# Beyond Stigmatisation, Moralism, and Reductionism: Philosophical Guidelines for Research, Media Representation, and Policy-Making on the Topic of Sex Work

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**Abstract:** This essay offers an ethical and philosophical framework for researchers, policy-makers,  film-makers, and writers working on the topic of sex work. It argues that in order to provide a more accurate and useful representation of the industry, three philosophical shifts have to take place. The first shift is from stigmatising sex workers to picturing them as complex, diverse, and whole human beings. The societal gaze upon sex workers tends to depict them as undesirables who have to be hidden, deviants who have to be cured, or victims who have to be saved. To challenge this stigmatisation process, I use Martin Buber's concept of the *I-Thou* relationship, Maria Lugones' concepts of *world-travelling* and the *loving gaze*, Linda LeMoncheck's concept of *care respect*, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality. The second shift is from moral ethics to pragmatic ethics. A pragmatic approach interrogates the practical consequences of our beliefs and rejects the idea that there is a universal ethical principle. It allows us to depart from a moral judgement of sex work itself and instead focus on sex workers' experiences and needs. The third shift is from considering sex work as an isolated topic to embracing an approach based on Edgar Morin's concept of complex thought, in order to address the systemic interdependencies and multidimensionalities of the topic.
**Keywords:** sex work, research guidelines, pragmatism

Researchers, policy-makers, writers, film-makers, and journalists may all, in the course of their work, engage with the topic of sex work. As they do, they have influence over how sex workers are portrayed in literature, research papers, articles, on screens, and in the legal system. In this paper, I will present, not a list of recommendations – those have previously been written by sex work organisations and are listed in the bibliography – but a philosophical framework to overcome specific obstacles to a nuanced and constructive approach to the subject of sex work. My goal is not to address specific actions but the attitudes and narratives that one holds towards this topic.

This argumentation is based on the ethical position that, when studying or representing a marginalised group, it is important to take the interests of this group into consideration, as well as to do no harm (Lazarus 2013). Biases and ignorance influence which information is retained and which is discarded, the words chosen, and what the focus would be. This may lead to misrepresentation, which has a negative impact on the ways the group is perceived and treated (Chowdhury 2023). Consequently, this study will address three correlated risks. The first is the risk of reproducing the oppression that sex workers experience, whereby the research, content, or law would do more harm than good. The second risk is of overlooking the reality and complexity of what is happening and of neglecting the specific experiences of individuals and groups, thus failing to provide a useful depiction, knowledge, or course of action. The third risk is of repeating the same narratives over and over, missing the incredible richness of the diversity of sex work–related topics, which can shed light on other philosophical questions and social experiences.

This essay argues that three shifts in philosophical viewpoints are necessary in order to have a holistic, complex, and accurate view of sex work. The first shift is to move beyond stigmatising narratives – that reduce sex workers to deviants, undesirables, or victims – by seeking an understanding of them as whole, complex, and unique human beings, through the concept of *care respect*. The second one is to focus on situation ethics and pragmatic philosophy, rather than on moral philosophy. The third is to avoid compartmentalisation and reductionism by employing complex thought and systemic thinking to approach the topic of sex work.

## Methodology

In this paper, I use critical analysis as a methodology seeking to 'expose and to challenge taken-for-granted power structures and to offer alternative perspectives to knowledge, theory-building, and social reality' (Holland, Novak 2017: 295). Critical Analysis aims to challenge the ways in which knowledge is produced, and the goal of this essay is to discuss which epistemological frameworks are the most useful when it comes to the study and representation of sex work. I more specifically draw

on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995), which focuses on the relationship between power and language, by questioning the words and narratives that reinforce the stigmatisation of sex workers.

Methodologically, I also draw on pragmatist ethics, which is an ethical inquiry that interrogates the practical results of our beliefs and prioritises the consideration of human well-being over the quest for universal moral laws. In this paper, I do not discuss the morality of sex work itself. I instead examine which philosophical frameworks have the most positive impact on both sex workers' well-being and the accuracy of research. Pragmatist ethics considers the practical consequences of discourse for the people and communities concerned. It is why I use this method to challenge stigmatising narratives. Its emphasis on lived experience invites us instead to focus on sex workers' needs and diversity.

