Some people seem to think like, 'oh that's great, you just have like loads of sex!'" Caiden highlights this parochial view of sex work shared by many, one which both trivialises and invalidates sex work as a form of labour by way of oversexualisation. Similarly, Luke (ANZ) articulates that there is, "the conception that male sex workers are just doing this because it's a good source of income, I think it's the idea that well they are just game for it and they are trying to monetise it". Speaking to the origin of this myth, Harry (ANZ) highlights the stereotypical view of queer men being inherently promiscuous, saying that: "I think gay people are put into that more promiscuous category generally, probably partly rightly!". The recreation myth (i.e., that all male sex workers enjoy sex work) can be partially explained by the general misconception that all men and masc people are hypersexual. This may be true for some male and masc people but it is not representative of the entire demographic. As noted by many, there is some degree of truth to myths; they do not, however, present the full story.

As noted by numerous scholars, there is a prevailing narrative that positions male sex work as being inherently agentic, recreational, and exploratory (Dennis 2008; Henriksen, Andersen, and Presser 2020; Peters, Kessi, and Boonzaier 2019). Contrary to this myth, most, if not all, sex workers taking part in the study framed sex work as an income-generating activity – that is, sex work as work, first and foremost. Participants' experiences varied greatly; however, within both national contexts, the positioning of sex work as work was a constant. For Harry (ANZ), sex work is, "very much just a side thing, because it... seemed like a lot of money to get quite easily". Kenny (S) said that he was a "typical student, I was skint, and ... thought it was a great opportunity to supplement my income". Kenny also says that: "I understood that it was work and people didn't always feel super excited about going to work, but they wanted

the money". Max (S) states that: It's just quite difficult... it's work... sex work is work, obviously!". Luke (ANZ) also comments on the difficulty of sex work from a labour perspective, saying: "I've heard stories about people trying sex work for like a week, realising how hard it is and then quitting". Tommy Lee (S) explains that he began sex working, "because my partner at the time was a sex worker it just really normalised it at the time, and a good way to make money". Lochy (ANZ) states that: "It's a job and like I, yeah, I wouldn't, I'm not like telling people to do sex work... it's just something I do for money and I feel very ambivalent towards it, yeah". Mark (S): "The first time I done it I was nineteen, and it was just I couldn't do the bar work anymore, and I just needed to pay rent!". Similarly, Caiden (S) shares:

I was like this is just a good way to make some money and pay my bills and it just relieved so much stress, like... instantly, like first time I did it, I just like straight away went to Tesco afterwards and bought like food and like stocked up my fridge and my cupboards and was like, it's fucking amazing!

Scott (S) also shares a similar experience, saying:

Plenty of people don't enjoy their job, and it is a lot more charged of an issue when it's something as personal... it is a very different kind of work, but like I also was looking at being homeless again and when I decided to go full-time, the last two and a half years of my life have been the most stable. I have a flat filled with furniture that I own, I get to buy myself things like air conditioners you know! My heating is always on, like this is the best place I've ever been in, and it's because of sex work!

Participants construct sex work as an income-generating activity, one which is rarely related to recreationality. Narratives such as these serve to complicate pre-existing paradigms of male sex work, ones which cast male sex workers as hypersexual, agentic, and far removed from labour or rights-based discourses of the sex industries.

As well as monetary reasons, several sex workers highlighted other positive elements of sex work, ones which are not related to hypersexuality or recreationality. Tommy Lee (S) states that other reasons for remaining in the sex industry include:

working for myself, being in control of when and where I work and not like relying on like a job or the state, so in terms of like what it means to me like being able to work in a form of like anti-capitalist labour and also like the work itself, like a lot of the times you know I'm someone's counsellour, so you know like working with like intimacy and like body work and things like that all I feel have a big impact on people's lives.

Jon (ANZ) says:

Essentially my sex work is funding my ability to do art... maybe eventually have that being my main gig... I feel like sex work is always going to be just like an option, I guess, for me in the future, it's not really something I'm itching to get out of I suppose, I'm quite comfortable.

Participants also frequently compared sex work to other forms of labour, rejecting recreational or hypersexual paradigms of male sex work. Caiden (S) states:

it's like a lot of the jobs I've done... so I work in a school and it's with like kids with additional support needs... I've worked with adults with additional support needs before and I've done like a lot of care work, and sometimes it just feels really just like doing a similar role, it feels like just doing another caring service, do you know what I mean?

Similarly, Luke (ANZ) explains that, "It's not just sex, it's customer service". Luke also states that sex work, "pays really well, has flexible hours. Quite often I walk out of there feeling better than I went. Sometimes it's a shitty booking. Most of the time it's not and fairly often, normal sex involved". That being said, several participants commented on the aporia of "choosing" to become a sex worker. Mark (S) explains that when he first entered the industry, he championed the sex positive paradigm of sex work, saying: "You become this person who's like, 'oh, no, it's amazing! It's pure wonderful, it's a choice, a choice! My body, my choice. And it's like ... it's like really, though, when you have to work, it's not a choice". Similarly, (S) Kenny states: "I think you can become very defensive... I felt the need to push the 'happy hooker' narrative, you know everything's great, I feel empowered all the time... which is not really true

all the time". While Mark and Kenny partially reject empowerment paradigms, Scott (S) embraces sex work as part of their "identity", saying:

My health has progressed to the point where I wouldn't be able to live without sex work. And rather than seeing that as like a ... rather than feeling victimised about that, I'm choosing to find it very empowering that like society has come to the point where actually I can do that safely and constructively and create a life for myself that I otherwise wouldn't be able to create.

This serves to highlight the complex and, at times, contradictory reasons male and non-binary sex workers engage with the sex industries. These complexities are often ignored in favour of the recreational and hypersexual paradigms, the image of the male sex worker in popular imagination remaining a largely one-dimensional figure. As Kenny states: "It's just what you *do*, it's not who you *are*". For Kenny, "I'm a sex worker and it's work... but my life is, you know, gardening, cooking, baking, all these... things that people don't associate with being a sex worker, because... they have nothing to do with being a sex worker".

Presumed hypersexuality trivialises (and invisibilises) harms faced by male sex workers, meaning that these harms are rarely addressed in any meaningful way within a socio-legal context. Kenny (S) is a cis male sex worker who has over 20 years of experience in the industry. Originally from Canada, Kenny tells the story of when he first moved to Scotland and the experience of extreme whorephobia he faced. He explains:

When I ... moved to Edinburgh, I had just moved here and I went to ... a gay venue and just you know to have a few drinks and to meet people... it was very friendly, it was a new space and I could see that some people... including people who had worked there, were really welcoming and friendly, and I was like wow, this is amazing. But somebody... this guy had seen my profile, my escorting profile as a sex worker, and I went there and it was a completely different... I had no idea what was going on... completely different experience.

Kenny describes an experience of being "outed" as a sex worker, a common occurrence for many sex workers. As Jack (S) explains: "I think... in terms of

discussing things with the media and things like that, it's quite hugely important, but unfortunately like a lot of sex workers, I'm kind of understandably scared about sort of being outed". Kenny (S) continues his story:

And then some people were not talking to me, the guy who worked there, we were kind of, you know, flirting and [then] there was no flirting... And... somebody just decided that he could... he was a bit drunk and was really handsy... in a way that... hadn't happened before, and... hand on my crotch and... what the hell is happening here? And then somebody, 'oh, I learnt that you are actually a really naughty boy!'. It went from being a very welcoming space to being... it was probably one of the worst experiences I had... because I was not there as a sex worker, I was there as Kenny.

Kenny's experience highlights the ways in which whorephobia has both emotional and material consequences for sex workers. In Kenny's case, the way in which he was treated and the dynamics of his relationships with others within a specific space (a gay club) were altered drastically. Upon learning that he was a sex worker, someone felt that, due to Kenny being a sex worker, he had the right to touch Kenny in a sexual way without permission. Experiences of non-consensual touching and other forms of sexual harm are common among all sex workers, regardless of gender; however, as with non-sex working men, male sex workers are unlikely to report such incidents to the police out of fear of not being taken seriously. Jon (ANZ) suggests that: "Honestly, I would assume it is like because of that stigma... like guys know that, 'oh, if I assault this guy then he's probably not going to talk about it, so I can get away with it'". This is a form of testimonial injustice, with some male sex workers feeling unable to report incidents of sexual harm to the police due to fear of not being trusted. This creates conditions for both emotional and material harm to flourish, with some clients inflicting harm on sex workers because of an assumption of non-reporting (silencing) and a lack of legal ramifications. Butler (2024) suggests that legal systems have only recently acknowledged (albeit partially) issues of consent and adopted broader definitions of sexual harm. However, they note that domestic and sexual harm is largely constructed through a cisheteronormative lens, with queer understandings of such harms being embryonic in nature (Butler 2024). Kenny did not report the incident and stated that

he felt vulnerable, to the point that he never returned to the bar where the incident occurred.

For many years, the queer community has had a tenuous relationship with systems of policing. Historically (and to this day), queer people have suffered harassment, assault, and even murder at the hands of police officers, with queer men and trans individuals receiving the highest levels of victimisation (Raine 2021). In the summer of 1969, police harassment of queer patrons of the Stonewall Inn in Manhattan, New York, resulted in what is now considered to be a pivotal moment in the queer rights movement: The Stonewall Riots. Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, two sex workers of colour, are considered important figures in this historical event (Appenroth 2015). Although the queer community's relationship with the police has improved in recent years, queer people are often reticent to engage with the police due to historical and present-day queerphobia on a global scale. In 2024, two gay men were murdered in Australia by a police officer who was an ex-partner of one of the victims²⁷. I was in Australia when this incident occurred, and there was a palpable sense of dread within the queer community at large, resulting in a request for no police presence at Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. This request was ultimately ignored. Even in a decriminalised environment, male sex workers were generally distrustful of the police, with Luke (ANZ) stating that: "We can't go to the police, like yeah, legally we have protections but that doesn't mean they are going to protect us and there are so many valid reasons for male workers not to trust the cops". Kenny's story may not have involved a client directly, but serves to highlight the stigma faced by male sex workers in everyday life, and the lack of willingness to engage with the police more generally.

Sex workers in both criminalised and decriminalised environments do not always feel comfortable interacting with the police, most likely a confluence of homophobia, whorephobia, and societal factors, which results in men being far less likely to engage with reporting systems. Lochy (ANZ) states that: "There was one time that I had like a really bad experience with a client and... they were really manipulative and I didn't... I probably should have called the police but I didn't". Steve (S) offers that, "there's much less protection... a lot of sex workers do not feel confident engaging with the police

²⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-australia-68455872>

because there isn't legislation that the police have to enforce to protect them outside of... you're not allowed to assault anybody". Allan (ANZ), a 55-year-old Māori sex worker who has experience of sex working both pre-decriminalisation and post-decriminalisation, states that, "in my young days, where you know it's illegal to be homosexual, it's illegal to be prostituting... the vice squad at the time... were on top of you, they were like out to get you all the time". Allan continues to describe the reality of being a sex worker in a pre-decriminalised Aotearoa New Zealand, saying:

Well, we didn't even have cell phones in those days, but you're street-based, so straight away you're in this environment where you've got to quickly make these decisions, jump in this car and read the situation very, very fast. First of all, is this person an undercover policeman? Get that out of the way. And then, OK, am I safe? You know? And then, OK, and then quickly get out of there and then go to some dark, dodgy, seedy, isolated place behind the building or some park or somewhere dark or... And then again, OK, are they taking me somewhere to... there's going to be other people waiting there when you get there because they know that you have money because you're working, you know, so you've got money, so you're a target.

According to Raine (2021), there is, "consistent evidence of a significant association between policing practices and increased risk of violence against sex workers. Criminalisation is exploited by some clients and the police in order to commit acts of violence and harassment against sex workers" (p. 351). Male sex workers are almost universally absent from socio-political discussions surrounding sex work law and policy. When sex work law and policy are developed, it is virtually never done with input from sex workers or sex worker rights activists. Within sex work legislation, however, sex working women are mostly considered as being the only demographic that legislative changes will impact. Sex worker voices, irrespective of gender, are routinely ignored. As Butler reminds us: "When marginalised groups attempt to contribute their knowledge (by detailing the ways a proposed law may be harmful, for example), but their knowledge is side-lined, laws are adopted or maintained that have a harmful effect on their lives" (2024, p. 750).

Whorephobia is undoubtedly correlated to the socio-legal landscape of a country or state. This is one of the primary reasons for this study being comparative and transnational, as Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand have vastly different laws governing sex work. Until 2003, both nations had highly comparable legal frameworks in place, mostly due to Aotearoa New Zealand's status as a former British colony. Until 2003, with the passing of the landmark Prostitution Reform Act (2003), both nations operated under an antiquated system of partial criminalisation. Under this framework, selling sex indoors is legal, but all other activities are illegal, including street-based sex work, soliciting, brothel-based sex work, and working with other sex workers for safety reasons. Scotland's sex work laws have remained unchanged for the past 40 years, despite arduous campaigning from sex worker activist groups (Armstrong, Phillips, and Ryan 2024). These groups advocate for the full decriminalisation of sex work, which is the model Aotearoa New Zealand adopted nationwide in 2003, with resounding success. Under this decriminalised framework, sex workers have employment protections, better access to healthcare, government-funded sex worker-serving organisations such as the NZPC, and considerably lower rates of client-perpetrated violence due to the socio-legal acceptability of both selling and purchasing sex. This is not to suggest that whorephobia does not exist in Aotearoa New Zealand, as several participants noted that sex work is not fully accepted in Aotearoa New Zealand, despite its decriminalised status. Incontrovertible, however, is the fact that decriminalisation has positively impacted Aotearoa New Zealand-based sex workers for numerous reasons, with a decreased level of whorephobia compared to that of other nations, such as Scotland (Armstrong 2021a; 2021b).

