A bene placito[1]: Narratives of sex work

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Abstract:

Sex work is often interpreted through master narratives that see women as victimized and subjected to stigmas and negative attitudes. This paper offers an insight into narratives that challenge or can be seen as an alternative to these narratives. Data are from a sample of 15 interviews with women who show an interest in sex work, conducted in a netnographic context. While widespread master narratives about sex work tend to revolve around the notion of commodification, these alternative narratives present scenarios in which sex work is interpreted as a complex activity of networking and self-promotion. The women's narratives describe how sex work can have positive implications for the development of careers, social impact and female emancipation, and is morally coherent. Arguably, they can be important in understanding the stories that instigate and sustain sex work.

Keywords:

Deep interest; Ethnography; Interview; Master narrative; Narrative; Online; Sex work

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1 Latin: 'At pleasure'

Introduction

> *Since prostitutes do not speak with one voice on the subject, it is very easy*
> *for theorists to "cherry pick" in order to support their own preconceptions*
> *about prostitution* (O'Connell Davidson, 1999, p. 114)

Narratives are one of the most powerful cognitive and epistemic processes in making sense of, understanding and communicating every aspect of social reality (Frank, 2012). There is, for example, an extensive corpus of studies that discusses narratives that refer to sex work and related practices (see Hulusjö, 2013). In recent years, a growing number of authors have tried to identify those narratives, sometimes labelled as *dominant*, that are used as a privileged cultural tool to understand sex work and related practices (see Hallgrímsdóttir et al., 2008; Sanders, 2006; Kaye, 2007; Snajdr, 2013; Albright and D'Adamo, 2017). Most of these condemn sex work and point to the many problematic aspects of these activities. There has been less academic interest in identifying and exploring positive narratives regarding sex work. We believe that regardless of ideological or political positions, exploring these narratives are crucial to understanding the draw of sex work.

Weitzer (2005) has argued that radical feminism has silenced more affirmative stories of sex work in order to serve a political agenda. Rubin (1984, p. 301) similarly states that research on sex work tends to discuss the "worst available examples" and the most disturbing aspects of sex work such as exploitation, violence and abuse and to present them as indicative of the "whole phenomenon". While this is understandable as part of a political and social struggle against sex work, it makes it difficult to understand the narrative pull of sex work. Moreover, narrative scholars do not have to take a position in political debates about sex work,

but it can be a pointed choice to present — and study — the broad variety of related narratives that exist in a society.

In this study, we identify and discuss a series of narratives, presented by interviewees selected on the basis of being favorable towards sex work. The stories they told include what we describe as business narratives, social impact narratives, female emancipation narratives and stories emphasizing moral coherency. These contrast and challenge some important master narratives about sex work, such as commodification and victimization, and their related stigmas. The narratives we study come from a group of 15 women with an interest in sex work. They were collected through semi-structured instant messaging interviews in a netnographic context.[2]

Sex work and narrative analysis

A narrative or story can be described as a constituent of discourse when "one thing happens as a consequence of another" (Frank, 2012, p. 25). In the humanities and social sciences, narratives have been theorized as one of the primary means of articulating and sharing knowledge, and they are closely related to power. The notion of narrative we use reflects Foucault's (1990) emphasis on how narratives are productive; they do things, and constitute and shape social realities (see Jäger, 2001; Tamboukou, 2008; Poppi and Castelli Gattinara, 2018; Poppi, Travaglino and Di Piazza, 2018). Foucault described how power, knowledge and their representations are inherently connected (Foucault, 1990, p. 100). One way to study power in narrative analysis is to conceptualize cultural stories (Richardson, 1990), formula stories (Loseke, 2007) or master narratives (Clifton and Van De Mieroop, 2016). These are

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[2] See Tunçalp and Lê 2014: 61. Netnography can also be described as *virtual ethnography, online ethnography and cyberanthropology* (Raitanen, Sandberg and Oksanen 2017: 5).

all different descriptions of stories that are more important than others are, and that in particular contexts can be described as dominant or even hegemonic.