The thesis and methodology of this paper has been guided by both personal engagement with sex work activism and philosophical reflection. By sustained exposure to literature, public discourse, and an activist's knowledge surrounding sex work, I have identified a set of recurring philosophical issues in the dominant frameworks used to conceptualise the topic. To offer alternative philosophical frameworks, I drew upon various theories, such as philosophy of dialogue (Buber), feminist philosophy (LeMoncheck, Lugones), gender studies (Butler), intersectional feminism (Crenshaw), situation ethics (Fletcher), pragmatism (Dewey, Rorty), and complex thinking (Morin). These perspectives were selected for their potential to shift the narrative about sex work towards a more inclusive, pragmatic, humanising, and relevant approach.

The examples I use in this paper, specifically the ones illustrating the stigmatising narratives of sex workers, focus on Eastern and Western Europe and on the United States from the eighteenth century to modern times. Thus, my argumentation takes place in this cultural context. However, there are examples of similar stigmatising narratives, with cultural differences, in many other countries. For example, the sex workers collective VAMP and the NGO SANGRAM, both based in India, mention the stigmatising narratives of victimhood and deviance in their study on the impact of anti-trafficking laws: 'As a result, adult, voluntarily working sex workers are treated as helpless victims in need of rescue or, when they refuse to identify themselves as victims, as perpetrators or deviants who deserve punishment' (VAMP, SANGRAM 2018: xii). The Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) presents an international list of sex worker organisations and visiting their respective websites provides information on the stigmatisation and specific struggles faced by sex workers across the globe.

This paper is mainly addressed to scholars, policy-makers, journalists, writers, and film-makers who are not sex workers themselves. It can also be useful for visual artists, dancers, and directors of plays.

## From stigmatisation to care respect and world-travelling

In this first part, I discuss the difference between stigmatising sex workers and considering them as unique, whole, and complex people. I argue that the latter improves research, media representation, and policy-making. I focus on two types of stigmatisation: the depiction of sex workers as deviants or undesirables, and the presentation of sex work as fully and wholly victimising. In order to question these narratives, Buber's (1923) concepts of *I-It* and *I-Thou* relationships and Lugones' (1987) concepts of *arrogant gaze* and *loving gaze* complement one another and, together, provide a framework to identify and differentiate between stigmatising and humanising approaches to the topic of sex work. The impact of the deviance and victimhood narratives will then be outlined through additional theories, such as Butler's (2004) discourse on the politics of grievability, and Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality. Finally, LeMoncheck's (1997) notion of *care respect* provides guidance in overcoming a stigmatising gaze.

The first stigmatising narrative presents sex workers as undesirables to hide or deviants to cure. A moralist view tends to describe sex workers as a 'great social evil' (Ericsson 1980: 337), as sinful – both a threat to family and corruptors of the young – and people who should be banned from society. Painting sex workers as immoral individuals who have to be separated from society has led, historically, to controlling their rights to freedom of movement. For example, in Germany, regulated brothels appeared in 1870, but the workers couldn't freely leave the premises and had to wear a red rose to indicate their involvement in prostitution (Tate, Oscyth 2022). Foucault's work (1961, 1977, 1978) addresses how, from the end of the 18th century, the figure of The Prostitute was constituted socially, as were the figures of The Madman and the Homosexual. The houses of confinement were emptied of lepers and The Prostitute then became a new target of these institutions (Beloso 2017). Across the Soviet republics, from the late 1950s and early 1960s, anti-parasite laws[1] were targeting individuals seen as deviants, including sex workers. They could be prosecuted for a variety of offences, such as being believed to have transmitted venereal diseases, and could be expelled from some cities (Hearne 2022). These attempts to control and mark sex workers as deviants went even further during Nazi Germany. Sex workers were sent to concentration camps, sometimes to work in forced brothels, under the category 'asocial', which was symbolised by a black triangle (Tate, Oscyth 2022).

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[1] 'In the late 1950s and early 1960s, anti-parasite laws were enacted across the Soviet republics, which targeted individuals who made a living from informal economies, refused to work or socialized with foreigners' (Hearne 2022: 291).