Currently, the Scottish Government is attempting to adopt the Nordic or end-demand model of sex work law (Armstrong, Phillips, and Ryan 2024). This neo-abolitionist model was first introduced in Sweden in 1999 and is intended to decrease the demand for sex work through asymmetric criminalisation – in other words, it is legal to sell sex but illegal to purchase it (Henham 2021). It has been suggested by many that client criminalisation intensifies harms faced by sex workers and that, under this model, sex work is viewed as a social problem to be abolished rather than a human reality to be addressed with compassion and justice (Bowen et al. 2021). The Scottish Government has repeatedly stated that they view sex work (which they refer to as prostitution) as “commercial sexual exploitation”, which inherently harms, “women and girls”, and that

they aim to decrease men's desire to engage with "prostitution" (Scottish Government 2020). I argue that the Scottish Government's stance on sex work is whorephobic in terms of the language used, their goals to abolish sex work, and their deliberate and forceful exclusion of male and non-binary sex workers from their definition of sex work. This exclusion is a form of symbolic annihilation, with the Scottish Government attempting to erase male and non-binary sex workers from social, political, and legal discourses surrounding the sex industries. This hermeneutical harm (Fricker 2007), in which male and non-binary sex workers are denied the interpretive resources to understand or communicate their own experiences, is exacerbated within this context of criminalisation.

When asked about the Government's whorephobic and exclusionary stance on sex work, Mark (S) says, "if you talk about male sex work, you have to talk about the agency... the people in power just now, they don't see female sex workers having agency, so therefore talking about male sex work would counter their arguments". Tommy Lee states that: "it's just not true [that all sex workers are women and girls] and yeah, it leaves like male workers in this kind of weird space". Similarly, Scott (S) offers that it is, "mystifying that we're still talking like that in this day and age. It's mystifying when a lot of the information is out there". When asked about the possibility of Scotland adopting the Nordic Model, Kenny (S) states that:

You often feel invisible in that conversation, because it's always about how it will affect women... some people might look at a woman who's a sex worker and see her as a victim. You're less likely to be seen as a victim and vulnerable as a male sex worker, you know, you're a man, you're not supposed to be in that situation.

Caiden (S) highlights the stigmatic implications of the Nordic Model by expressing:

I think it just like kind of also adds to the whole sex work is something wrong, isn't it? Because you know, if it was illegal to buy, then... yeah, it's just adding into that whole stigma of it, it's like ... it's setting it up again as something wrong and seedy and dirty or whatever, and again, as if like we're in a position that we're like vulnerable and being exploited.

Similarly, Steve (S) suggests:

My concern would be that by making it harder for people to engage with sex workers, all you're going to do is put sex workers at greater risk of harm, because they'll have to go to less safe locations, they'll have to... engage with clients that they maybe normally wouldn't have because they didn't feel 100% safe.

As Luke (ANZ) states: "And there is the fundamental issue with any of these systems designed to 'protect' sex workers. If you assume that sex work is wrong you are never going to develop a system that adequately protects the workers". Sex workers in Aotearoa New Zealand are not fully inoculated from harm, as Luke (ANZ) suggests that: "You can still be discriminated against, it is just that those people are legally in the wrong". This is especially true of migrant sex workers who are not prohibited from selling sex under the legal framework of Aotearoa New Zealand, as outlined in section 19 of the Prostitution Reform Act (Bennachie et al. 2021). As Zach (ANZ) states: "Yeah, I mean I think I'd also note that it [decriminalisation] hasn't helped migrant sex workers". Thiago (ANZ), a Brazilian migrant sex worker, explains:

I've had clients who blackmailed me in so many ways... they were like, 'oh, I'm going to call immigration', and they probably did. 'I'm going to tell on you, I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that'... They have so much power over other people because of the laws, the laws are supporting this nastiness.

Discussing the positive impacts of decriminalisation Lochy (ANZ) states that the decriminalisation of sex work has made selling sex much safer, and that, "just in like the situation if you... [find] yourself in danger, like it's so, so like comforting to know that you can, you are on... the right side of the law I guess". Zach (ANZ) echoes this by saying: "I think it's made it safer. Like you can... if something happens you can go to the police without being you know criminalised yourself". Agreeably, Kurt (ANZ) states that decriminalisation has had a positive impact on sex workers, suggesting that: "I think the invisibility of men in the industry means that we probably get the same

respect for our rights as women get, people just aren't aware that they are doing it, you know?". Luke (ANZ) also extols the benefits of decriminalisation by expressing:

We are more able to provide support for each other and communicate about dangerous clients, we can share resources, NZPC is able to exist as a legal entity and we have got a Dame who works for the Prostitutes Collective, like that's wild... I think, I guess it's one of those weird ones because I've only ever worked after the decrim model came into effect. I couldn't say what the difference is, wood for the trees, it's okay and it was great that we passed on the Sexual Law Reform in New Zealand. That happened before I was born and again I'm very happy to grow up when and where I have.

As with the majority of participants, Prince (ANZ) has only ever experienced sex working in Aotearoa New Zealand post-decriminalisation, stating:

Well I think it's impacted me in the sense that I've never had to worry about really, yeah, about any issues to do with Police and interacting with the Police... it's been huge in the sense of the amount of privilege I have as a sex worker and the safety I have as a sex worker and safety that was written into law and sex work as an industry and that we have worker's rights and we can organise and have, you know, take people to Court and stuff like... that's huge.

Allan (ANZ) speaks to the vocational security bolstered by decriminalisation, saying that, "the biggest thing for me is that, ah, now I can control the situation, I'm in control of my work, where I work". In relation to his massage and spiritual body work practice, Allan continues by expressing:

I just wanted to take my professional training, clinical training, and take that into that sex work arena and offer those same standard of service but in a more professional manner. And coming from a... delivering my work from a space of light, as opposed to a space of darkness and dodginess, which I feel pre-decriminalisation, it's pushed sex workers, pushed them to the shady... in the shadows kind of space. And now... we actually can work in the light.

Several participants mention potential employment discrimination due to experience of sex work, something which is rarely considered an issue for male and non-binary sex workers because of the lack of labour-centric analyses apropos men selling sex. Whorephobia, however, *does* manifest as employment discrimination. This is especially true of countries which do not offer labour protections to sex workers (such as Scotland); however, it must be noted that employment discrimination is extant in countries which do offer labour protections to sex workers (such as Aotearoa New Zealand). As aforementioned, male sex work is rarely explored through the lens of labour analysis and, as such, stories of men experiencing employment discrimination are often overlooked. Mark (S) states:

Yeah, just like the stigma... looking at apprenticeships and wanting to continue content as well... because I don't see why it should have to be one or the other. So, I'm just aware of the fact that I'm going into corporate environments where you know you're online, right, and you're publicly facing, so at some point, somebody who's employing you will find out. And then like OK, how do I prepare myself for that? Like how do I be ready for knowing the policies that they are breaking if they're discriminating or whatever. So, it's just like you're going... like trying to have like an arsenal ready for when that's going to probably inevitably happen, do you know what I mean?

Zach (ANZ) shares similar fears, stating that he has recently finished studying law and that being a sex worker could preclude him from being admitted to the Bar. Zach states that to qualify to practice law, you are required to be a “fit and proper person” and that he is unsure if people perceive being a sex worker (past or present) as being aligned with this moralistic idea of personhood within a legal context. Despite sex work being decriminalised and sex workers having employment protections, sex workers like Zach remain reticent to disclose their experience of sex work due to fears of discrimination within the context of employment. Similarly, Harry (ANZ) states that he is almost qualified to be a schoolteacher, and he has concerns about people finding out, suggesting that there is, “probably just a bit of an instinctive discomfort with someone who engages with sex work being a teacher”. Caiden (S), who also works in education, says:

If my day job found out, I'm quite certain I would lose my job, yeah, the council would fire me, so like I feel like I need to be really careful about who I tell and like my online presence. And I feel like I've got to be so careful like what photos I can put online, which is like difficult because then because like people actually like see my face and things like that, and I try not to have like my whole face on things.

Steve (S) summarises: "I think people probably feel freer to discriminate against sex work, because it's not protected the same way as other occupations are". Steve is speaking from a Scottish context in which sex work is partially criminalised and has no vocational protections under the law. However, as mentioned by several participants from Aotearoa New Zealand, having employment protections for sex workers does not guarantee *social* acceptance of sex work.

Another potential participant, who also works in the Scottish education sector, ultimately decided not to take part in the project due to concerns that his professional life would be put at risk. This is unsurprising due to whorephobia and the socio-legal landscape of Scotland. Here, we can see how criminalising sex work creates barriers for sex workers taking part in research (academic and otherwise). Taking part in research is a vital way to ensure that sex worker voices are heard. If sex workers do not speak for themselves, they will be spoken *for*. This highlights the convergence of legislative frameworks and the harm they can cause. Sex workers who are fearful of the material harms of criminalisation (in this case, potentially being fired from a job because they also engage in sex work) are less likely to seek out sources of community. This absence of community can lead to emotional harm such as isolation or mental health issues. Further, sex workers who are disconnected from the sex working community may not have access to community resources or harm reduction information e.g., information on dangerous clients or avenues for non-stigmatising sexual health screenings. As shown, the ramifications of criminalisation are far-reaching and can be especially damaging for sex workers who belong to multiple marginalised groups such as male and non-binary sex workers. Male and non-binary sex workers operating in decriminalised environments such as Aotearoa New Zealand remain generally invisible and lack community. Male sex workers operating in criminalised environments such as Scotland are at greater risk for further

invisibilisation and isolation. As Mark (S) elucidates: “I feel like everybody else is probably just like me, just has a completely like singular experience of their sex work in Scotland, and there’s no clue about how anybody else is experiencing it”. Jack (S) states that male sex workers are, “less likely to have community, they’re less likely to possibly even identify as sex workers because they’re told that what they’re doing isn’t sex work, even though they’re on Grindr every week, being paid to have sex with people”.

That being said, there was also a prospective participant from Aotearoa New Zealand who also dropped out of the project. This potential participant was a 20-year-old man who sold sex informally via Grindr. He explained that he was not overly familiar with the work of the NZPC and the sex worker-specific services they offer such as counselling, sexual health screenings, and community drop-in spaces. He was reticent about labelling what he engaged in as sex work. This highlights a limitation of my study insofar that my recruitment materials explicitly state that I was looking to interview sex workers. This was not only due to linguistic ease but also to firmly situate my research within the sex worker rights paradigm. Such an approach may alienate situational sex workers, such as those who sell sex on Grindr, as they do not identify with the political label of sex worker. This is another potent example of the hypermarginalisation faced by male and non-binary sex workers, many of whom do not access sources of community or sex worker-specific services. This is another potential source of harm and, although more demonstrable in nations where sex work is criminalised, it is worth noting that male and non-binary sex workers are still more likely to be isolated from the community and less likely to access harm reduction services in decriminalised environments. Men who sell sex situationally are unable to interpret their own experiences of selling sex, being hermeneutically sealed off from the wider sex working community. In other words, they are unable to *imagine* themselves as sex workers.

Myth #5: The Myth of the Monolithic “Male” Body (All Male Sex Workers Have the Same Body Type)

Another prominent myth consistent across both nations was the prerequisite for male sex workers to be youthful or adhere to normative societal conventions of

attractiveness by possessing a specific body type (slim or muscular). Thiago (ANZ) states: "I think a misconception is that you... have to have certain physical attributes. That's a misconception". Aiden (ANZ) says that: "Oh yeah, that is another good myth... that all sex workers are incredibly hot. A lot of people are just average people. I don't think I'm that good looking, not ugly, but I'm not, you know". Jack (S) states: "Another one [myth] I guess would be that they're all super young twinkie boys". "Twinkie" or "twink" is gay slang commonly used to denote a slim, boyish, and usually hairless queer man. Zach (ANZ) offers that: "And I think that there's probably a misconception that all male workers (inclusive of trans male workers), are like twinkie, hairless, skinny as a twig... wasn't my experience". Toby explains: "I suppose after that you have to belong to one of like a small handful of kind of conventionally attractive, like conventional attractiveness categories like, quite like gym fit or being quite twink-ey". Tommy Lee (S) states that: "I guess like the typical ideal of like a male worker is like an eboy or just like someone that's like quite young and quite muscular as well," adding that, "I don't know but I don't think society thinks as much about male workers as they do about fem workers at all, or trans workers". Toby (ANZ) says that: "I think there would probably be something there about how it is something that's only done by quite young people... maybe less so for female sex workers". Allan (ANZ) suggests that, "there's all ages, there's all types... it can be your brother, it can be your father... you know, I'm a grandfather, I'm a father, I'm a partner, it's like, you know, all these different hats that I wear". The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 55, with the mean age being 30. Although the ages tended to skew younger, the range of participant ages serves to highlight the misconception that male sex workers are exclusively men in their youth. Further, Luke (ANZ) highlights, "the young queer man being taken advantage of stereotype". Similarly, Toby (ANZ) emphasises the, "idea that all of your clients are going to be much, much older men, that all of your clients are going to be like weird and gross, that it's terribly dangerous, like, I think is my impression, yeah".