Master narratives are "deeply embedded in a culture, provide a pattern for cultural life and social structure, and create a framework for communication about what people are expected to do in certain situations" (Halverson, Goodall and Corman, 2011: 7). Clifton and Van De Mieroop (2016, p. 7) discuss the problems of identifying master narratives as well as their flexibility, but still conclude that people orient to them "in one way or other", for example by countering them (Bamberg, 2004). This is often described as counter-narratives (Bamberg and Andrews, 2004). The notion of master narrative has been used to describe a range of normative conceptualizations and sociopolitical discourses. Dominant environmental discourses (Harper, 2001), gender and power relations (Erler, 2003) and broad intellectual revolutions, like "the Enlightenment" (Gikandi, 2001) have been framed as master narratives. As Snajdr (2013, p. 234) points out: "[a] master narrative is directed from and ultimately constructed and reproduced as social reality by dominant institutions, agents and systems."

The critical analysis of master narratives and the identification of contrastive constituents of discourse has found application also in sex-related phenomena. From sex scandals and pedophilia (Cavanagh, 2008) to human trafficking (Kaye, 2007; Albright and D'Adamo, 2017), researchers have tried to "explore and to tease apart the characteristics and components of the master narrative" and 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. 231; 235). Ethnography or other approaches emphasizing the perspective of "insiders" can show how some stories and key experiences are left out of widespread discourses or master narratives.

Skilbrei (2012) shows how prostitution has variably been seen as a legal and a social problem historically. While the framing of sex work changes continuously, what remain stable is that it is seen as a problem. This is closely related to Hallgrímsdóttir et al. (2008) suggested five main sex work narratives that seem to be particularly important in a Western context. These include contagion, slavery, risk, culpability, and societal failure narratives. Although developed from newspaper narratives of sex industry work in a Canadian city (1980–2004), they suggest that they are relevant elsewhere as well; "stigmas have an almost limitless elasticity" and can adapt to changing socio-cultural circumstances (Hallgrímsdóttir et al. 2008, p. 135, see also Benoit and Millar, 2001; Phillips and Benoit 2005; Snajdr, 2013, O'Brien, 2015).

Contagion refers to the spreading of "moral malaise" and, as Hunt (2002) claims, also concerns economic interests. In this narrative, sex work is understood as a state of moral marginalization in which the professional realization of a person is precluded. *Slavery* narratives describe sex work as a condition of coercion, entrapment and enslavement, in which agency and choice are often reduced or eliminated entirely by unequal power relations (see also Barry, 1979). Consequently, narratives of *risk* often describe how women become sex workers because of a male figure, a pimp, usually described as a sort of villain (Hallgrímsdóttir et al., 2008, p. 130). Sex work narratives that describe *moral culpability* tend to conceive of sex workers as carriers of moral fault for which they should be blamed (see also Jones, 2012). Finally, *societal failure* narratives consider sex work as a result of a series of contextual mistakes and ineptitudes that have led women to choose an activity that is contrary to the dominant principles of society (see also Gaffney, 2007).

Mass media and popular culture shape and contribute to spreading these master narratives. Depictions of sex work in the news media, literature and film often reduce women

with prostitution experience to sexualized Others, constituted as "dirty, sexually indiscriminatory and willing to do anything for money" or "desperate and victimized" (Hulusjö, 2013, p. 22). These representations of sex work found in the media and artistic productions produce and shape what the public "knows" about sex work and thus important master narratives. In contemporary society, news, television documentaries, films, books and other cultural artifacts are produced for, and consumed by, a global audience (see Attwood, 1993; De Villiers, 2017; Hallgrímsdóttir et al., 2008). Master narratives of sex work can therefore share important similarities across geographical, cultural and societal contexts. Arguably, the above-mentioned master narratives of sex work are also widespread because they are based on a universal practice that derives from the widespread commodification of the female body (see Sanders, 2005; 2013). However, in the same way as powerful narratives in other domains (see Andrews 2004; Loseke, 2007), master narratives about sex work must be identified — and studied — in particular cultural and historical contexts. As Vance (1984, p. 15) points out, a thorough understanding of sex work requires "understanding its multiplicity and the potential discontinuities in the experience of prostitution between participants in it, as well as between participants and dominant narratives of the culture at large".