The second type of stigmatisation that this paper addresses is the presentation of sex work as inherently and wholly victimising. This narrative mixes disapproval with a facade of compassion, claiming the fate of the sex worker to be 'worse than death' (Ericsson 1980: 337). It presents sex work as degrading for both clients and workers, but generally focuses on the cisgender woman worker's presumed degradation. This narrative grew and gained popularity with specific late 20th century feminist movements. During the 1980s in the United States, two different feminist groups heavily disagreed on sexual matters, leading to a series of writings and debates referred to as the 'Sex Wars'. On the one hand, anti-pornography feminists were focused only on the negative aspects of sex with cisgender men under patriarchy, and specifically on gender violence. They claimed that pornography, BDSM, and prostitution were all inherently violent towards women, thus all sex workers were victims. On the other hand, pro-sex feminists were focused on the possibility for women's empowerment and liberation through sexual expression under patriarchy (LeMoncheck 1997). Many sex workers were part of the pro-sex movement, defending their agency as workers. However, these two feminist movements were and are not equal in their reach and power. The anti-pornography movement, defending the abolition of prostitution, gained social and political influence.

I argue that these narratives of deviance and victimhood both objectify and deshumanise sex workers. To support the claim that stigmatisation and objectification are interconnected, as well as presenting a methodology which addresses these issues, I will refer to Martin Buber's (1923) distinction between the *I-It* and the *I-Thou* relationships to otherness, and to Maria Lugones' (1987) distinction between an *arrogant gaze* and a *loving gaze*. These two philosophers both advocate perceiving others as valued and multidimensional human beings. Their philosophies are anchored in experiences of discrimination – antisemitism in Buber's case, racism and sexism in Lugones'. Their stances underline that interacting with  marginalised communities – such as sex workers – is a call to reflect on the way one relates to otherness in general.

Martin Buber (1923) exposes two ways of relating to the other, which he calls two fundamental words we can 'say' in this relationship. The first is *I-It*, when one considers the other as an object that one can analyse, cut up, classify, judge, and act upon. Stigmatisation happens when one sees only a specific facet of a person, the facet one is judging, thereby making them into an objectified *It*. Furthermore, in this *I-It* relationship, the *I* places itself, not in a mutual and equal relationship, but at a distance from the *It*, which it analyses or classifies from this viewpoint.

According to Buber (1923: 4), the second fundamental word one can say in a relationship is *I-Thou*. In this dynamic, the *Thou* is no longer an object, no longer analysable, classifiable, judgeable: 'When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object'. The *I* is no longer in the empirical world of things, but in the human world

of relationship, and 'if I face a human being as my *Thou* and say the primary word *I-Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things' (Buber 1923: 8). The *I-Thou* relationship arises when the *I* stops classifying, analysing, trying to control, and thus objectifying the other. The *I* sees their *Thou* as a whole, unique, and complex person and cannot define them anymore by just the one part of their identity that is being judged.

However, researching and representing a group entails analysis and classification. It is beyond the contemplation of another person in a one-on-one encounter. It raises the question of a possible transition from '*Thou*' to '*Them*'. When one writes about people one has never met in person, it heightens the possibility of staying in an *I-It* relationship, making the group into an object and projecting opinions and narratives onto them. As Martin Buber (1923: 17) wrote, 'every *Thou* in the world is by its nature fated to become a thing, or continually to re-enter into the condition of things'.

He then offers insight on how to remember the *I-Thou* relationship when one has to analyse people, thereby considering them as *It*:

> It's enough for him to know [the man who possesses the guarantor of his freedom] that he can cross the threshold of the sanctuary at any hour, where he cannot stay; moreover, the obligation he has to leave it immediately afterwards, is intimately part of the meaning and destination of this life. It's here, on the threshold, that the ever-new response, the Spirit, is kindled in him; it's here, in the profane and needy life of every day, that the spark will have to manifest its virtue. (Buber 1923: 52)

The 'sanctuary' Buber mentions is the *I-Thou* relationship. He means that when one has the experience of seeing a person in their entirety and uniqueness, without any desire to objectify them, one can retain the memory, the flavour of it. And it is in everyday life, when one has to analyse and classify, that 'the spark will have to manifest its virtue'. This means that one should remember that the people being considered are more than just the aspects of them that one is referring to, that they are whole and unique people, that they could be a *Thou*. The virtue of this 'spark' is to mitigate the downfalls of the objectification process.