Luke (ANZ) shares a story of one of his clients, John, an older disabled man, saying that when non-sex workers imagine the average type of client, he does not think that they would, "picture John and that's a shame because he's one of the nicest people that I've met and he treated me with a lot more dignity than a lot of the people I've had sex with, for no money!". Relatedly, Caiden (S) states that, "other people are like, 'oh yeah, I bet you just kind of sleep with like really like horrible fat old men and you must

hate it', you know, that sort of thing". Caiden also comments that he has a regular older client who is "really sweet" and that he almost feels "bad taking his money off him!". Presumptions surrounding the general age and body type of clients also stem from whorephobia: this is known as stigma by association. As Mark suggests, "it's like the fear and the stigma is just felt by everybody, even if they're not a sex worker, like by association, that whole thing". Max (S) comments that whorephobia is directly related to xenophobia and heteromonogamy, saying that: "I think it's all just... fear of the Other, you know what I mean, and with sex work it's ... people think that you should be monogamous and you should have one partner". Lochy also comments on the stigma stemming from sex work existing outwith the normative hetero-monogamous matrix, saying that: "It's just like kind of slut shaming, basically". Max and Lochy both allude to the whorephobic notion of sex work undermining the normative boundaries of sex – that is, sex between two people in a monogamous relationship.

The myth that all male sex workers are young operates in synchronicity with the myth that all clients are older men (specifically, predatory men who aim to take advantage of young male workers). This is not to erase or invalidate experiences of young male sex workers who have been mistreated by older clients, but instead to emphasise that this is one experience of many that exists within the wide spectrum of male sex worker multiplicities. As Redwood suggests, while there is, "intense racism, classism, and ageism present in the sex industry, my feeling is that these "isms" and biases in male sex work reflect the power dynamics that exist in the larger society and within the capitalist economy itself" (Redwood 2018, p. 172). In other words, cultural conditioning has demanded the placing of greater value on bodies that are youthful and slim/muscular, meaning that the sex industry does not hold a monopoly on the valorisation of specific bodies. It can be argued, however, that specific sectors of the sex industry preferentially platform normative bodies (cisgender, young, slim, and conventionally attractive) i.e., the pornographic film industry. Several participants reference the influence of porn apropos the ways in which male sex workers are constructed and perceived within society. As Jon (ANZ) states, porn, "does a decent job at not explaining the full story", and that, porn, "does not teach you how to have sex". Prince (ANZ) states:

Porn has got a lot to do with that [client perceptions of male sex workers] because... a lot of the time if I would get messages from Johns being like what is F2M [female to male], I would say like check out PornHub or something like that... that was a good way for them to have like a visual understanding of what I looked like.

Prince explains that, although he is aware that some of the misconceptions surrounding male and non-binary sex workers come from the representation of male sex workers in porn, they also utilise porn as a pedagogic tool for clients who are unfamiliar with transmasculine bodies. Rather than suggesting that porn is an accurate depiction of transmasculine bodies (and the ways in which they engage in sex with their clients), Prince suggests that porn has some utility as an instructive instrument. As Lochy (ANZ) explains, however, porn's utility as an educational tool is limited due to its focus on normative, binary, and simplistic representations of queer masculinity and bodies. Lochy states that, "Yeah, a lot of them come in... they want to do like role play... I think the idea of... youthful like gay masculinity is coded by watching porn... it's just kind of really simple... gay masculinity is very simple". Lochy (ANZ) also suggests that, for some people, porn is not only a conduit through which preconceptions (and misconceptions) of male sex workers are produced, but representations of queer sex among men in general. They state:

Yeah and also just like what gay sex looks like because I feel like a lot of them [older clients] just don't have a lot of experience, like, having like real life like relationships with other gay people... I feel, quote, lucky to have... like having a lot of gay friends and yeah have like grown up in a certain time and place... I feel like a lot of them just... have lived in a lot of like repression and the only kind of way they have been able to like come up with the idea of other gay people has been through porn.

As scholars have suggested, demonising the porn industry does not actualise change within society, but rather fuels stigma for sex workers who work in the porn industry (Jones 2020; Stardust 2015). As with other sectors of the sex industry, redirecting blame or judgement on the workers is an ineffective way to engage with discourses surrounding the depiction (and deification) of normative bodies within porn and wider society. Although not all bodies in porn are normative, as noted by Jones (2020) in

their discussion of trans-inclusive porn studios, the majority can be considered as such. Porn reflects the societal emphasis on normative bodies, and this portrayal has material effects for sex workers who work in other sectors of the sex industry (as in the case of this study). Redwood stresses the importance of non-sex workers to understand that, “what they are seeing in front of a camera is a performance by actors who are acting out a prescribed role that often does not reflect who they are or what they do in real life” (2018, p. 173).

Several transmasculine participants across both nations highlighted the myth that trans male sex workers do not require their clients to use condoms. Client misunderstandings of transmasculine bodies could be partially ascribed to the representation (or lack thereof) of transmasculine persons in porn, but also the general dearth of knowledge surrounding transmasculine bodies within wider society. Aiden (ANZ) states:

I've also seen things like... for example, the period when it was the AIDS crisis and young trans and gay men who were doing sex work, you know, if a client says I will pay you extra if you don't wear a condom... they are going to say okay I'll do that then. So, I feel like another misconception might be that it's easier to convince male sex workers to have unsafe sex, that's what I picked up at least.

Caiden (S) suggests that he has had significant issues with clients requesting to have unprotected sex, expressing:

The amount of guys who push not using condoms and then I'm like... you either need to get on board with the condoms thing very quickly or like we're not meeting... And like you just explain to guys like, you know I mean it's not likely, but I could get pregnant, like you know, that is possible.

Aiden (ANZ) also echoes this sentiment, saying:

A lot of people think that trans guys can't get pregnant. Another thing is people are like, 'you can't get pregnant if you are on Testosterone'. Testosterone can

stop your cycle but also at the same time, like, you don't necessarily need to be having periods to be at a point where you can get pregnant.

Speaking of the disparity in client knowledge concerning safer transactional sex, Kurt (ANZ) explains:

If you are woman, you can work in a brothel, lots of clear signage everywhere about condoms and safety and all that kind of stuff, whereas the clients that you get when you are booking them off Grindr or off Craigslist or a shitty rentboy website and you're meeting them in their car or at their Hotel or at a room by the hour... a lot less communication about rights and laws and things. It's why I have... so many conversations about condoms, if you had to walk past the sign saying it was illegal to not wear one before you enter this room, you wouldn't ask that question!

Similarly, Jon (ANZ) states:

One of the interesting things is about, oh shit, just how like common people asking for unprotected sex is. It's way more common, like you will get some guys that are like, always use a condom... but most guys will happily go, 'oh I'm clean', you know, whatever... really just not take their sexual health seriously because you are seeing someone that is having sex with a lot of other different people and so they are kind of relying on you... all it takes is one person and then all of a sudden I'm infecting like 20 other people before I get my next test. So yeah, there's definitely misconceptions that male sex workers are more okay with unprotected sex because of the clientele being okay with that and being uneducated, yeah and just the pressure I guess, to do so is pretty big, again because you are just doing it for fun so we can do it raw, whatever.

Similarly, Aiden (ANZ) suggests: "One of the things I'm thinking is that there's more of a conception that you can sort of, there are, you know, there's no need to use a condom because of PrEP". As noted by the participants, there is a myth that male sex workers will have unprotected sex with clients (the idea being that they will be easier to convince compared to female sex workers due to hypersexuality or inherent

recreationality). This myth is most likely compounded by representations of queer male sex (and queer male sex workers) in porn, with most queer male porn scenes featuring unprotected sex.

The prevalence of unprotected sex in queer male porn may be partially attributed to the advent of PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis), a combination of antiviral drugs used to prevent HIV transmission. PrEP is a highly effective preventative treatment with near 100% efficacy when adhering to medication schedules. Although many queer men and queer male sex workers take PrEP, this is not universally true. Over 40 years since the beginning of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the advent of PrEP is a monumental medical breakthrough and a significant turning point for limiting HIV transmissibility. This is significant for the queer community at large; however, for queer men and male sex workers (two groups who were, historically, disproportionately affected by HIV), PrEP signifies not only a turning point in the history of these communities, but also the ways in which queer men and male sex workers engage in sex. However, this can cause issues for male and non-binary sex workers within the transactional space occupied by the worker and client.

This can be seen in the prevalence of male sex workers (especially transmasculine sex workers) being subjected to pervasive demands for unprotected sex during sessions. As Tommy Lee (S) comments, there are times when sex workers will comply with demands for unprotected sex due to financial precarity, a common situation for many sex workers, one which is made more common in nations in which sex work is criminalised. Tommy Lee (S) suggests that clients asking transmasculine sex workers to have unprotected sex is a, “huge thing”, and, “[he] knew that we would have to talk about it at some point because every single client wants to have unprotected sex”. Tommy Lee states that: “I have to like assert my boundaries like very, very harshly... but clients will just not meet me if they don’t want that [protected sex] and you know there’s been times where it has happened without my consent”. Here, Tommy Lee is referring to the practice of *stealth*, the act of removing a condom during sex without consent. Jon (ANZ) speaks of a similar experience with a client:

During the middle of the night, you know, [the client] doesn’t bother putting a condom on and I’m half asleep and yeah, it’s kind of, because he feels like he

has paid so much that he can get away with stuff. I was like fucking hell, so I'm not seeing him again, I'm not dealing with the boundary pushers, even though the money is good... it's just not worth it!

Tommy Lee (S) further elaborates upon his experience of stealthing, saying that it:

left [him] with like 3 STIs... yeah and this is like a huge thing – just because PrEP exists doesn't mean that other things don't, so I'm just expected to be on PrEP or like birth medication and yeah, you know, this, my body and my health and unfortunately there have been times where I have done it for the money because I needed money.

This is indicative of how myths or misconceptions about sex workers can cause material and emotional harm for sex workers – in this case, Tommy Lee having unprotected sex out of economic necessity.

The legal environment also contributes to sex worker vulnerability in this sense, with clients in Aotearoa New Zealand being required by law to use condoms. In Scotland, however, no such requirement exists, meaning sex workers have significantly less social and legal latitude for negotiating safer sex practices. Despite the legal framework, sex workers in Aotearoa New Zealand still have issues negotiating safer sex with clients, as Jon (ANZ) explains:

I hope that they are mature enough to take no, so many times it's, 'oh but, oh but this, oh but that', you know, it's very... it just gets tiring and people think that they can wear you down enough that you finally give in type thing and that has happened to me, you know, it does happen. It fucking sucks and I mean I'm of the opinion if that was the case, I shouldn't be working but also sometimes you are in between a rock and a hard place and you fucking need the money.

Interestingly, Harry (ANZ), a cisgender male worker, suggests that he feels he has an ample ability to negotiate safer sex with clients, stating:

I mean I know that when I'm doing sex work, I'm normally... I just feel in control setting my terms, because I feel like I've got the right to set my terms if we're

going to do this transaction almost, rather than a hook-up where it's more negotiating... I almost feel more at ease setting my terms, OK, we're going to only go to this space or we're going to... or you're going to use a condom, right, or whatever, or that kind of stuff.

It would stand to reason that cis male sex workers experience more latitude in terms of negotiating safer sex practices with clients when compared to trans male sex workers. Cis male sex workers are the beneficiaries of social privileges not provided to transmasculine and non-binary sex workers. Although trans men are afforded privilege over female sex workers by virtue of their maleness or mascness, cis men, on average, possess the most latitude within society and can harness this discursive power in certain social situations (in this case, negotiating safer sex within transactional sex). Many of these issues are interconnected; for example, the general lack of knowledge surrounding trans men contributes to how they are perceived by clients. For instance, it is assumed by many that trans men who undergo hormonal therapy in the form of taking testosterone are unable to get pregnant. This is untrue, however, as trans men taking testosterone can get pregnant, although the likelihood of this happening is greatly diminished. Here, we can observe the coalescence between myths surrounding gender and myths concerning sex work. This is unsurprising as sex work is a heavily gendered practice, one which is beholden to the dominant social scripts of gender; however, sex work can also disrupt traditional understandings of gender, as illustrated by several participants in the previous chapter.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the various myths surrounding male and non-binary sex workers. Further, attention was paid to the ways in which myths can cause both material and emotional harm for male and non-binary sex workers, and how these harms go largely unnoticed within society. This chapter emphasises the need for policy reforms which prioritise the safety and well-being of all sex workers, while recognising the unique challenges faced by those who exist outwith cisheteronormative frameworks. Further, this chapter explores how the criminalisation and stigmatisation of sex work exacerbate these vulnerabilities via processes of Othering. This chapter

also explores participant narratives in relation to socio-legal models of sex work law. Participants were unanimous in their positive appraisal of decriminalisation, while criminalisation models were highly criticised, specifically Nordic approaches to sex work law and policy due to the potential harms they produce for sex workers and clients. This exclusion neglects the unique challenges faced by men in the industry, including societal perceptions of masculinity that discourage acknowledgment of victimhood or discrimination.