Master narratives of sex work often come with a strong stigma. Stigma can be regarded as a powerful social label, or a system of labels, that has a strong impact on those individuals to whom it is applied (see Goffman, 1963). As Scambler (2007) claims, stigmatized individuals are affected by a wide range of penalizing and damaging behaviors, "from shunning and avoidance to restraint and physical abuse and assault (*enacted stigma*)" to internalizing this negative treatment, "leading to a tainted image of the self (*felt stigma*)" (Hallgrímsdóttir et al., 2008, p. 120). Stigma in dominant narratives about sex work can severely affect the sense of self of women and lead to "traumatic events and violations of their

rights and of their bodies" (Hulusjö, 2013, p. 23). Stigmas are not equally shared in populations, but instead disproportionately affect those people that are characterized by reduced symbolic capital and reduced social power (Bourdieu, 2002 [1977]). Following Link and Phelan (2001), stigma targets people generally belonging to already marginalized social classes, race, ethnicity or gender or possessing deviant physical traits.

The focus of this study is inherently phenomenological, and we study sex work based on the perspective of those with "deep interest" in it, instead of from the perspective of mainstream society. The affirmative narratives of sex work we present should not be considered as individualized interpretations of sex work, but instead as less well-known, but equally important narratives of sex work. Following narrative criminology (Sandberg 2010, Presser and Sandberg 2015; Poppi and Verde, *forthcoming*), we do not weigh in on which set of narratives is true, but believe that highlighting affirmative stories gives an "insiders" insight into a sometimes hidden culture, and can offer an important perspective on the draw of sex work for many young women.

Method

Data for this study is online interviews with 15 Eastern European women recruited based on being interested in and favorable towards sex work. We describe them as having a "deep interest" in sex work. The notion of deep interest is based on (1) a favorable attitude towards sex work and on (2) the willingness to consider the possibility of working as a sex worker. In this sense, the broad notion of deep interest reflects both an interest in the activity with an attitudinal predisposition to enter into and practice sex work and the lack of homogeneity for age, country of origin and social status that such a group of participants presents. The interviewees ranged from 19 to 38 years of age and were from Russia (4), Ukraine (4), Romania

(2), Belarus (2), Moldova (1), Lithuania (1) and Bulgaria (1). Importantly, the interviewees did not belong to the sex work nexus, and had not experience as sex workers.

The selection criteria included being of Central-East and Eastern European nationality and showing a preference for short-term relationships or hook-ups on a selected dating site. We wanted to identify interviewees who would take into consideration the idea of doing sex work and chose this selection criteria because we also were interested in the link to migration and poverty. It is also a fact that many sex workers in Western Europe have a background in Eastern-European countries and that sex work or related activities can be an opportunity for economic emancipation (see Tiefenbrun, 2001; Wallman, 2001; Hubbard, Matthews and Scoular, 2008). The preferences for short-term relationships or hook-ups could result in an increased susceptibility to a more favorable attitude towards sex work. Each potential interviewee was also asked how positive her attitude to sex work was. Only those participants that declared themselves favorable towards sex work and that could not deny the possibility of entering into and practicing sex work were included in the study.