Maria Lugones (1987) offers more concepts that can be used to differentiate between objectification and embracing a whole and complex human being. The first one is the difference between the *arrogant gaze* and the *loving gaze*, two different ways of perceiving another. The arrogant gaze is rooted in the arrogant perceiver's supremacy (Akdoğan 2020) and is defined as a failure of love and a failure of identification (Lugones 1987). If one fails to identify with and understand another, while

being secure in one's superiority, one's perception of this other will be arrogant. Maria Lugones calls for developing a *loving gaze* instead, based on her concept of *world-travelling*. *World-travelling* is a reciprocal, playful, and creative approach to getting to know someone else that requires the traveller to accept that giving and receiving understanding will alter them.

Maria Lugones' and Martin Buber's approaches present differences and complementarities. They both stress the importance of mutuality and dialogue as ways to humanize others, but they phrase the obstacle standing in the way differently. According to Buber, the obstacle is seeing others as objects; according to Lugones, it is a failure of identification. Maria Lugones addresses the issue of systemic power dynamics, while Martin Buber offers the reminder that people could be a *Thou* even when we have to analyse them and momentarily consider them as *It*.

These concepts show the connection between stigmatisation and objectification. The act of stigmatisation meets several criteria from the definition of an objectifying *I-It* relationship. It is based on judgement, on seeing only one part of a being, and it often leads to analysing and controlling the ones seen as *It*. It also encompasses elements of the *arrogant gaze*. The person who stigmatises places themself in a superior position, where they fail to identify with the other, travel to their world, and perceive them with a *loving gaze*. That is why studying different stigmatising narratives placed upon sex workers means studying different ways that they are being objectified by society, and perceived through an *arrogant gaze*.

As demonstrated earlier, the stigmatising narrative of social deviance has repeatedly targeted sex workers throughout history, endangering their freedom and survival. In these circumstances, sex workers become not unique individuals, a *Thou*, but a social problem to solve, an *It*. Institutions, police, and governments attempt to classify and control them. The 'deviance' narrative is a failure of identification and *world-travelling*, inviting a perception of sex workers only through an *arrogant gaze*.

The stigma of deviance connects with the concept of grievability of life, or as Judith Butler framed it, the 'biopolitics of grievability', which refers to the status of some lives as more or less 'killable' (Butler 2004). Butler explains that 'some lives are regarded as if the prospective loss of that life would be a serious loss; they are the grievable. Others are regarded as if their loss would be no loss, or not much of a loss; they are in the category of the ungrievable' (Butler 2004: 38). Sex workers' lives are perceived as ungrievable. In the media, 'discourses of disposability' reinforce this stigmatisation and ungrievability:

Lowman (2000) describes how 'discourses of disposability' evident across core institutions such as the media and through public and official discourses which

position sex workers as non-citizens, as rubbish, not to be cared about, or indeed there to be violated. These discourses work to 'other' the sex worker, separate her from 'normal women', through ideas which perpetuate associations with criminogenic offenders, immoral and dangerous sexuality, disease, incivility and disgust. (Sanders 2016: 9)

According to Sanders (2016: 10), this reinforced stigmatisation has a direct impact on the violence against sex workers, as the quoted report shows:

Boff (2012: 2), the author of the report, cites a serial murderer: 'I picked prostitutes because I thought I could kill as many of them as I wanted without getting caught', to drive the point home that how we treat sex workers directly affects the public imagination.

By this logic, if research, representation, or policy-making reinforces these narratives, they participate in the perpetuation of controlling policies and sex worker stigmatisation and encourage violence against them. Butler (2004) argues that for all lives to be equally grievable, to socially matter, people have to be perceived as subjects – and not objects. Furthermore, in an objectifying *I-It* relationship, one sees only one part of the other. This means that many components of their experience and circumstances are missed. If the goal of research, representation, or policy-making is to be based on a view as complete as possible, then stigmatisation and prejudices are obstacles to the process of data collection.

The second stigmatising narrative, which reduces sex workers to inherent victims, meets different criteria of objectification, of the *I-It* relationship, and of the *arrogant gaze*. First, the choice of language in the anti-pornography feminists' discourse tends to be directly objectifying. Some refer to sex workers as 'broken dolls' (Hyde 2018), others describe them as 'selling themselves' (Bateman 2021: 830). As Bateman (2021: 830) states:

The notion that buying *sex* is equivalent to buying a *woman*, seems to suggest that radical feminists themselves – somewhat ironically – see the women involved as just sex objects.