Chapter Six

Media, Myths, and the Future

Introduction

Throughout this chapter, several significant topics will be explored, including: the media representation of male and non-binary sex workers (or lack thereof); the importance of sex worker-told stories; and how male and non-binary sex workers *imagine* a better world for sex workers. The interpretation of stories, whether it be one's own story or another person's, is a central concept throughout this chapter. This chapter begins with a vignette, in which I detail my past experiences of espousing whorephobic beliefs prior to entering the sex industry. This vignette was not adapted from a fieldnote; I include it here to highlight the situatedness of knowledge within society, an important theme throughout this chapter. The impetus for the inclusion of this story is to demonstrate that knowledge is not fixed, but rather is always in a state of flux. As we acquire new information concerning a specific topic or idea (or, in this case, someone's lived reality), we can interpret it differently based on the expansion of our (in my case, very limited) pre-existing knowledge.

I vividly remember my first interaction with a male sex worker – that is, someone who had been explicit about their experience of sex work. As aforementioned, male sex workers are everywhere. It was Pride and I was celebrating with some friends; we were socialising at a friend's flat after the march and someone had invited a friend no one else was familiar with. I do not even remember his name – I do remember, however, how we judged him. After telling us he was a sex worker, several of us felt it necessary to express to him that we did not agree with sex work and that sex should not be transactional. One person attempted to defend him from our onslaught of whorephobia, but the sex worker himself remained silent. I will never forget how small he looked as he sat on the floor, a timid individual, stunned into silence by the unsolicited opinions of strangers. We did not know this person, his background, his story. We knew nothing of the circumstances that led him to become a sex worker, nor did we care, apparently. I wish, more than anything, that I could speak to him again. I wish I could apologise for my transmission of judgement and shame. Upon entering

the sex industry, I was subjected to, although admittedly not to the same degree, the whorephobic treatment that I had once imparted onto this stranger. I have been told that what I am doing is “not work”, been called a prostitute in a pejorative manner, and suffered mentally due to general anxieties concerning employment discrimination and issues with entering certain nations (such as the USA and Japan). I acknowledge my immense privilege within this industry, however, as a white, cisgender, educated individual. I am also forward and outspoken and would have no issue challenging someone on whorephobic proclamations made in my presence. My previous whorephobic attitudes stemmed from a lacuna in knowledge surrounding the sex industries, specifically sex working men. I was unable to understand his experience because it was deeply alien and saturated in alterity. I had no epistemic reference, no basis for any kind of interpretation beyond sex work, for some reason, being “wrong”. When I began my own sex work journey, it was an intensely isolating experience. I had no peers, no shepherding influence from a more experienced male sex worker, and no familiar experiences reflected within the media. Simply put, I was unable to *interpret* my own experiences, my own narrative, my own life, just as I was unable to interpret the life of another sex worker. I lacked the *narrative imagination* (Nussbaum 1996) – that is, the capability of being an intelligent reader of someone else’s story – necessary to fully understand this person’s life.

As Caiden (S) states: “I mean, I think a lot of it’s just... not knowing anyone who does it, do you know what I mean?”. If we are not aware of an individual’s circumstances or reality, we are unable to interpret their story. This can have both emotional and material effects for male and non-binary sex workers, as I will explore throughout this chapter.

Myths of the Media (the Symbolic Annihilation of Male and Non-Binary Sex Workers)

Many participants agreed that their own perception of male and non-binary sex work(ers) stemmed from media representation (or lack thereof), with the lacuna of male and non-binary sex worker representation in the media being a prominent motif throughout both nations. In their analysis of the representation of male sex workers in

media, Corvino states that: “The shift toward broader representation expands our culture, and the inclusion of sex workers’ narratives that present a more complicated picture than prevailing stereotypes is a part of this expansion” (2021, p. 177). As most of the sex workers taking part in this study suggest, however, male and non-binary sex workers are represented either vis-à-vis stereotypical depictions or by their absence. For Gerbner and Gross (1976), the media reflect normative societal ideals and values of a given time. In this case, symbolic annihilation communicates to society that male and non-binary sex workers do not exist and/or are not important within said society – viz., the need to understand men’s place within the global sex industries holds no function for society. Here, I argue that myth, in tandem with symbolic annihilation, is a site of social harm (both material and symbolic) for male sex workers. Symbolic annihilation is also totemic of hermeneutical harm (Fricker 2007), when someone is less able to interpret their own existence due to their experiences not existing within normative frameworks by virtue of socio-historic exclusion from institutions and industries (such as academia, journalism, media, and law) that allow people to make sense of their lives.

Speaking to the lack of male and non-binary sex worker representation in the media, Jon (ANZ) suggests that: “It’s extremely niche, I do not see my experience in media at all... I can see some parallels, some things that are kind of there but, hell, sex work and media is barely represented, let alone male sex work!”. Similarly, Kurt (ANZ) states: “I don’t think I’ve seen like a realistic one [depiction of male sex work] in my time and definitely not for a transmasculine worker”. Lochy (ANZ), a genderfluid worker, says that while they do enjoy some sex work-related media, they do not see their own experience represented in these stories, a sentiment shared by many participants across both nations. Mark (S) states that: “The impression I get from this country [Scotland] specifically, whenever I watch like a Channel 4 documentary or a BBC documentary or anything on mainstream TV about [male] sex workers... it’s much more about like male sexuality”. Kenny (S) comments on the lack of representation for specifically queer male sex workers, saying that when he started sex working in the 1990s and 2000s, television and film depictions around this time tended to favour the image of the heterosexual sex worker providing services to female clients. Zach (ANZ) suggests that: “Male sex workers really aren’t the hot topic, you know, I think that if people are thinking of sex workers they’re thinking of women, unless they’re thinking

of strippers... maybe like *Magic Mike*, Channing Tatum comes into it". Several other participants mention *Magic Mike*, a 2012 film which explores the lives of heterosexual male strippers, suggesting that, for some people, the image of a male sex worker is congruent with the one seen in *Magic Mike* (that is, a heterosexual man who strips for predominantly female clientele). The depiction of young, conventionally attractive, cisheterosexual male sex workers who cater almost exclusively to women is not reflective of most male sex workers' realities. These portrayals erase the diversity of male sex workers, including trans, non-binary, older, and disabled workers, all of which are represented within this study.

Depictions of sex work within the media are overwhelmingly heterosexual, with queer sex workers (irrespective of gender) rarely being depicted on-screen, both within fiction and non-fiction media. This symbolic annihilation effectively works to "un-queer" the sex industries, with the emphasis instead being placed on cisgender and heterosexual stories, with queer sex work remaining a mystery to many (Phillips 2025). Several participants also spoke about the limited representation of female sex workers within the media, with Prince (ANZ) suggesting that a common trope in sex worker-related media is the depiction of young female sex workers with older, rich men. This kind of portrayal perpetuates mythological and binary understandings of sex workers and clients – that is, that all sex workers are young and that all clients are old and rich. Mark (S) also mentions how sex work-related media commonly portrays female sex workers as victims. Mark says: "The women they put on the programmes, it's always like a struggling... you know even just the people they pick... the people whose stories they choose to tell". The media creates narratives based on pre-existing cultural and political biases, and the stories they choose to depict or distribute reveal, in this instance, entrenched whorephobic attitudes and beliefs.

Numerous participants suggested that when sex workers were portrayed in the media, they were often depicted in an unfavourable manner, with Allan (ANZ) stating: "That's what they [the public] see in the media... who's getting murdered or whatever, do you know what I mean, those are all the stories, and you very rarely hear anything about a male". Congruently, Aiden (ANZ) states: "If you see a sex worker on TV, it's because they have been murdered in like a police drama". Aiden (ANZ) further comments on the disposability of sex workers on TV, inferring that people view sex workers as a,

“throwaway human being who doesn’t need to have any sort of back story”. Luke (ANZ) voices that if a TV series contains or centres around queer stories, one of the characters, “will have an experience with sex work but it’s always kind of like a side note rather than being a major plot line”. Luke also suggests that such stories are often characteristic of “trauma drama” – that is, a unidirectional storyline (a “trauma porn story” as Scott (S) terms it) which depicts sex work as a solely traumatic experience. Trauma-centric sex worker stories are commonplace in the media, irrespective of gender and sexuality. Several participants also noted that news tends to focus on sex work as a crisis, associating it with crime, trafficking, and drugs. When sex workers are covered, the focus is often centred around sex work being a taboo or tragic subject, portraying sex workers as victims of trafficking or drug users. Caiden (S) suggests that media depictions of sex workers tend to be centred around, “hookers who are on drugs and... walking along the side of the street or whatever. Like I don’t think people realise how digital it is now”. Similarly, Prince (ANZ) states that media depictions of the sex industry are limited to, “either street-based sex workers, poverty, drug use, or it’s high-class escorts and yeah, like expensive trips away and shopping sprees and things like that”. Commenting on the lack of diverse representation concerning sex work representation in the media, Aiden (ANZ) states:

The real issue is I have found most sex workers I have met are deeply trusting people with a lot going on in their lives and clients I have found, you know, they are pretty much the same. Deeply interesting people who have got loads going on in their lives who just happen to see sex workers.

Prince also comments on the media’s potential power in shaping sex worker-client dynamics: “I think that is kind of both like instilled within sex workers and also clients like, what our roles should be when it’s... so much less black and white than that”. As Prince suggests, limited or non-existent representation stimulates hermeneutical harm insofar that both sex workers and clients are unable to interpret or navigate sex worker-client dynamics outwith normative and binary understandings. Unilateral media representation and news coverage of sex work that highlight only negative experiences create stigma, making it harder for male sex workers to be open about their work, which, in turn, reinforces myths pertaining to male sex work *ad infinitum*.

Several participants commented on the possible correlation between a lack of knowledge surrounding the sex industries, generationality, and how this may influence media depictions of sex work. When asked about the myths concerning male sex workers and their potential sources, Max (S) says: “I don’t know, stupid TV shows! I think it’s like... it’s the same old ideas that get propagated by presumably writers who aren’t engaged in the community or a community like this in any kind of way”. Max also states that: “I think just immediately from using terminology like prostitute, prostitution... people have an idea in their head that they don’t like. I think that... yeah, I mean fucking shows like Game of Thrones!”. Max also explains that: “It’s all kind of layers of generational nonsense”. Commenting on the relationship between generationality and sex worker-related knowledge, Prince (ANZ) uses individuals who are now at retirement age as an example, saying:

The type of media that they have like consumed or experienced around sex work goes back to magazines and movies and movies where it’s like really framed around street based sex work and Johns being, you know, like the shadow guy in the car and it’s a quick fuck and then it’s like you’re gone or something, or otherwise like the pretty hooker type thing, like, I want to say *Pretty Woman*.

In a similar vein, Scott (S) references ancient biblical texts and how negative ideas about sex workers are expressed in such texts. Scott mentions the Bible’s supposed portrayal of sex work, articulating that: “Jesus talking to prostitutes and stuff like that, there was always the inherent understanding that it’s a bad thing and that you want to get out of it, even though you might forgive someone for having done that”. Scott mentions that they come from a religious family and that their own family’s understanding of sex work (as something immoral) is directly influenced by the Bible. This is an example of how forms of media that are now considered outdated (that is, far from being a contemporary source of information) continue to influence certain individuals and their ideological standpoints. This relates to generationality insofar that, in certain contexts, religiosity may be associated with older generations. Non-stigmatic and nuanced depictions of sex work in the media, although rare, are usually found within more contemporary media, with participants drawing connections

between older generations' media consumption habits and how this impacts their understanding of sex work.

Here, I wish to highlight a transformative moment during my fieldwork journey. In Wellington, I became acquainted with a group of friends who lived together in, what I would soon find out, was a house owned by their Church. I was not aware of this prior to attending a dinner party at their home. They told me, very casually, that their flat had once been a brothel. In Scotland, brothels (shared spaces of transactional sex) do exist, but they are not legal and are therefore highly secretive in nature. Yet, here I was in Wellington, attending a dinner party with a group of young Christians who, with the same nonchalance as when they told me what kind of soup we would be having, informed me that they lived in a flat that was once a brothel. In a world in which sex worker stigma is almost ubiquitous, I found this evening particularly enlightening. We spent hours talking about life, about sex work, religion, politics, et alia, and what I ultimately took from this evening was that if we allow ourselves, without judgment, to imagine worlds beyond our own, there is no limit to what we could achieve. I have heard many religious people disparage sex work and sex workers in my lifetime, but within this interstice, we were imagining a new way of seeing each other, of seeing the world the way it could be. I return now to the analysis proper.