The first author did semi-structured interviews in April and June 2018, by recruiting interviewees from an online dating website (OKCupid). A number of similar questions were asked to all the interviewees, but there was no rigid structure that limited the conversations. The questions to the interviewees addressed issues related to the world of sex work and the positive implications that it can have on personal, economic, and social levels. All the interviews were conducted in writing using Telegram, an instant messaging application. The study is thus a contribution to netnography (see Tunçalp and Lê, 2014: 61), a type of ethnography that is undertaken as "a specialized form of ethnography adapted to the unique computer-mediated contingencies of today's social world" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 1).

In recent years, the use of application softwares providing video chat and voice calls between devices has become an increasingly integrated part of ethnographic research. These

platforms can allow researchers to create a *free space*, where the exchange of sensitive and confidential information is facilitated by inherent nature of the medium (Bertrand and Bourdeau, 2010). This can be an advantage when discussing sensitive topics such as sex work. The anonymity of the interviewees varied from visual anonymity to full anonymity (see Keipi and Oksanen, 2014), depending on the information participants provided. In this kind of research the interviewees' *true* identities are never certain (Raitanen, Sandberg and Oksanen, 2017, p. 5). Online research is thus best suited to perspectives emphasizing narratives and stories, and less suited to comparing these to particular characteristics and traits of participants.

We do not reveal personal information about the participants in order to protect their anonymity. Following Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett (2008, p. 129–130), this study uses *ethnographic generalizations*, in which personal narratives "are used to unveil otherwise hidden meanings, motivations, social practices, interactions and mythologies" (Raitanen, Sandberg and Oksanen, 2017, p. 5). The extracts below are quoted verbatim in the same form as they occurred during the interviews, including their stylistic imperfections as the interviews are not native English speakers. The interviewer's contributions are reported in square brackets, while the interviewer's notes are reported in italics.

Affirmative narratives of sex work

This study examines a series of personal narratives that challenge, or that can be seen as contrasting, widespread master narratives of sex work. We distinguish between four different narratives. The narratives below are constructed by us and should be seen as "theoretical constructions designed to describe some empirical tendency" (Frank, 1995, p. 29). In real life

conversations, they are intertwined in subtle and complex ways, both with each other and with other less affirmative narratives of sex work.

Business narratives

Extract (1)

- You can make a lot of money doing that job but only as a classy one
- [Yes, I guess...]
- I've heard of escorts making so much money that they started to do business [What do you mean by that?]
- When you have money and good connections you can work in fashion and even make your own brand!
- [How do you know about that?]
- There's this Russian woman
- *the interviewee posts an instagram account link*
- [Who is she?]
- She was an escort and now she's still an escort but she also owns a fashion brand
- [Really?]
- Of course! She's known for this reason and everybody in Russia knows!
- [Interesting!]
- That's my point.
- Escorts like her can become something else, because everything is about money and connections. Classy escorts have rich clients and then have connections.
- She's not known as an escort, she is known as a good person for doing business with that used to work as escort. Being an escort is secondary.
- [Oh I see, so the escort dimension has somehow been covered up by her new career?]

- Yes, she was only an escort and now she's also a serious worker ha-
  haha

Extract (2)

- As prostitute you can also become other things
- [Like what?]
- Prostitutes can even buy a restaurant or a beauty shop from the money
  prostitutes make
- [Sure, why not!]
- And then the woman is just a restaurant owner or beauty shop owner

As these two quotations point out, the interviewees conceptualize sex work as the starting point for a different career. The different careers that are mentioned include working in the fashion industry, owning a restaurant or a beauty shop and becoming an entrepreneur. At the base of the scenarios, there is the hypothetical role played by some clients who — through a network of connections and economic opportunities — can encourage the development of a different but parallel job. In previous contributions, Sanders (2007, p. 77) has suggested "a typology of transitions that illustrates four different processes of change that women under-take to leave sex work". These processes described the different reasons that can induce women to quit sex work, but do not consider sex work as a career that can proceed in tandem with other business activities. According to the narrative revealed by the interviewees in ex-tracts 1 and 2, those sex workers that have a certain financial power can keep using their original career as a sort of hub for career development and not necessarily replace it.