Secondly, presenting sex workers as victims, or, as Butler (2004) states, 'in the framework of vulnerability', means denying their agency. It is seeing only one part of their experience and negating the others, which is part of an *I-It* relationship. This insistence on vulnerability may lead to an *arrogant gaze* where, instead of mutual world-travelling, there is an unequal power dynamic between saviours and victims:

Rather, Butler's point is to note a number of problems that can exist in the framework of vulnerability; for example, its paternalistic overtones in positing a seemingly 'invulnerable' 'strong' agent coming to the aid of the 'vulnerable' and the 'helpless' who lack agency (Borg 2023: 301).

Thirdly, the victimhood narrative erases the nuanced and different experiences of sex workers. bell hooks (1984) cautioned against making common oppression the basis of feminism and thus erasing diversity within the movement. The term *intersectionality* was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to address that the needs and experiences of black women differ from the ones of white women. Similarly, to apply an intersectional gaze to the topic of sex work is to explore how sex workers' and non-sex workers' experiences differ, as well as to acknowledge diversity within the sex industry. For example, a straight female black stripper will have different needs and experiences than a white gay male escort. The former may face hiring discrimination and racist beauty standards (Vermish 2017) and the latter may face stigmatisation as 'vectors of disease transmission' twice over – for being gay and for being a sex worker (Koken et al. 2004: 16). Discovering the different experiences and needs of diverse people implies a curiosity and openness that prevent the simple projection of one's own experiences and internal narratives. It gives an opportunity to *world-travel*, to playfully and creatively discover the reality of someone else, which Maria Lugones places as a condition for looking at others with a *loving gaze*. This demonstrates how a victim-centred approach to sex work participates in processes of simplification and generalisation, which creates an *I-It* relationship, where one cannot embrace the uniqueness, agency, and complexity of the people one is referring to. Furthermore, Judith Butler argued that focusing only on vulnerability, on victimhood, leads to denying the resilience, solidarity, and resistance which arise from the same circumstances (Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay 2016).

On one hand, reinforcing this narrative as a researcher, film-maker, writer, or policy-maker means participating in another form of objectification of sex workers. Ronald Weitzer (2005) shows that studies presenting sex work as inherently degrading and sex workers as victims tend to lead to biased data collection. These data are then used in policy-making, and have a direct negative impact on sex workers' lives.

On the other hand, glamourising sex work, presenting it as only empowering, provides an incomplete view as well. It denies the gender-based violence and exploitation which exist within the sex industry. However, addressing these issues can be done without simplification and systematic victimisation. As Judith Butler (2020: 182) stated, 'we do not recognise their suffering by further depriving them of all capacity'.

Being aware of the narratives of deviance, pathologisation and victimhood while working on research, media representation or policy-making is a useful tool to ques-

tion our own gaze and its influence on our work. However, a method is needed to overcome one's objectifying gaze. How does one see sex workers as a potential *Thou*, travel to their world and present them through a *loving gaze*? LeMoncheck, inspired by Lugones' writings, recommends an approach she calls *care respect*:

> […] treating a person with care respect means not only valuing her as one among many unique individuals worthy of respect but also valuing the particular ways in which she is unique. This perspective allows us to acknowledge the shared partiality of social location in all of us as well the contextual specificity of each person. An ethic of care respect also requires that we try to understand an individual in her own terms and not through our favoured ways of seeing her and that we try to promote, where possible and desirable, the interests of individuals consistent with that ethic. (LeMoncheck 1997: 43)

This approach gives specific indications for engaging with others without objectifying, stigmatising, or projecting personal opinions onto them. It implies respect, valuing uniqueness, and being aware of one's own social position and that of the person one faces. LeMoncheck (1997: 43) presents two useful questions to ask oneself in order to heighten both respect and awareness: 'What is it like to be them?' and 'What is it like to be myself in their eyes?' What is it like to be this specific person engaged in sex work? What is it like to be myself – the policy-maker, the researcher, the writer, or the film-maker – in their eyes? In order to use these questions effectively, one has to grasp that the question 'What is it like to be this specific person engaged in sex work?' is different from asking 'What would it be like for *me* to engage in sex work?' or 'What do I think it is like to be a sex worker?' *World-travelling* requires refraining from projecting our own emotions, opinions, and expectations on a unique and different person.