Several sex workers highlighted what they considered to be positive depictions of sex work. Lochy (ANZ) suggests that: "One of my favourite movies is called *Funeral Parade of Roses*... I really love that because... it's about sex workers and it... uses like real life actors who are actually like trans sex workers". Media depictions of trans sex work are not only scarce, but the roles are usually given to cisgender and non-sex worker actors. The casting of cisgender actors in transgender roles is a contentious topic, with many suggesting that casting cisgender actors to portray transgender characters is exclusionary and offensive. Some have argued that, due to cisnormativity and cissexism, most acting roles are reserved for cisgender characters because, by and large, characters on screen are cisgender. Transgender actors, even those who "pass" as cisgender, are not commonly chosen to portray cisgender characters. Similarly, it is atypical for someone who has lived experience of sex work to portray a sex worker on screen. This is due to the whorephobic nature of both society and the media industries. Sex worker identities can be easier to conceal than

other identities, with sex worker being a political identity rather than identities that can, although not always, be interpreted from physical characteristics such as gender or race. It is unsurprising, then, that a genderqueer sex worker such as Lochy (ANZ) would identify with the trans sex workers portrayed in *Funeral Parade of Roses*, with Lochy being a non-cisgender sex worker. Thiago (ANZ) recalls an experience of watching a documentary about female sex workers in Europe and how their “lifestyle” seemed appealing. Thiago explains: “I want to date for a living, I want to seduce and be seduced and flirt for a living... I like human beings, I like being on dates, why not make money off of it?”. Here, Thiago (ANZ) recalls seeing sex workers being portrayed on screen and it, at least partially, encouraged them to engage in sex work. This is not to say that depicting sex work on screen will inspire people to become sex workers; quite the contrary, most depictions of sex work on screen are overpoweringly negative and usually serve as a cautionary tale for those considering entering the sex industry. What is clear, however, from both Lochy and Thiago’s stories is that representation matters.

Not only does representation matter for sex workers consuming sex worker-related media, but it is also important for non-sex workers to consume media that explores all aspects of sex worker experiences and identities. Otherwise, the lived reality of sex work will remain a mystery to most, and myths relating to sex work will continue to thrive, bolstered by symbolic annihilation which is causative to hermeneutic harm for sex workers. Scott (S) explains that they enjoy the TV series *Orphan Black* (2013-2017) because of its nuanced depiction of the character of Felix, a male sex worker. Scott (S) says the show depicts Felix’s sex working as, “a non-issue, it’s just not even talked about... that’s what he does, and it enables his art, and that is so beautiful. And it’s not even discussed”. Scott (S) also says that Felix:

does drugs with clients as well, which I think is really important to show like... it shows him at some low moments, when he... could be doing better for himself, and it shows him at some good moments... he’s a drug user in a positive way, it’s something that interacts with his art and his expression, which interacts with his mental health... he’s totally accepted for that, it’s a non-issue, so I really, really enjoyed that.

Scott (S) was the only participant to name what they considered to be a positive depiction of male and non-binary sex work in the media. Most participants were unable to name a piece of media containing male sex workers, regardless of whether they considered the depiction to be favourable or pejorative.

The media plays a powerful role in shaping how society understands sex work. By ignoring male and non-binary sex workers, their struggles are largely invisibilised. The symbolic annihilation of male and non-binary sex workers in the media, as well as other important social institutions, is a form of harm which can have both emotional and material consequences. Arguably, one of the most damaging (albeit mostly imperceptible) forms of harm is hermeneutical in nature, with male and non-binary sex workers being, at times, unable to interpret their experiences due to a lack of cultural reference points. The absence of male and non-binary sex worker narratives allows mainstream media to shape the discourse with incomplete, false, or damaging portrayals of male and non-binary sex workers in the media. In no uncertain terms, if sex workers do not tell their own stories, they will be told by others, and this has led to immeasurable harm for male sex workers whose true stories remain untold. The media's erasure, misrepresentation, and sensationalism surrounding male sex work create real-world harm. Symbolic annihilation creates stigma, reinforces client misconceptions, and makes it harder for male sex workers to interpret their own lives. A more accurate and diverse portrayal of male sex work – including trans and non-binary experiences – could play a vital role in shifting public understanding of the lived realities of sex work.

The Importance of Sex Worker-Told Stories (the Power of Narrative)

Many participants emphasised the power of storytelling in reducing stigma and combating societal misconceptions pertaining to male sex work. Speaking to the absence of male sex worker stories within society, Mark asks: "When do male sex workers tell their stories? I mean, do they?". This thesis is dedicated to highlighting sex worker-told stories, specifically stories which are often ignored or erased (as is often the case with male sex workers), but also to emphasise the *importance* of these

stories for both the narrators and listeners. As Zach (ANZ) puts it, “there’s power in sharing a story, right?”. Power, here, can be understood in the Foucauldian sense inasmuch that power is not strictly understood as something which can be physically exercised, but rather as *knowledge* – that is, how knowledge is distributed or restricted within specific socio-cultural contexts (Read 2013). The ways in which knowledge is distributed or restricted within society are an example of how power is exercised between individuals in society within a broader structure of institutional power. Sharing stories is an exercise in resistance – that is, resistance or rejection of epistemic injustice and is necessary for the betterment of sex workers everywhere, regardless of gender, but is especially important for sex workers whose stories remain mostly untold, as is the case with male sex workers. As Luke (ANZ) suggests: “Representation for any group to be effective and accurate is contingent on those groups being involved in telling the stories”.

On the significance of sex worker-told stories, Toby (ANZ) states: “I think that being able to speak openly about something which is a part of your life without it being like harshly judged is really important”. As Prince (ANZ) suggests: “I think it’s important for us to focus on like demythologising it and... have these stories like kind of displayed to the public to normalise, yeah, normalise peoples lived experiences”. Jack (S) echoes this by saying: “It’s also good to kind of normalise... you know what I mean, sex work in general, and giving people the option and opportunity to kind of tell their stories is quite central to it”. For Aiden (ANZ): “The more people who tell their stories, the more that we get rid of stigma, the more we get rid of stereotypes”. Similarly, Kurt (ANZ) suggests that a, “sex worker telling her story is why [he is] in the industry and able to do it safely... the whole demystification thing is quite important... particularly for like male and masc workers because there is so few of us”. Although participants unanimously agreed that sharing their stories was important, specifically for challenging stereotypes and combating stigma, they acknowledged the various barriers which might preclude a sex worker from being open about their work and therefore being unable to share their lived experiences with others.

Fear of being outed, judged, or penalised prevents many sex workers from speaking openly about their work, meaning that misconceptions and myths concerning male and non-binary sex workers are rarely challenged. Aiden (ANZ) states that there are

very few people he feels that he can, “safely open up to without having some sort of judgement or repercussion, so I think it’s very important because every time I am able to talk about it, it’s that sense of freedom”. As Jack (S) suggests, speaking to media outlets is a prime opportunity for sex workers to have their stories told and to dispel common myths. They state that it is, “hugely important, but unfortunately, like a lot of sex workers, I’m kind of understandably scared about sort of being outed”. Toby (ANZ) states: “I think keeping it a secret can be so stressful, it can be such a weight that people carry”. Similarly, Harry (ANZ) says: “In terms of telling stories, that’s also valuable in terms of changing the narrative and making sure people aren’t just getting their ideas about sex work from media and... shortcut pathways of you know thinking about things”. Speaking of negative socio-cultural attitudes surrounding the sex industries, Aiden (ANZ) suggests: “Yeah, it’s a kind of narrative, people like to believe things, people love to – people like stories, people live stories, love hearing stories”. Max (S) also shares his thoughts on the importance of sex worker-told stories, expressing:

I think it’s super important, because if they don’t, other people will tell their stories and other people can get it wrong and they’re going to tell made up stories and conflated stories, and they’re going to tell fucking stories in the *Daily Mail*... trans people and sex workers get tarred with this terrible brush.

Sex workers being unable to share their stories creates harm insofar that untrue, one-sided, or damaging stories (such as the ones potentially found in the *Daily Mail*, a UK-based tabloid newspaper known for its sensationalist and inaccurate reporting) fuel stigma and perpetuate stereotypes surrounding the sex industries. Sex workers are unlikely to speak out against whorephobic attitudes and challenge stereotypes due to fear of being judged or silenced. Sex workers, like other marginalised groups, often find solace within their own community, finding that they can (although not always) speak freely about their experiences without fear of censure.

Several sex workers commented on the importance of sharing stories of sex work with other sex workers, both in relation to harm reduction and community building. As Zach (ANZ) states:

There's power in communities, hearing each other's stories... there's something in not feeling alone, right, and when other people share their stories, you know that you're not the only one who's doing this, or has kind of walked this path, and there's... comfort in community and kind of safety in that.

Similarly, Harry (ANZ) suggests that, because of the potential risks associated with sex work, people should be able to make informed decisions based on their own circumstances within their own life. He says that, without the necessary support frameworks, sex workers are more likely to find themselves in unsafe situations and be more vulnerable to harm. Jon (ANZ) suggests that sex worker-told stories are valuable for clients inasmuch that they will demystify the sex worker-client interaction and humanise sex workers more generally. Jon (ANZ) states:

Your average client, if they hear those stories, then they can, I guess, get a better understanding of the industry that they are participating in and perhaps make better, more informed choices, like insistent on using protection and you know making sure to, I don't know, just not be a dickhead!

Tommy Lee (S) also suggests that sex worker-told stories are essential, "to give a better understanding and knowledge and share information so that other people can, yeah, get access to what it's... like to have this lived experience and you know inform themselves based on our experiences". Tommy Lee (S) also states that the laws surrounding sex work should be informed by sex worker experiences, speaking to the fact that in most nations, sex work laws are not informed by sex workers themselves, but rather non-sex workers (in many cases, anti-sex work campaigners).

In 2003, when Aotearoa New Zealand became the first country in the world to decriminalise sex work, it did so after sex workers campaigned for decades and fought arduously to have their voices and experiences heard. Sex worker experiences informing law and policy is not commonplace, but there is a precedent for this kind of approach in the case of Aotearoa New Zealand. Speaking to the importance of intersectionality within the sex worker communities, Lochy (ANZ) stresses that it is, "important that it's not just *one* kind of sex worker". When sex worker stories are told, it is usually from the viewpoint of either the most privileged or the most disadvantaged

sex workers. This lack of nuance within sex worker stories invisibilises the experiences of sex workers who do not fall within these strict social categories. Lochy also states that it is essential to share sex worker stories with a “political consciousness” – that is, stories which pay attention to the socio-political situatedness in which they are being told. Everything exists *within* context. The contextual parameters in which stories are being told (or not told) differ across time and space. For sex workers operating within a criminalised environment such as Scotland, their personal narratives are shaped by broader cultural and political narratives of sex work. In other words, stories do not exist within a vacuum; they operate within and *through* context. Sex workers working within Aotearoa New Zealand are also shaped by the context in which they exist; however, a decriminalised context offers greater social latitude and mobility through which to share experiences openly.

In relation to using one’s political and personal context for the betterment of others, Thiago stresses that: “Stories need to be told. We cannot be invisible and I am one of them who is screaming to be heard because the stigma makes people not have the guts to”. Thiago acknowledges their privileges within the sex worker community (“I am white, I am male, I am educated, I am not going to lose a lot”), suggesting that they use their privilege to speak out where others cannot. Thiago suggests that speaking out is not only important, but that it is an ethical responsibility: “That’s one of my positions in the world, that’s my moral obligation. If I can do it, it would be irresponsible not to”. Despite being a Brazilian migrant working within Aotearoa New Zealand, Thiago believes that his personal privileges (such as being perceived by others as a man, being light-skinned, and having some degree of education) inoculate him to some extent from the struggles faced by less advantaged sex workers (for instance, a female-presenting, dark skinned migrant sex worker). Similarly, Kurt states that: “If you are one of the people where it is safe for you to open your mouth, please do so because... some of us just really can’t”.

Kenny (S) says that it is important for sex workers to feel that they can tell their stories because, due to stigma and discriminatory practices, many do not feel comfortable doing so. Kenny states that sex workers, “might have friends who don’t want to hear about it. It’s... ‘I’m your friend, but you know we won’t go there’. And I feel that when you speak about your story, it helps you process what’s happening to you”. Kenny’s

words illuminate a prominent issue for sex workers who, despite achieving some degree of openness about their work, remain unable to fully share their experiences due to stigma surrounding sex work. The decriminalisation of sex work does little to combat negative attitudes towards sex within society. For Allan (ANZ), sex worker-told stories are of vital importance, stating that sex work holds an important place within history and society. He says that: “everyone’s having sex... people just don’t talk about it, you know?”. As Steve (S) suggests: “Here in the UK, I don’t think we have a particularly healthy relationship with sex”. As noted by participants, one of the barriers to discussing sex work openly is a lack of enthusiasm for openly discussing sex more generally. Lack of knowledge surrounding the sex industries (as well as both implicit and explicit whorephobia) can perhaps be partially ascribed to both personal and cultural relationships towards sex in a broader sense. Toby (ANZ) addresses this by saying they would like to see sex work become normalised that it becomes “boring”, reducing the need for sex worker-told stories inasmuch that there would not be, “anything of consequence to say”.

Moreover, several participants shared their frustration with non-sex workers spreading misinformation concerning the sex industries. As Scott (S) suggests, “people just go round spouting nonsense about things they know nothing about, it’s crazy! Similarly, Aiden (ANZ) states that: “you should fact check and not spread rumours... maybe it is the case that some of the stories are true, but also, a lot of true stories can be highly generalised”. When sex worker stories are not told, the lived realities (including the harms) of sex work are invisibilised. Untold stories lead to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and myths, as well as sex worker experiences being made unintelligible. The sex workers taking part in this study suggest that sex work is work and involves extensive administrative ability, client management, and emotional labour. They also emphasise the unpredictability of bookings and last-minute cancellations from clients, which creates financial instability, as well as citing boundary negotiation with clients as a frequent challenge. Moreover, clients often expect male and non-binary sex workers to enjoy the work and be sexually available, rather than treating it as a paid service between a customer and a service provider. These are just some of the important, yet untold, narratives of male and non-binary sex workers that are expounded upon throughout this thesis, highlighting the need for these stories to be told.