Extracts 1 and 2 represent narratives that contrast master narratives of slavery and risk. The strategic planning described is more in line with a spontaneous entrepreneurial de-cision than with the results of a condition of oppression and domination. In these narratives, sex work represents agency and strategic decisions to maximize the outcomes of the profes-sion, for example to expand them into different careers.

Extract (3)

- The real challenge is to find the right circle of clients, I guess
- [Why are you saying that?]
- Well
- Isn't it obvious?
- [Not really…]
- The right clients can give you opportunities and opportunities allow people to do other things, too
- [What do you mean by "other things"?]
- Well you can also start working for one of your clients
- Of course clients need to be rich people
- Managers, business men, that kind of thing
- [I see, it's like customers can give sex workers opportunities for other careers, too?]
- Yes of course
- Well I'd not say other careers
- You can keep working as a prostitute and do other things, too
- Prostitution is only the base for doing other things
- [I understand]
- [But why would these professionals do that?]
- The managers?
- [Yes]
- I don't know but it can also be a form of control to get better treatment
- Better treatment as a client
- [I see]
- Also to keep the sex workers quiet
- you know
- [Sure, sure, I understand]
- [It's possible, I mean]
- It's more than possible...rich clients can buy silence
- They might be famous!

In extract 3, professional figures are detailed as "managers" and "businessmen". What also emerges in this quotation is the reasons that would induce clients to support sex workers' career development. In addition to the possibility of receiving "better treatment", financial opportunities and career support are described as forms of control "to keep the sex workers quiet". Several studies have pointed out that sex work often includes coercive control (see Lowman & Fraser, 1995; Church, Henderson, Barnard & Hart, 2001), but these narratives emphasize how sex workers can use information about clients as a negotiating tool. Some clients can invest in the careers of sex workers to obtain greater discretion and to stop encounters from being revealed.

In contrast to the risk and slavery narratives that see women as subjected to the coercion of a pimp, the interviewees picture a scenario in which every career development is determined by the choices of women and in which women manage to mould the economic and networking opportunities of their clients to their own advantage. In other words, women are not represented as victims but as agents, optimizing their opportunities through sex work.

Extract (4)

- It's like for any other job, I guess
- [There are steps, there's a career that can improve]
- You can start from the bottom and you can even reach the top levels
- [Not for everybody, I guess!]
- Of course not ;)
- You need to be very beautiful and very good :DDD
- :D
- Only the good ones and the beautiful ones can reach the top levels
- It's really a career like for everything else
- [That's very interesting]
- I know
- It's normal

- Good athletes are well paid and good actors are well paid and I don't think poor athletes and bad actors are well paid
- ;)
- [Well, it depends…]
- :DDD
- True
- Once you reach the top levels and you have money you can even become the first lady of the US
- :DDDD
- [Oh]
- It's normal
- :DDD
- Isn't it the same thing?
- [I don't think so…]
- Oh come on!
- :D

Extract (5)
- The poor ones, no!
- [I guess that's hard…]
- This is a world where only the top ones have a great life
- [That's possible…]
- It's not about the job itself, it's about the level, like for everything else
- Sex work is not different from any other job
- [You think so?]
- Yeah
- I mean, a poor worker in manufacturing is often only being exploited.
- A great craftsman can also be an artist and can make a lot of money and can create a brand, like Italian stylists

The interviewees in extracts 4 and 5 explain the possibility of becoming a "top level" sex worker in terms of professional abilities and beauty. A sex work career is implicitly considered as meritocratic, and these two components could represent the reason for achieving many

kinds of career developments. The comparison of sex workers to "good athletes", "good actors" and "great craftsmen" seems to exclude any form of exploitation and violence against sex workers. When sex work is conceived as a voluntary and meritocratic activity based on objective performances and qualities, contagion, moral culpability and societal failure narratives become less relevant. This can also be linked to Shaver's (2005, p. 314) claims about the necessity to "normalize sex work and place it in the context of other personal service work". The affirmative narratives in this study represent sex work as "any kind of job" and a form of competition or career that ends up rewarding the best individuals. The resulting rewards and recognition are not in contrast with mainstream societal values, but simply reflect any other societal activity, even the most normal ones.