LeMoncheck adds an additional layer:

> […] treating sex workers with care respect will mean trying to see the world from their point of view and, even more important, to respect each worker as a unique individual whose social location specifies her needs and interests in ways that may be quite different from other sex workers' or my own. (LeMoncheck 1997: 43)

This resonates with Martin Buber's *I-Thou* relationship, wherein recognising the uniqueness of the person one faces is an important component. In everyday life, when one has to analyse sex workers as a group, 'the spark manifests its virtue' (Buber 1923: 52) when we remember that sex workers are unique people with different

views of the world and different needs within it. This underlines once more the importance of intersectional feminism within studies of sex work (Morrison 2023). For instance, transgender women street-based sex workers do not have the exact same struggles and needs as cisgender women escorts. However, a simplistic approach to intersectionality can create a view of these categories as static and homogenous, while we are actually referring to a multitude of unique individuals, each with their own relationship to these parts of their identity, always in flux and evolution. That is why focusing only on intersectional identities, on 'social location', is not enough to travel to someone's world. When one meets a sex worker, one doesn't meet a category of identity, but a person with their own unique life story. They have their own origin story about entering the sex industry. They have their own childhood memories, worldviews, qualities and flaws, favourite type of food or music, hobbies, and so on. Another facet of the blindness of stigmatisation is to perceive others only through the part of their identity that is stigmatised, negating the infinite and often mundane details of their own life experience. Seeing sex workers as whole and diverse human beings demands that one embraces complexity. This richness and diversity found within sex workers' lived experiences are an invitation to consider sex work itself as more than an isolated topic or an abstract moral problem.

## Situation ethics, pragmatism and complex thought

When one engages with the topic of sex work, one's chosen epistemological method defines the questions one will focus on. Deontological ethics attempts to define actions that are universally good or universally bad. The most famous example is Kant's (1785: 421) categorical imperative: 'act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law'. His search for moral universality has been criticised for its lack of acknowledgment of context and situationality, and for its rigidity. Defining universal moral laws asks for an abstract position, for distancing oneself from the specifics of the given situation. In the case of sex work, deontological philosophy would ask 'Is sex work inherently good or bad? Should it be part of society?'

On the opposite, situation ethics rejects moral absolutism and 'holds that moral judgements must be made within the context of the entirety of a situation and that all normative features of a situation must be viewed as a whole' (Rosenthal 2023). This approach resists the abstraction of universalisation, inviting ethics to be flexible, adaptable, situational, and based on care for all people involved in the situation. It bears close similarities with the pragmatic philosophy movement (Rosenthal 2023).

Being pragmatic is defined as 'solving problems in a sensible way that suits the conditions that really exist now, rather than obeying fixed theories, ideas, or rules'

(Cambridge Dictionary 2020). Pragmatism is a philosophical movement that opposes the research of absolute truth in philosophy. It claims, on the contrary, that the value of an idea or narrative is defined by its usefulness. One of the main pragmatist philosophers, John Dewey, 'sought to promote pragmatism by reorienting philosophy away from abstract concerns and turning it instead toward an emphasis on human experience' (Morgan 2014: 1046). Therefore, it argues that philosophy should be based on people's experiences and be useful for the improvement of their lives.

While people in positions of power debate abstractly on the good and the bad of a topic, others on the ground may suffer from their lack of action or from their inaccurate actions. Juno Mac, a well-known sex worker activist, provided an example of this criticism during a TED talk:

> People get really hung up on the question: 'Well, would you want your daughter doing it?' That's the wrong question. Instead, imagine she is doing it. How safe is she at work tonight? Why isn't she safer? (Mac 2016)

From a philosophical point of view, it means that she denounces a moral and deontological approach to sex work whose questions focus on judging an abstract concept and turning this judgement into a universal law. She claims these are the wrong questions. Departing from moral abstraction, she brings the public back to situational and pragmatic ethical questions such as immediate safety in a specific environment and the reasons for this lack of safety. Pragmatism takes into account people's experiences, as a database and as feedback on the usefulness of the narrative crafted or of the action taken. This method calls for questions such as: 'What are sex worker's struggles?' and 'What do sex workers need?'