The Future (A Better World for Sex Workers)

I was acutely aware before conducting interviews that some of the questions I was asking had the potential to elicit negative emotional responses from participants due to the multitude of social complexities that are inextricably linked to the experience of being a sex worker i.e., whorephobia, homophobia, and transphobia. I wanted the last question I asked to be a hopeful one, so I asked my participants what a better world for sex workers would look like, specifically male and non-binary sex workers. In essence, I was asking participants to create their own futures by *imagining* them. Many of the participant responses focused on the eradication of sex worker stigma. For Aiden (ANZ), a better world for sex workers includes: “More visibility, more knowledge, less stigma... you know, it being seen as just a job like any other job, more education around this sort of thing”. Similarly, Zach (ANZ) states, “I think a lack of stigma would create a lot of things... like it would create stronger communities, it would create more kind of empowerment in what you do”.

Scott (S) draws connections between sex worker stigma and public perceptions of how much sex workers earn. They suggest a better world for sex workers is one in which, “it is not seen as inherently like selfish or overly capitalistic that we exchange a certain service that a lot of people aren’t comfortable with for quite a large amount of money”. To illustrate their point, Scott uses the example of a healthcare manager, with the idea being that someone who works in healthcare at a managerial level would be receiving, “an amount of money that’s appropriate... for their job”, and that most people would not resent such a worker for earning a wage consistent with the perceived onerousness of their labour. Sex work, by contrast, is viewed by many as not only unskilled labour, but rather as a form of income-generating activity which inherently lacks labour and is therefore not work. As Max (S) says: “I think people don’t like the idea of other people having what they think as an easy ride. And so they see sex work as easy, and they think... you should be grafting for your work”. This is connected to much broader arguments surrounding sex work as work, but the underlying idea being presented here is that sex work has no value within society and is not considered “real” work, and is, instead, an “easy” way to gain perceived amounts of money not equal to the presumed output of labour. As Scott (S) summarises: “And some people feel like we don’t deserve the money that we’re getting, for the service that we provide. And I

feel like getting rid of a lot of that judgement would help a lot with the overall stigma". Harry (ANZ) also echoes this by saying that: "I guess all the stuff that we've been talking around about the public perceptions, and being able to talk with people, including your family... about it without fear and them being supportive".

Many participants commented on the need for the global decriminalisation of sex work for the betterment of sex workers in the future. As Aiden (ANZ) puts it: "Worldwide decriminalisation and protection for people who do the work". Comparably, Tommy Lee (S) says: "Decriminalisation, for us to have more safety because more safety brings more respect and more money and a happier life". Thiago (ANZ) proposed: "Full decriminalisation in every country". Thiago, a migrant sex worker from Brazil, was critical of the lack of legal protections for migrant workers in Aotearoa New Zealand, going as far as to suggest that sex work is not decriminalised in Aotearoa New Zealand because of this legal lacuna. Zach (ANZ) also echoes this sentiment, advocating for, "changes in legislation, specifically for migrant sex workers, but possibly also if there are things that need to be done for... just all sex workers". Thiago and Zach's comments highlight the importance of decriminalisation for all sex workers (including migrants), but also speak to the importance of intersectional struggles within the global sex working community.

The sex worker community is not a monolith, and while subgroups within the sex working community (such as migrants or trans sex workers) face unique challenges, it is important to recognise that these struggles are deeply interrelated. As Grant (2014, p. 128) reminds us, while the sex worker rights movement has its own, "character, history, and trajectory," the sex worker struggle exists within many other movements e.g., queer and trans movements, women of colour movements, feminist movements, prison abolitionism, harm reductionism, and labour movements. The sex worker rights movements are multiple, just as the participants taking part in this study experience multiplicities of gender, ethnicity, and queerness, *et alia*. However, it should be noted that participants operating within the decriminalised context of Aotearoa New Zealand, while enthusiastic of the numerous benefits of decriminalisation, were also vocal about the social limitations of decriminalisation as a legal framework. Numerous sex workers comment on the misconception or myth that the decriminalisation of sex work equates to societal acceptance and full cultural

citizenship. As noted by Smith and Mac (2020), while legislative decisions have the potential to influence the socio-cultural ecology of a specific space, this is not a guaranteed effect.

Speaking specifically to the betterment of the futures of transmasculine and non-binary sex workers, Prince (ANZ) proposes: Financial security, all of the material things that we don't have right now... that's what we need and yeah, just like a way more, an approach that's just grounded in like human rights and like human needs". Toby (ANZ) suggests that a greater awareness of non-cis women sex workers is imperative for the social betterment of transmasculine and non-binary sex workers. They indicate that an improved understanding of trans identities within society would facilitate trans sex workers' capacity to work openly as a trans person, diminishing the need for trans sex workers to backpass to maintain a steady flow of income. They also suggest that greater awareness of trans identities would facilitate improved relationship dynamics with clients insofar that the emotional burden of explaining trans identities would be lessened considerably. In a similar vein, Jon (ANZ) hopes for venues (brothels) specifically for transmasculine workers operating within Aotearoa New Zealand. They also state that having help advertise transmasculine workers to prospective clients and adequate client vetting processes to ensure sex worker safety. Kurt (ANZ) also suggests that transmasculine sex workers in Aotearoa New Zealand would benefit from a transmasculine-specific brothel, and, "a website that wasn't hot pink and terribly coded". Kurt stresses the need for improved social structures surrounding transmasculine sex workers, ones that participants agreed were lacking. Male and non-binary participants agreed that the support services that do exist, while inclusive of sex workers of all genders, do not always feel accessible to them as non-women sex workers. Kurt states that: "Visibility and representation would probably go a long way towards supporting... just having those social structures, access the same social support, specifically informal... peer social support... I think that that would make a huge difference for us".

Aotearoa New Zealand-based sex workers suggested that, mostly due to the decriminalisation of sex work in New Zealand, sex work is widely accepted (or, at least, tolerated). However, several commented that, despite sex workers being recognised legally as workers, their social status was lower than that of non-sex workers.

Moreover, they stated that sex work remains a social taboo inasmuch that the non-sex working public knows little about the lived experiences of sex workers. For many, sex work remains an abstraction, albeit one that is legally permitted. As Aiden (ANZ) suggests: “So it’s legal here but again, I wouldn’t say it’s socially acceptable”. Jon (ANZ) remarks that: “There are some people that are vehemently against it, like I wouldn’t come out as a sex worker to my family. My dad would be worried about me, my parents would be worried about me first and foremost”. Jon also suggests that his parents would most likely appeal for him to stop sex working, explaining that for, “the average person, it is okay if other people do it, but if my kid does it, no”. These quotes highlight that, while legal changes can improve conditions for marginalised groups, social acceptance remains conditional and constrained by broader cultural biases. This is not to suggest that decriminalisation of sex work has no impact on the social acceptance or mobility of sex workers operating within a decriminalised context, but rather to highlight the limitations of legal recognition within a system that was not created for queer people or sex workers, but rather exists to exclude them. In their study of “gayfriendliness”, Tissot (2023) postulates that queer acceptance is usually afforded to those who occupy similar socio-economic status, those who wish to mimic traditional forms of family life, and do not seek to disrupt the cisheteronormative hegemony. They also state that queer stereotypes continue to pervade perceptions and narratives of queerness. I would espouse that a similar form of “whorefriendliness” exists within the socially progressive cities of Wellington and Auckland in Aotearoa New Zealand (where most my interviews took place). Numerous sex workers suggested that, although most non-sex workers are accepting of sex work, sex work itself is not spoken about openly very often.

Compare this with the queer politics of acceptability and respectability, a highly contentious issue within queer scholarship and the queer community at large. As with queer people, sex workers are allowed to exist within carefully constructed (although often unconscious) conditions under cisheteronormative hegemony. Queer sex workers are doubly affected by this, having to satisfy the cultural conditions of both gayfriendliness and whorefriendliness. It would seem that, for many, negotiating the conditions of both simultaneously is an impossibility. Kenny (S) remarks that to be a male sex worker in Scottish society is to have failed as a man. He expounds on this by saying that men, who are traditionally the head of the family unit, are not afforded

social acceptance. Rather, such a failure of gender, “manifests itself through specific signs to be read as evidence of degeneration” (Bacio and Rinaldi 2022, p. 11). All this to say, we must strive for better. The decriminalisation of homosexuality does not equate to full cultural citizenship, just as the decriminalisation of sex work does not afford sex workers the same socio-legal standing as non-sex workers.

Decriminalisation is a necessary starting point, one which has the potential to positively impact sex worker rights, greater visibility, access to justice, and employment rights, but the struggle persists into the future. Globally, women are a marginalised group within society, even in purported “progressive” countries such as Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand. Women’s movements continue into the 21st century, as do queer and sex worker movements. Rather than something to be achieved (such as decriminalisation), we must interrogate why such groups are seen as lesser than within a given society, and imagine ways of not only including marginalised groups, but restructuring pre-existing societal paradigms to meaningfully address the exclusion of such groups. Overall, sex workers taking part in this study advocated for the: full decriminalisation of sex work on a global scale; more visibility and representation in the media; improved safety measures and financial stability; more adequate social structures, such as peer networks and representation within professional organisations; eradicating stigma and viewing sex work as a valid profession like any other.

At the beginning of this chapter, I shared a vignette in which I detailed my prior engagement with casual whorephobia many years ago. If I were to meet this person again, I would not only show contrition for my actions, but I would also ask forgiveness for my lack of empathy towards another human being. I would say, “I should not have had to live your experience to understand it on a basic, human level”. It was only when our realities converged that I realised how wrong and uncaring I had been. You should not have to experience someone else’s reality to be a compassionate listener. When someone tells you their story, you become part of it. Our narratives are complex and contextual; we can never be fully cognizant of someone’s life and the context in which they live it. We can, however, endeavour to be active and empathetic participants within their story, their reality, their life. I hope that, above all else, anyone reading this

thesis will see the humanity in sex workers' stories. Humanness is, after all, the one thing that connects all of us together; the story we all live is the story of being human.

Summary

This chapter highlights the lack of male and non-binary sex worker narratives within mainstream media. I argue that representational absence, otherwise known as symbolic annihilation, constitutes a form of epistemic harm, one which is informed by (and reproductive of) myths concerning male and non-binary sex workers. Male and non-binary sex workers are excluded from the institutions that construct shared social meaning (academia, journalism, law, and media), and they are often unable to recognise their own marginalisation or name its harms. This chapter also underscores the importance of sex worker-told stories and the power of narrative within communities. Intra-community stories are essential for producing counter-narratives that resist monolithic and mythological master narratives. Finally, this chapter asks sex workers to look to the future and imagine a better world, with the most common response being decriminalisation as a starting point. Participants also noted that more visibility for male and non-binary sex workers is needed, as well as a greater understanding of transgender and non-binary identities within society more generally.

Conclusion

This concluding chapter highlights my key theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions and suggests possible future areas of research within this field. This chapter underscores the importance of sex worker-told stories and the need for a paradigmatic shift in terms of how we imagine male and non-binary sex workers within society. I advocate for the resistance of monolithic, monosemic stories and instead highlight the critical need for diverse narratives which showcase the intersectional and complex realities of male and non-binary sex workers.

Theoretical Contributions

This thesis offers several theoretical contributions, most notably the examination of myth as a form of harm. Although myth has been explored to a limited extent within academic scholarship (cf. Redwood 2018; Sawicki et al. 2019; Strathdee et al. 2015), my research is unique in its attempt to animate the relationship between invisibility, myth, and harm. Throughout this thesis, I have presented arguments that support my theory that invisibility, myth, and harm have a reproductive relationship inasmuch that invisibility creates the cultural conditionalities for myth to thrive and vice versa. Further, invisibilisation and myths surrounding male and non-binary sex workers produce a cycle of epistemic injustice, one which produces both material and emotional harm for male and non-binary sex workers. These harms are more prominent in socio-legal matrices of criminalisation; however, participants working in Aotearoa New Zealand noted that, despite decriminalisation offering legal protections and generally improving upon quality of life for sex workers, the decriminalisation of sex work has done little to combat the invisibility of male and non-binary sex workers.

As noted by others, decriminalisation is not an end goal, but rather a necessary starting point. Decriminalisation allows for safer working conditions, better access to justice, and improves sex workers' emotional and physical health and wellbeing. Decriminalisation is not utopic, but it does, however, enable sex workers to work (in most cases) safely and within the purview of the law. For some sex workers, a utopic understanding of sex work exists only within a post-work imaginary – that is, a future

without work, including sex work. As a sex worker and socialist, I too imagine this future, one in which our value as human beings is not intrinsically tied to productivist capitalism. Baker-Cristales writes that: “In the end, the real utopia in Le Guin’s work is not a people, place, or social system, but the act of self-transcendence and cross-cultural understanding, a process that is never complete nor perhaps fully possible” (2015, p. 25). What might we find, however, on this path? Assuming this future is, indeed, not possible, that does not render the journey meaningless. On the contrary, we could imagine and summon the best possible version of our world – would this not be enough? We must reimagine not only our understanding of sex work, but also a world in which sex workers are the natural inhabitants of the same social and symbolic spaces populated by non-sex workers.