Social impact narratives

> Extract (6)
>
> - Working in the sex industry makes you popular
> - Porn is like that
> - :DDD
> - Everybody watches porn and porn means popularity
> - It's the same for escorts!
> - Some escorts work in porn, too
> - [I guess that's true]
> - When people know you and you are popular you have an impact
> - [What kind of impact?]
> - An impact on society
> - ;)

Affirmative sex work narratives reject or circumscribe the stigma associated with widespread master narratives of sex work. The network of connections that can emerge from dealing with

rich clients could also result in a form of popularity that transgresses the field of sex work. As extract 6 shows, the popularity of some sex workers is related to their simultaneous career in mainstream pornography. In contrast to the stigma associated with master narratives of sex work, which forces most women to hide their professional life, the fact that some sex workers move between escorting and mainstream pornography presents sex work as a potential route to fame and popularity. Similar to extracts 4 and 5, sex work is represented not as contravening societal principles and morality (e.g. contagion and societal failure narratives), but as an activity that uses societal principles and morality to achieve different forms of self-realization and career development.

Extract (7)

- I don't know really
- It's curious that sex work means shame
- Here in Hungary there are porn actresses and famous prostitutes that go on TV
- Hahahah
- [What do they do on TV?]
- Talk shows or TV games and everybody knows!
- [Oh, really?]
- They give advice about products and they are famous because
- they are beautiful women!
- So even if people talk badly people know they are beautiful women
- People respect them
- [Why?]
- Beauty counts more than sex work
- It's all about envy
- [I see, that's a good point!]

Extract 7 presents a narrative of how sex work can be a route to fame, and how beauty and appearance can overcome the stigma of sex work. In a similar way to business narratives that

see sex work as the base for further job and career opportunities, social impact narratives present sex work as the base for being appreciated (and envied) for physical characteristics alone. As reported in extract 4, too, beauty is considered as the main factor that establishes success, both for being a sex worker and for becoming a public figure.

Extract (8)

- There are a lot of Instagram influencers that were certainly escorts.
- I'm sure
- Now these women have k of followers and they promote stuff
- [What do you mean by that?]
- They have social impact and promote beauty products and clothes
- They're like testimonials

Extract (9)

- However
- You know what
- Every girl that has like 500k followers and is famous now started out as an escort
- Every one
- [On Instagram?]
- [Interesting]
- Hahahah

The impact of social media has not received much attention in sex work studies, but as extracts 8 and 9 (and 1) show, many interviewees emphasize how platforms such as Instagram are actively used by sex workers to elevate their careers to other domains. The interviewees emphasized how sex workers could exploit their network of connections coming from rich clients, and possible profits, to increase their online impact. The popularity which comes from social media can be used both to expand the range of potential clients and to create new, and

parallel, career opportunities. In contrast to widespread master narratives that describe sex work as an activity meant to be hidden, the connection between social media and sex work is seen as a catalyst for different careers and ways to have a societal impact in these affirmative narratives. Here the potential for fame supersedes concerns about privacy and social stigma.

In affirmative narratives, sex work is depicted as an activity that can attract attention and consideration by media that are not necessarily involved in the sex industry (e.g. mainstream TV and social networks). In this sense, sex work may be representing what porn has already experienced in the last decade, that is, the shift from being "something out there" to becoming a constitutive part of mainstream culture (see Sarracino and Scott, 2008). This increases the appeal of selling sex and merges sex work with the activities and values of mainstream society in a way that is not seen in more widespread master narratives of sex work.