Thus, for policy-makers, researchers, writers, and film-makers, the risk of abstract moral questions is a distraction from the reality on the ground and a reduction of situational complexity to a universalist moral stand. Both the moral and the stigmatising approach carry the risk of being reductionist, which has two main components: 'reductive approaches isolate phenomena from their environment and operate with a disjunctive logic of either/or' (Montuori 2013: xxviii). The logic of either/or would tend to present sex work as entirely morally bad or entirely morally good, as inherently violent and degrading or inherently empowering. A binary system lacks nuances. Furthermore, isolating sex work, the 'phenomenon', from its environment reduces the chances of understanding it. For instance, even under decriminalisation, the legal system globally defended by sex worker organisations, undocumented sex workers are not yet successfully protected. This is because their safety also depends on immigration laws (Mai et al. 2021). Sex work and immigration are two intercon-

nected topics that influence each other, and trying to understand sex work without addressing this connection leads to reductionist thinking.

The sociologist and philosopher Edgar Morin (2008: vii) claimed that in order to understand an uncertain and complex world, one should not over-simplify, reduce, or compartmentalise. He developed, instead, a theory of complexity:

> We need a kind of thinking that reconnects that which is disjointed and compartmentalised, that respects diversity as it recognises unity, and that tries to discern interdependencies. We need a radical thinking (which gets to the root of problems), a multidimensional thinking, and an organisational or systemic thinking.

This definition of the theory of complexity, or *complex thinking*, can be applied to the topic of sex work step by step. Firstly, reconnecting 'that which is disjointed and compartmentalised' and discerning 'interdependencies' means recognising that sex work does not exist in a vacuum but is embedded in economic, political and discriminative structures. For instance, sex work, by providing easier access to employment in diverse situations, sheds light on problems such as poverty, access to work, immigration, violent conflict, disability, queerness, racism, colonisation, labour rights, homelessness, and more. All factors that marginalise people – and thus place them in financial difficulties or make it harder for them to keep a job – share a connection with the topic of sex work (Yarbrough 2016). Therefore, ignoring the interdependencies between these topics would lead to a compartmentalised and reductionist approach.

Secondly, Morin (2008) states that complex thinking is radical and 'gets to the root of problems'. For instance, Teela Sanders (2016), in her research on sex work and violence, aimed to unearth the complex causes of violence against sex workers. She could have collected evidence of violence and concluded sex work was inherently violent – which would be a reductionist approach. Instead, she used radical thinking in order to find the roots, such as the influence of stigma.

Thirdly, 'multidimensional thinking' in the context of sex work means exploring different perspectives and layers. For instance, one's conception of sex work depends on one's conception of sex and one's conception of work (Danger, Phoenix 2022). Furthermore, another layer is the web of interaction and influence between the different groups involved: sex workers, clients, managers, bosses, the police, healthcare providers, social workers, politicians, etc.

Lastly, 'an organisational or systemic thinking' connects all these data, interdependencies, and dimensions in order to present a more complex picture, which allows for creative solutions. An example of systemic thinking applied to research on sex work

is a paper on unequal access to healthcare for sex workers in Canada. Squires (2024) uses both written analysis and diagrams to represent the parties involved in the system and their complex connections, as well as the types of stigmatisation of sex workers. This allowed the research to effectively articulate a complex situation, and to offer several potential solutions from different levels and perspectives.

A pragmatic and complex approach applied to sex work has many advantages. Pragmatism shifts the focus from abstract moral questions to an interest in lived experiences and aims at usefulness. Complex thinking breaks from compartmentalisation and an either/or logic to embrace the multiple dimensions, interconnections, and diversity of experiences. In policy-making, these tools suggest taking an interest in sex workers' lived experiences to question the concrete effects of the law, and studying sex work in connection with immigration, poverty, and discrimination to make sure that the different laws in these fields are coherent for the rights and safety of sex workers. For research, it allows scholars to be better informed and accurate and to reveal surprising connections. When it comes to media representation, it invites writers and film-makers to not repeat the same overused tropes, but explore new and original topics – providing that ethical research and sex workers' consultancy took place prior.