Another significant theoretical contribution is the exploration of the diversity of gender within male and non-binary sex work. My research is, to my knowledge, one of the only comparative research projects in this area with a greater representation of trans and non-binary participants compared to cisgender participants. This was not intended but rather, presumably, a consequence of the careful and respectful consideration of gender within the project during all stages from conception to conclusion. The study’s recruitment materials, for instance, were highly transparent about the inclusion of transgender men and non-binary sex workers. These groups represent intensely invisible and under-researched populations, a research lacuna which this study was informed by and responsive to.

Empirical Contributions

This research contributes to the empirical literature on male and non-binary sex workers and the narrative experiences of sex workers more generally. This research was conducted during two antithetical socio-political periods. In Aotearoa New Zealand, I conducted fieldwork during the 20th anniversary of sex work decriminalisation. This prompted an atmosphere of positivity and contemplation among the NZPC and other affiliated organisations. In stark contrast, sex workers in Scotland are currently engaging in the ongoing struggle against criminalisation and the looming threat of the implementation of the Nordic model (Armstrong, Phillips, and

Ryan 2024). Highlighting sex worker stories which dispel myths and highlight the harms associated with criminalisation are, more than ever, essential. Sex workers in Scotland are facing increased levels of social, legal, and political precarity. This research reveals the current challenges faced by male and non-binary sex workers in both Aotearoa New Zealand and Scotland, including the omnipresence of annihilatory narratives within social, legal, and political discourses. This research also highlights the performative and rhizomatic possibilities of gender within sex work, specifically in relation to transmasculine and non-binary sex workers. This serves to not only complicate pre-existing paradigms associated with male sex workers but also to dislocate male sex work from the cisnormative and binary frameworks through which it is commonly constructed.

Methodological Contributions

The use of queer ethnography emphasises the need for research that pays close attention to the specificities of socio-legal contexts in which sex workers operate. The use of ethnographic field sites, interviews, informal conversations, audio fieldnotes, and autoethnographic writings contributed to a greater understanding of sex work within the context of decriminalisation. In the Scottish context, ethnographic research was decidedly more challenging, which I argue is a consequence of the ways in which sex work is imagined (or not imagined) within Scottish society. Participant narratives reveal volatile, isolated working conditions, ones which are exacerbated by the criminalisation of sex work. The use of narrative methods, in which experiences and stories are considered expert and valued knowledge, is an appropriate choice due to the absence of male and non-binary sex worker voices within society, as well as broader academic and legal discussions surrounding the sex industries.

I consider this research to be a timely and important contribution to the burgeoning subfield of male and non-binary sex work. I encourage researchers to engage with male and non-binary sex workers with empathetic curiosity, to lean into uncertainty within their research, and to acknowledge the power of transformative moments. I implore others to look to the future with hope and a commitment to showcasing the very human stories like the ones found within this thesis.

Future Research

This research, to the author's knowledge, is the only study of male and non-binary sex workers within a multi-jurisdictional context. Although studies that centralise the experiences of non-women sex workers are becoming more commonplace within academia, studies that examine the multidimensional, queer, and rhizomatic potential of male and non-binary sex work are highly limited. As such, this research serves as a necessary starting point for future research within this area.

The sample size ($n=20$) was not intended to reflect the wider sex working community – in fact, no study can hope to achieve this. However, future studies in this area could benefit from a larger sample size, depending on research outcomes and potential desires for generalisability.

One of the most significant limitations of this study is the lack of racial diversity among participants, with most of the participants being white. The intersection between race and gender among male and non-binary sex workers is complex and requires further investigation.

Further, there were no active street-based sex workers involved in the study, although several participants had previously engaged in street-based sex work. It should be noted, however, that male street-based sex workers are very uncommon within both Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand. This was noted by the NZPC, who told me that, during their outreach efforts, they had not encountered a street-working man for some time.

The study, being aligned with the sex worker rights paradigm, uses the term sex worker in its promotional and recruitment materials. As such, those who do not identify themselves as a sex worker may have been dissuaded participating, although one participant from Aotearoa New Zealand did describe their experience as being incidental or situational.

Lastly, the implementation of (in)visibility as a conceptual tool to understand sex worker marginalisation has theoretical and practical limitations. Not all sex workers wish to be visible within society; as Foucault (1995) reminds us, visibility can be a trap. This was evidenced during the research process in both nations. In Scotland, a potential participant withdrew his desire to participate due to concerns regarding his employment within the education sector. In Aotearoa New Zealand, a sex worker who sold sex informally via Grindr initially agreed and later declined to participate, stating that he wished to remain as private as possible in relation to selling sex. For some sex workers, visibility may be a trap; however, for others, invisibility also poses serious concerns. For instance, those who seek to strategise invisibility out of fear of being outed as a sex worker are likely to be disconnected from the broader sex working community, peer support networks, and mutual aid. Visibility as a political strategy for sex worker equality is, therefore, dependent on socio-political climates and may not be applicable in all national contexts. This is especially true of countries in which elements of queerness are criminalised.

Reimagining the Future

Within one of my autoethnographic vignettes, I shared a personal experience in which I harboured whorephobic attitudes. I included this vignette not only as a symbolic atonement for my past actions, but to underscore the mercurial nature of our seemingly entrenched belief systems. In less than 10 years, I went from espousing whorephobic rhetoric to becoming a sex worker and eventually writing both a Master's dissertation and a PhD thesis on the subject of male sex work. Our beliefs, even those we consider to be fundamental, are malleable. In this sense, our principles – what we consider to be inherently right or wrong – are rhizomatic. My previous belief that sex work was somehow wrong had no clear entry point; it grew out of various myths and social systems that are so ingrained that we do not notice them subtly guiding our moral compass.

Society has a reliable history of ostracising that which deviates from the normative structure in some way. This is also evident in the way society has treated migrant communities over the past few decades, with anti-immigration ideology becoming

highly prevalent in the United Kingdom and the United States. The sex worker rights movement is not singular; it is intersectional and is coterminous with the queer and transgender rights movements, movements which concern migrants, people of colour, and indigenous persons, women's rights movements, disability rights movements, *et alia* (Grant 2014). At present, marginalised persons are facing increasing levels of harm from those who are attempting to dehumanise, displace, and disenfranchise marginalised groups. How do we remain hopeful in such dark times? How are we able to defend ourselves from such animus? It is within this interstitial time and space that I choose to locate hope – the hope that sex workers, and other marginalised groups, will be recognised for who they are: human beings who are entitled to the same dignity and respect as other denizens of this shared world.

Having considered this need for hope and recognition, this research emphasises the critical importance of sex worker-led storytelling in dismantling stigma and fostering diverse, empathetic representations within social, legal, political, and academic discourses. Greater attention is to be paid to the role of the media in shaping societal attitudes, with many participants stressing the need for inclusive media representations that showcase the complex continuum of sex worker experiences. Male and non-binary voices are almost entirely omitted from discourses surrounding the sex industries, meaning that they are denied the visibility required to challenge oppressive stereotypes and universalising narratives. Within a queer theoretical framework, storytelling becomes a form of resistance – a performative act that destabilises normative categories of gender, sexuality, and labour. Thus, storytelling is not simply a communicative act but a queer and non-binary epistemological practice, one which allows us to disrupt dominant social scripts and reimagine queer lives. Through their stories, male and non-binary sex workers challenge the cultural assumptions that render their experiences unintelligible within society. Storytelling challenges the symbolic annihilation of male and non-binary sex workers and highlights the various harms associated with social, political, and legal erasure.

These findings illustrate the need for a paradigmatic shift in relation to how male (cisgender and transgender) and non-binary sex workers are understood and imagined within society. We must move beyond stereotypes and embrace the full multiplicity of sex worker experiences. This is not simply a representational matter, but

a matter of *justice*, one which demands a more inclusive, safer society for all sex workers. Queer and rhizomatic approaches, with their commitment to destabilising fixed identity categories and normative social scripts, call us to reimagine the dominant, cisheteronormative frameworks through which sex work is conceptualised. Queer and rhizomatic approaches to identity reject linear, hierarchical structures. Instead, they imagine worlds as interconnected, fluid, and multiple (Butler 1993; Deleuze and Guattari 1987). This shift is not merely a corrective, but rather a radical reorientation towards *imagining* justice, one that recognises the emotional, material, and epistemic harms created by erasure, misrepresentation, and stigma.

This thesis (and the queer stories presented throughout) rejects the pre-existing narrative models of understanding sex work, instead holding space for complexity, contradiction, and understanding sex work as one part of a broader constellation of human experiences. This shift requires a commitment to dismantling harmful myths, amplifying marginalised voices, and fostering a more nuanced understanding of sex work as a complex, intersectional phenomenon. Through amplifying the voices and experiences of male and non-binary sex workers, this research seeks to contribute to a broader, more nuanced conversation about the rights, safety, and dignity of all sex workers. By turning to narrative, we are not only able to document stories and offer marginalised groups a vehicle for their experiences, but also imagine other worlds – worlds in which all sex workers are safe, respected, and valued as human beings. In 2023, we celebrated 20 years of decriminalisation of sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand and the positive impact that this model continues to have on sex worker safety, well-being, and access to justice. What progress can we imagine for the next 20 years in Aotearoa New Zealand, Scotland, and beyond? To end this thesis, and this part of my journey, I turn once more to the immortal words of Ursula K. Le Guin (2016, p. 204), who states:

We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable – but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our art, the art of words.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Poster for Aotearoa New Zealand



CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

for a PhD project exploring **myth and male sex work in Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand**

I am looking to speak to **full service sex workers** who:

- are 18+
- currently live in Aotearoa New Zealand
- identify as male or masc (cisgender or transgender, including non-binary or gender diverse)
- are willing to share their experiences of sex work and their views on misconceptions of male sex work in society

The project is led by Jordan Phillips, a PhD researcher in Criminology at the University of Stirling. The focus of the project is to examine the **dominant myths surrounding male sex work within different socio-legal contexts** (Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand).

This research uses a **sex worker rights framework**. All data provided by participants is **completely confidential**. Interviews should take between **45-90 minutes**. All participants will receive a **\$60 NZD gift card** for their contributions. For more information on how to take part, contact Jordan by email or Twitter!

This research has Ethical Approval from the University of Stirling Ethics Committee (10490)

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Appendix B: Recruitment Poster for Scotland



CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

for a PhD project exploring **myth and male sex work in Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand**

I am looking to speak to **full service sex workers** who:

- are 18+
- currently live in Scotland
- identify as male or masc (cisgender or transgender, including non-binary or gender diverse)
- are willing to share their experiences of sex work and their views on misconceptions of male sex work in society

The project is led by Jordan Phillips, a PhD researcher in Criminology at the University of Stirling. The focus of the project is to examine the **dominant myths surrounding male sex work within different socio-legal contexts** (Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand).

This research uses a **sex worker rights framework**. All data provided by participants is **completely confidential**. Interviews should take between **45-90 minutes**. All participants will receive **£35** for their contributions. For more information on how to take part, contact Jordan by email or Twitter!

This research has Ethical Approval from the University of Stirling Ethics Committee (10490)

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Appendix C: Interview Schedule for Aotearoa New Zealand

Guiding (Ethical) Principles

- 1) Autonomy (self-determination)
- 2) Justice (actively challenging inequality)
- 3) Beneficence (do no harm)

OR Tino Rangatiratanga (self-determination, sovereignty, independence, autonomy)

Whakawhanaungatanga (Establishing Relationships)

Introduce self, pronouns, ethnicity (acknowledge privilege as white European – pākehā), length of time engaged with sex work/sex work activism/academia, disclose mental health issues and explain why I'm doing the research

Preliminary questions/socio-demographic information

Pseudonym, age, gender, pronouns, ethnicity, other activities (full-time work, part-time work, studying, volunteering, care responsibilities), age started sex working

Individual Experiences

- 1) Can you tell me about your experience with sex work and how you came to be involved in the sex industry? (prompt re: how long they've been working for, what sectors, etc.)
- 2) Before starting sex work, what did you imagine it would be like? How does this compare with your actual experience of sex working? (prompt re: where they found information about (male) sex work e.g. mass media)
- 3) What does being a sex worker mean to you, if anything? (prompt re: do they identify as a sex worker!)

4) What does being a male/masc sex worker mean to you? (change wording based on gender identity of participant e.g. trans male sex worker/non-binary/etc.)

Public Perceptions of Sex Work(ers)

5) From your perspective, how are male/masc sex workers perceived or imagined within society? (prompt re: how this differs from lived experiences of sex work)

6) From your perspective, do you think there are differences between how cisgender and transgender male sex workers are perceived and treated in society? (prompt re: client behaviours and/or attitudes, public perceptions of trans people, etc.)

7) To what extent are male or masc sex workers perceived and treated differently to that of female or femme sex workers?

8) Do you feel visible as sex worker in Aotearoa New Zealand, and to what degree is visibility important to you? (change wording when necessary)

9) What do you think non-sex workers should know about male/masc sex workers? (change to non-binary/gender diverse based on participant)

Cultural Differences, Masculinity, and Language

10) Does the idea of masculinity mean anything to you in relation to sex work? (prompt re: performing masculinity in sex work (or “backpassing” i.e. non-female sex workers performing femininity), client desires, etc.)

11) Do you think masculinity means different things to sex workers (and clients) in different countries?