Emancipation narratives

Extract (10)

- I think for some women life can be hard but life can be good too
- [Sure, but what do you mean in terms of sex work?]
- I mean that you can get some independence, too
- [Most of the sex workers are exploited…]
- I know, but when you are free you have more freedom than most of the women around
- [I don't understand]
- Your sexual life is free, you can go whenever you want
- only if you are big big
- [What do you mean by that?]
- High level prostitutes can do that
- They live in Dubai, Qatar, Singapore
- Great life!
- [And what about the non-high level]

- That's hard :(

Extract (11)

- Some women are stuck
- [stuck how?]
- The same stuff
- Family
- Kids
- Husband :D
- Some women don't want that for sure
- [And?]
- And sex work is an alternative because few men would marry a prostitute
- [I see…]
- It's obvious...but maybe some will specifically marry a prostitute!
- :DDD
- [How can we see sex work as an "alternative"?]
- Because you can be free to have a different life and some of them travel a lot!
- They very often live abroad!
- [Not all of them, I guess…]
- OFC
- The top ones I told you
- [Only?]
- I guess
- [Otherwise, there isn't any freedom…]
- I think that only those super expensive ones can really be free and have a free life

These two quotations are important in a narrative where sex work represents a tool for distancing oneself from conventional and oppressive interpersonal relationships. As the interviewees point out, sex work is regarded as a pattern of activities and social connections that

can increase the degree of perceived freedom. These assumptions are based on the possibility of traveling abroad and having a more intense interpersonal life. Despite the limitation that sex work imposes ("...few men would marry a prostitute"), the emancipatory power of sex work is highlighted in these affirmative narratives.

The possibility that sex work can operate as an emancipating tool has been supported by a wide number of scholars (see Rubin, 1984), but this issue is still controversial and not reflected in more widespread master narratives of sex work. Emancipation narratives challenge the epistemic values of risk, slavery and moral culpability narratives, as they focus on a spontaneous and morally acceptable practice that could produce a form of enrichment in terms of self-determination. These narratives were important in the interviews in this study and often presented as one of the main reasons as to why sex work was justifiable or even attractive.

Moral coherence narratives

Extract (12)

- At least sex workers are coherent
- [What do you mean?]
- Everybody is shocked by sex but everybody watches porn and stuff
- sex workers cannot be hypocritical and this is good
- [I understand…]
- They are the most coherent people there are

Extract (13)

- Well those women are the only people that don't judge anybody
- and everybody judges
- I hate that

- When you work in the sex business you can be considered as a bad person but you cannot be considered as double faced
- [You mean, hypocrisy?]
- Yes hypocrisy
- Prostitutes don't judge anybody

Finally, as extracts 12 and 13 make explicit, the interviewees consider sex work to be a way of showing moral coherence about some practices and attitudes concerning sex. Moral coherence narratives start from the assumption that while practices such as pornography have become part of mainstream culture and society (see Sarracino and Scott, 2008), these practices are still connected to stigmas and denial. Emphasizing this, the interviewees created a narrative in which sex workers became morally superior, and added that because of their professional activities, they were also less inclined to express moralistic judgements. Interviewees appreciated coherence and believed that sex workers were more morally coherent than many others in mainstream society.

Discussion and conclusion

The academic debate about sex work has traditionally been heavily politicized and polarized, with abolitionist and anti-abolitionist scholars in two separate camps. The critical attitude towards sex work has lead several authors to emphasize the negative side of sex work, and the associated narratives from sex workers. These are similar to widespread master narratives of sex work and related activities (Kaye, 2007; Hallgrímsdóttir et al. 2008; Snajdr, 2013; Albright and D'Adamo, 2017). However, as emphasized in the opening quotation to this article, sex workers do not speak with one voice:

It is not hard to find "sex workers" who are prepared to "voice" the view that they freely elected prostitution as a form of work, even to argue that prostitution allows them a greater degree of control over their own sexuality than that enjoyed by non-prostitute women and equally there is no shortage of former prostitutes who are prepared to "voice" the view that their experience of prostitution was akin to that of rape or sexual abuse. (O'Connell Davidson (1999, p. 114)

Scholars such as Bernstein (1999), Kesler (2002) and Satz (1995) have suggested that sex work is often described as a single entity and little attention is paid to the differences that exist among various forms of sex work. Research on sex work is often based on data that comes from a street context (see Lowman Fraser, 1995; Church et al., 2001). This research context goes hand-in-hand with widespread and condemnatory master narratives of sex work. This is very different from the affirmative narratives we have studied, which usually refer to more "classy", "top-end", and "high-level" forms of sex work. Arguably, while widespread master narratives of sex work affect desistance from sex work, these idealized stories of top-end prostitution are the kind of stories that encourage it.

Interviewees could have emphasized high-end sex work because they considered high-end sex work as more representative of the type of sex work they would potentially aim at. Their lay perspective also represented a romanticization of sex work that maybe reflected their lack of detailed knowledge about the sex work nexus. What we have described as "deep interest" can still be useful for identifying and understanding the cultural complexities of sex work narratives. "Deep interest" represents a form of favorable attitude and of a willingness to consider the possibility of entering the field that can point towards narratives that can potentially encourage sex work. The affirmative narratives presented in this study also reveal a body of knowledge regarding sex work that may be "deemed unacceptable" (Gair & Moloney, 2013), but they should not be dismissed.

Master narratives points to powerful consensuses in society, but there are also often many stories that challenge the status quo. The affirmative stories of sex work we have identified could for example, be described as counter-narratives (Bamberg and Andrews, 2004). Researching counter-narratives shows how ideological domination can be challenged, and the ways that even widespread and dominant master narratives often are not hegemonic. The relationship between master- and counter-narratives however, is not a simple one. Summarizing the debate, Bamberg (2004, p. 363) concludes that the questions "are no longer whether speakers are complicit with existing master narratives or whether they are countering them". Rather, he emphasizes that both master narratives and counter-narratives are part of a complex work to create a sense of self and identity. Interviewees for example used affirmative counter-narratives of sex work to show agency, and maybe provoke, but also traditional master narratives when describing sex work that was not considered attractive.

At the centre of participants favorable narratives there is a conceptualization of sex work in terms of personal service work (see also Jenness, 1990 and Shaver, 2005). This is reflected in the term "sex work" (instead of prostitutes), which implies that this activity is not "any better or worse than other forms of service work" (Hulusjö, 2013, p. 30). In contrast to widespread master narratives and their associated stigmas, our interviewees considered sex work to be a socio-relational phenomenon that could contribute to social mobility and autonomy. In their view, sex work was an activity that allowed some women to improve their economic conditions in foreign and more prosperous countries. This probably had particular appeal to the women in this study who came from relatively poor Eastern European countries. Affirmative sex work narratives thus merged with immigration narratives, seeing migration as an opportunity for self-realization. This also opened up the possibility of seeing immigrant sex workers as "a resistant subject, challenging 'patriarchal' control within the family and

marriage as well as a subject who exercises economic choices and social mobility" (Kapur, 2001, p. 880 in Scoular 2004, p. 352).

There are important limitations to our sample both concerning size and selection, but we still believe that the narratives we have presented provide important insights into the phenomenon of sex work. The women interviewed describe how sex work can have positive implications for career development, for an increase in their social impact and also for female emancipation, and is a more morally coherent position than the condemnation sex workers often receive in more stigmatizing master narratives of sex work. While these affirmative narratives might be idealized, they can present a corrective to widespread and powerful master narratives of sex work. They are also necessary in understanding the fascination for and recruitment into the sex industry. Stories about high-end sex workers who advance through society and move on to other careers captivate, and can nurture motivations for sex work.

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