## Notes on language and sex worker organisations' guidelines

Both *care respect* and pragmatism ask for an examination of the language used to describe sex work. For the pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, vocabularies are to be thought of as tools chosen for their usefulness to serve our goal or purpose (Brandom 2020). LeMoncheck (1997: 43) points out that a *care respect* approach requires that we 'understand an individual in her own terms'. A guide on language and sex work produced by the organisation Stella (2013: 1) begins with the following statement:

> The way we talk about sex work is anything but neutral – it communicates meaning and influences how people understand our work and create policy about us.

Specific words support specific narratives. For example, the expression 'selling their bodies' supports the victimhood narrative, emphasising an inherent self-violation in the practice of sex work. Although, realistically, sex workers don't sell themselves, they sell sexual services (Ericsson 1980). The word 'prostitute' supports the narrative of degradation, as it also, as a verb, means: 'to use yourself or your abilities or beliefs in a way that does not deserve respect, especially in order to get money' (Cambridge Dictionary 2020). However, some sex workers refer to themselves as prostitutes. The

term 'sex work', coined in 1978 by Carol Leigh, is less stigmatising and connects the profession to the discourse on labour rights. Thus, when one writes about sex work, the choice of word reflects the narrative one wants to advance. Policy-makers, researchers, journalists, writers, and film-makers all have a responsibility in the words they choose to discuss the topic.

The responsibility to do no harm comes from a *care respect* approach, which requires 'that we try to promote, where possible and desirable, the interests of individuals consistent with that ethic' (LeMoncheck 1997: 43). Pragmatic philosophy stresses the importance of knowledge based on lived experiences. For these reasons, it is useful to explore the network of sex worker activism and organising. Discovering these local and global movements reveals the unique complexity of sex workers' struggles (Derkas 2019). Sex workers write articles, books, and academic papers and produce art and campaign projects. Sex workers' organisations publish detailed ethical guidelines for researchers. For example, SWOP USA provides a fact sheet on the risks, challenges, ethics, and recommendations for research on sex work (Bloomquist). These guidelines address how to respect sex workers, making it safe and positive for them to participate in research. The Sex Workers Project of the Urban Justice Center provides guidelines for every step of a research, from the choice of method and topic to the publication, and has a very valuable list of resources at the end, presenting more research and articles about ethical research on sex work. They encourage a systemic, intersectional, and respectful approach that will present the complexity of the sex industry and the diversity of the lived experiences of sex workers. Lastly, the organisation SWAN (2019) has produced recommendations for both researchers and policy-makers.

## Conclusion

Pragmatism, complex thinking, and considering sex workers as whole, complex, and unique human beings are complementary methods that support each other. Pragmatism, by focusing on usefulness instead of deontological ethics, invites us to overcome the taboo surrounding sex work and to consider people's lived experiences in order to find what is useful for their welfare. The concepts of *I-Thou, world-travelling, loving gaze*, and *care respect* support pragmatism by offering clues on how to embrace the diversity of lived experiences in a way that aims to improve well-being. This approach is, in itself, complex thinking: instead of stigmatising, thereby seeing only one part of a being through judgement, *world-travelling* welcomes the contradictions and multiplicities of the person's experience. Complexity overcomes the binary thinking of reductionism. Sex workers are then seen neither as the threat of deviance nor as inherent victims. An intersectional approach is in essence complex

thinking, as it invites the acknowledgment of the confluences of multiple aspects of one's identity. Finally, complex thinking and systemic thinking help to incorporate a pragmatist approach and a *care respect* attitude into a study of the multiple dimensions and interdependencies existing within the sex industry. Facing this complex reality helps in deciding what needs to be done, shown, and researched.

Avoiding harmful narratives, representations, decisions, and projections in research, politics, and media has the power to encourage the public to challenge their own prejudices and embrace a more complex and humanistic view of sex workers – seeing them as human beings with different backgrounds, motivations, and individual lives beyond their profession. This hinders stigmatisation, discourages violence, and gives a voice to the silenced. Policy-makers, scholars, journalists, writers, and film-makers can amplify sex workers' voices by promoting messages, writings, and art created by the community.

This combination of pragmatism, *care respect*, *world-travelling*, and complex thinking can be applied to any discriminated group. It is a method and a philosophical stance that aims to thoroughly articulate a complex situation, while not losing sight of what it is all about: neither statistics, nor curiosities, nor abstract objects, but whole, complex, and diverse people living their lives, with agency, and whose challenges can be lessened.

## Recommendations from sex worker organisations

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