12) Would you say your experience of being a male/masc sex worker is related to where you are in the world? That is, do you think male/masc sex workers are treated

the same in other countries? (prompt re: countries where it is illegal to be queer and/or a sex worker)

13) Do you think the language people use is important regarding the sex industry/sex workers? Are there any specific words or terms you like/dislike? (prompt re: terminologies, sex work, prostitute, rent boy, hustler, etc., and people who don't ID as sex workers e.g. incidental sex workers)

Misconceptions, Stereotypes, Myths, and Media

14) In your experience, what are the main misconceptions or myths about male sex work and male/masc sex workers? (prompt re: compared to female/femme sex work... where do non-binary sex workers fit within this narrative?)

15) Where do you think these misconceptions or myths come from? (prompt re: the media, law, etc.)

16) How do these misconceptions or myths effect you as a sex worker?

17) Are there any forms of media which resonate with your experiences of sex working? (prompt re: films, TV shows, music, podcasts, etc.)

18) Are there any forms of media that you dislike in relation to how they portray sex work?

19) How do you feel when non-sex workers tell stories about male sex workers that you deem to be untrue or, at least, partially false? (prompt re: statistics about the sex industry that have been proven as false, sex workers being drug users/vectors of disease, etc.)

Sex Work Laws and Worker Rights

20) To what extent do you feel that the general public respect male sex workers and their rights in Aotearoa New Zealand?

21) How familiar are you with the sex work laws in Aotearoa New Zealand? (prompt re: decrim, migrant workers)

22) In 2003, Aotearoa New Zealand became the first country in the world to fully decriminalise sex work. In what ways do you think this has impacted sex workers operating in Aotearoa New Zealand? (prompt re: rates of violence, labour rights, working conditions, etc.)

23) In your opinion, how familiar are clients with sex work laws in Aotearoa New Zealand?

24) To what extent do you think the law impacts how sex workers are treated in society? (prompt re: how clients behave in sessions towards sex workers, public perception of sex workers, does myth influence the law and vice versa, etc.)

25) Other than Aotearoa New Zealand, what other countries do you have experience of selling sex? (prompt re: how it compared to Aotearoa New Zealand in terms of treatment and overall atmosphere)

Sex Workers' Stories and the Future

26) How important is it for sex workers to be able to tell their stories?

27) Is there something specific you want people to know based on your experience of sex working?

28) Is there a story, as it pertains to sex work, that you would like to share? This can be positive or negative, comical or serious, inspiring or uninspiring... or perhaps it's a story that you imagine or would like to happen one day? (prompt re: individual stories/experiences of sex work and also collective narratives)

29) What would a better world look like for sex workers, specifically male/masc/non-female sex workers?

30) What else would you like to add anything else that hasn't been covered?

Appendix D: Interview Schedule for Scotland

Guiding (Ethical) Principles

- 1) Autonomy (self-determination)
- 2) Justice (actively challenging inequality)
- 3) Beneficence (do no harm)

OR Tino Rangatiratanga (self-determination, sovereignty, independence, autonomy)

Whakawhanaungatanga (Establishing Relationships)

Introduce self, pronouns, ethnicity (acknowledge privilege as white European – pākehā), length of time engaged with sex work/sex work activism/academia, disclose mental health issues and explain why I'm doing the research

Preliminary questions/socio-demographic information

Pseudonym, age, gender, pronouns, ethnicity, other activities (full-time work, part-time work, studying, volunteering, care responsibilities), age started sex working

Individual Experiences

- 1) Can you tell me about your experience with sex work and how you came to be involved in the sex industry? (prompt re: how long they've been working for, what sectors, etc.)
- 2) Before starting sex work, what did you imagine it would be like? How does this compare with your actual experience of sex working? (prompt re: where they found information about (male) sex work e.g. mass media)
- 3) What does being a sex worker mean to you, if anything? (prompt re: do they identify as a sex worker!)

4) What does being a male/masc sex worker mean to you? (change wording based on gender identity of participant e.g. trans male sex worker/non-binary/etc.)

Public Perceptions of Sex Work(ers)

5) From your perspective, how are male/masc sex workers perceived or imagined within society? (prompt re: how this differs from lived experiences of sex work)

6) From your perspective, do you think there are differences between how cisgender and transgender male sex workers are perceived and treated in society? (prompt re: client behaviours and/or attitudes, public perceptions of trans people, etc.)

7) To what extent are male or masc sex workers perceived and treated differently to that of female or femme sex workers?

8) Do you feel visible as sex worker in Scotland, and to what degree is visibility important to you? (change wording when necessary)

9) What do you think non-sex workers should know about male/masc sex workers? (change to non-binary/gender diverse based on participant)

Cultural Differences, Masculinity, and Language

10) Does the idea of masculinity mean anything to you in relation to sex work? (prompt re: performing masculinity in sex work (or “backpassing” i.e. non-female sex workers performing femininity), client desires, etc.)

11) Do you think masculinity means different things to sex workers (and clients) in different countries?

12) Would you say your experience of being a male/masc sex worker is related to where you are in the world? That is, do you think male/masc sex workers are treated

the same in other countries? (prompt re: countries where it is illegal to be queer and/or a sex worker)

13) Do you think the language people use is important regarding the sex industry/sex workers? Are there any specific words or terms you like/dislike? (prompt re: terminologies, sex work, prostitute, rent boy, hustler, etc., and people who don't ID as sex workers e.g. incidental sex workers)

Misconceptions, Stereotypes, Myths, and Media

14) In your experience, what are the main misconceptions or myths about male sex work and male/masc sex workers? (prompt re: compared to female/femme sex work... where do non-binary sex workers fit within this narrative?)

15) Where do you think these misconceptions or myths come from? (prompt re: the media, law, etc.)

16) How do these misconceptions or myths effect you as a sex worker?

17) Are there any forms of media which resonate with your experiences of sex working? (prompt re: films, TV shows, music, podcasts, etc.)

18) Are there any forms of media that you dislike in relation to how they portray sex work?

19) How do you feel when non-sex workers tell stories about male sex workers that you deem to be untrue or, at least, partially false? (prompt re: statistics about the sex industry that have been proven as false, sex workers being drug users/vectors of disease, etc.)

Sex Work Laws and Worker Rights

20) To what extent do you feel that the general public respect male sex workers and their rights in Scotland?

21) In your opinion, how familiar are clients with sex work laws in Scotland?

22) How familiar are you with the sex work laws in Scotland? (prompt re: working together, “brothel” keeping”, street working)

23) The Scottish Government considers sex work a form of violence against women and girls, as stated in their Equally Safe Consultation from 2020. As a male sex worker, how do you feel about this statement?

24) The Scottish Government are currently trying to adopt a Nordic model/end-demand approach to sex work law, similar to the one adopted by Ireland in 2017. This would mean the purchase of sex would be criminalised. How do you feel this model, if adopted, would affect male sex workers operating in Scotland?

25) To what extent do you think the law impacts how sex workers are treated in society? (prompt re: how clients behave in sessions towards sex workers, public perception of sex workers, does myth influence the law and vice versa, etc.)

26) Do you have experience working somewhere other than Scotland? (prompt re: how it compared to Scotland in terms of treatment and overall atmosphere)

Sex Workers’ Stories and the Future

27) How important is it for sex workers to be able to tell their stories?

28) Is there something specific you want people to know based on your experience of sex working?

29) Is there a story, as it pertains to sex work, that you would like to share? This can be positive or negative, comical or serious, inspiring or uninspiring... or perhaps it's a story that you imagine or would like to happen one day? (prompt re: individual stories/experiences of sex work and also collective narratives)

30) What would a better world look like for sex workers, specifically male/masc/non-female sex workers?

31) What else would you like to add anything else that hasn't been covered?

Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet - Face-to-Face Interviews

1) Project Title: Uncovering the Myth of the Male Sex Worker: A Comparative Study of Cisgender and Transgender Male Sex Workers in Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand

2) Who am I? My name is Jordan Phillips. I am a PhD researcher in Criminology at the University of Stirling. This research examines the dominant myths surrounding male sex work within a transnational context (Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand) and aims to destabilise the pre-existing models of understanding male sex work by highlighting the stories of male sex workers across these two nations. The research uses a sex worker rights framework and is peer led.

3) How can you help? If you agree to take part, you will take part in a face-to-face interview in which you will be asked some questions about your experiences of sex work, how you think male sex workers are perceived in society, and your perception of the dominant myths surrounding male sex work. You must be over 18-years-old to take part, a male or masc-identified sex worker (inclusive of non-binary, gender non-conforming, and non-Western genders) and living in either Scotland or Aotearoa New Zealand.

4) Do I have to take part? No, you do not have to take part. If you do decide to take part, you can withdraw your participation at any time without needing to explain and the researcher will respect this decision without question. You can also withdraw your data within 4 weeks of the interview's conclusion. To discuss withdrawing your data, email jjp2@stir.ac.uk. You have the right to request a copy of the information we hold about you and to request corrections or deletions of the information that is no longer required.

5) What will happen if I take part? You will take part in an informal interview (between 45-90 minutes) in a place of your choosing. I will record the interview using an audio recorder. The interview will then be transcribed by a professional transcriber who has signed a confidentiality agreement. You have the option to be sent a copy of your interview transcription and can make amendments accordingly. You will receive a £30 gift card (\$60 NZD) as compensation for your time.

6) What happens to the data I provide? The data you provide will be kept anonymous using a pseudonym you select (or one will be selected for you). Confidential information will be stored securely using SharePoint. The transcriber will have access to the data, but will have signed a confidentiality agreement. Your personal data will

be kept for 10 years on DataSTORRE, a secure data centre on the Stirling campus, and then will be securely destroyed/lodged in DataSTORRE.

7) Will the research be published? The research may be published in the form of academic articles, book chapters, a manuscript, or a community resource (in the form of a booklet or zine). Results from the study may also form the basis for academic conference presentations or articles for the mass media.

8) Who is organising and funding the research? The Scottish Graduate School of Social Science (in collaboration with the Economic and Social Research Council) are funding this research project.

9) Who has reviewed this research project? The ethical parameters of this project have been approved via The University of Stirling General University Ethics Panel.

10) Who do I contact if I have concerns about this study or I wish to complain? If you would like to discuss the research with someone, you may contact my supervisor, Ian McIntosh (ian.mcintosh@stir.ac.uk). You have the right to lodge a complaint against the University regarding data protection issues with the Information Commissioner's Office (<https://ico.org.uk/concerns/>). The University's Data Protection Officer is Joanna Morrow, Deputy Secretary. If you have any questions relating to data protection these can be addressed to data.protection@stir.ac.uk in the first instance.

Appendix F: Participant Information Sheet – Online Interviews

1) Project Title: Uncovering the Myth of the Male Sex Worker: A Comparative Study of Cisgender and Transgender Male Sex Workers in Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand

2) Who am I? My name is Jordan Phillips. I am a PhD researcher in Criminology at the University of Stirling. This research examines the dominant myths surrounding male sex work within a transnational context (Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand) and aims to destabilise the pre-existing models of understanding male sex work by highlighting the stories of male sex workers across these two nations. The research uses a sex worker rights framework and is peer led.

3) How can you help? If you agree to take part, you will take part in an online interview facilitated by Zoom video call. You will be asked some questions about your experiences of sex work, how you think male sex workers are perceived in society, and your perception of the dominant myths surrounding male sex work. You must be over 18-years-old to take part, a male or masc-identified sex worker (inclusive of non-binary, gender non-conforming, and non-Western genders), and living in either Scotland or Aotearoa New Zealand.

4) Do I have to take part? No, you do not have to take part. If you do decide to take part, you can withdraw your participation at any time without needing to explain and the researcher will respect this decision without question. You can also withdraw your data within 4 weeks of the interview's conclusion. To discuss withdrawing your data, email jip2@stir.ac.uk. You have the right to request a copy of the information we hold about you and to request corrections or deletions of the information that is no longer required.

5) What will happen if I take part? You will take part in an informal interview (between 45-90 minutes) in a place of your choosing. I will record the interview using an audio recorder. The interview will then be transcribed by a professional transcriber who has signed a confidentiality agreement. You have the option to be sent a copy of your interview transcription and can make amendments accordingly. You will receive a £30 gift card (\$60 NZD) as compensation for your time.

6) What happens to the data I provide? The data you provide will be kept anonymous using a pseudonym you select (or one will be selected for you). Confidential information will be stored securely using SharePoint. The transcriber will have access to the data, but will have signed a confidentiality agreement. Your personal data will

be kept for 10 years on DataSTORRE, a secure data centre on the Stirling campus, and then will be securely destroyed/lodged in DataSTORRE.

7) Will the research be published? The research may be published in the form of academic articles, book chapters, a manuscript, or a community resource (in the form of a booklet or zine). Results from the study may also form the basis for academic conference presentations or articles for the mass media.

8) Who is organising and funding the research? The Scottish Graduate School of Social Science (in collaboration with the Economic and Social Research Council) are funding this research project.

9) Who has reviewed this research project? The ethical parameters of this project have been approved via The University of Stirling General University Ethics Panel.

10) Who do I contact if I have concerns about this study or I wish to complain? If you would like to discuss the research with someone, you may contact my supervisor, Ian McIntosh (ian.mcintosh@stir.ac.uk). You have the right to lodge a complaint against the University regarding data protection issues with the Information Commissioner's Office (<https://ico.org.uk/concerns/>). The University's Data Protection Officer is Joanna Morrow, Deputy Secretary. If you have any questions relating to data protection these can be addressed to data.protection@stir.ac.uk in the first instance.